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Mortality in the 21st Century: A Cycle of Short Stories on Death and the Afterlife

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**Mortality in the 21st Century:
A Cycle of Short Stories
on Death and the Afterlife**



Honors Thesis

Rose A. Rucoba

Department: English

Advisor: Albino Carrillo, M.F.A

April 2019

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Abstract

Every culture and religion around the world has different beliefs and theories about why humans die and whether or not there is something more beyond death. Authors such as Elizabeth Evans, Flannery O'Connor, and Stephanie Vaughn are three modern-day, impactful writers who have explored the themes of death and the afterlife in their own works. In response to these writers, I have completed a collection of four short stories and one novella that focuses on the themes of death and the afterlife. The stories are separate from each other and are told from different points of view, following a variety of characters as each struggles with the inevitability of death and the afterlife that follows. While each story is different and unique, as a whole, the collection portrays an array of different beliefs and perspectives on one of humanity's biggest mysteries.

Disclaimer

Reading this collection will cause a gain in knowledge and wisdom, a change in perspective, and serious expansion of the imagination. Read at your own risk.

Dedication

This cycle of short stories is dedicated to all the dreamers out there--all the weird and quirky writers who, like me, give away a little bit of their soul with each work of writing they put out into the world, but who often receive nothing in return. I would also like to dedicate this collection to my advisor, Dr. Albino Carrillo, without whom none of this would have been possible. His guidance, wisdom, and encouragement over the past three years has made me a better writer and a better person. I will be forever grateful for his help in making these stories a reality. I would like to thank the Berry family for allowing me the opportunity to study on campus the summer before my junior year, which marked the start of this whole journey. Finally, a thank you to my family, who has always encouraged me to be myself and to keep writing.



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Death Benefit

Mr. Harvey doesn't like music. Any of it. At all.

He also doesn't like the news, politics, emails, TV in general, Halloween, solicitors, visitors, doorbells in general, Christmas, Easter, Fourth of July, holidays or merriment in general, the city, the country, dogs, cats, birds, animals in general, bugs, puddles, dirt, rain in general, crowded places, quiet places, noisy places, children, babies, people who smile too much, people who smile at all, sweat, sweets, cold dinners, paintings, technology, the color orange, or Texas.

Yeah, it's safe to say that Mr. Harvey is one of *those* people. We all know the type. He (or she) may live next door, down the street, around the corner or you may not know exactly where, but are sure there must be one of them somewhere in your neighborhood because, well, there's a Mr. Harvey in every neighborhood.

This Mr. Harvey lives all alone in a sub-par neighborhood in a tiny ranch-style house and *that* is how he likes it. He has never been married and he is not so much estranged from his family as they are estranged from him. He likes black coffee and buttered toast in the morning and always ends the day with something hot to eat, whether it be meat and potatoes, a hot cup of soup, or (once in a blue moon) a nice, juicy steak. He likes routine and order and, above all, he likes. To be. Alone.

Much like the Grinch, no one really knows why Mr. Harvey *is* the way *that* he *is*. Many have tried to soften his heart. But to no avail. All anyone knows is that, as long as you keep out of his way, Mr. Harvey generally stays his normal grouchy, unpleasant, wretched self and leaves you alone. His condition only worsens when he is bothered by

some outside force in the universe such as a little girl selling girl-scout cookies, a thunderstorm, or (God forbid) a smoke detector in need of a change in batteries.

Lately, though, Mr. Harvey's condition has been worse than usual. It may have been brought on by his arthritis, or the unusually chilly August weather, or the fact that the lawn men haven't showed up in two weeks, but is mostly due to the fact that he is dying. Yes, it is only a matter of time now and Mr. Harvey knows this. He isn't particularly fond of the idea (as most people are not) nor is he willing to, as they say, go quietly—hence his unusually irritable and raucous disposition. He spends his days angry at the world, cussing and kicking anything that gets in his way. He refuses to entertain any hopeful or justifying thoughts about death or the afterlife or anything good, insisting on being relentless and stubborn in his fight against death.

And things may have gone on this way for Mr. Harvey if it weren't for a certain stranger that comes in the night to pay him a visit and offer him a very rare and unusual second chance before his time is up.

It happens one night while Mr. Harvey is in bed stirring and sipping his tea, mumbling about life's unfairness, awaiting death...when he hears a noise.

“Who's that?” he whispers harshly into the night.

Only silence. Because this is not one of his better days, Mr. Harvey's gut instinct loses the battle against the disease festering in his brain and he decides that it's not worth risking getting another bad headache, which he gets a lot of these days, just to go check on something that will probably turn out to be nothing more than a tree branch or creaky door. With that, he returns to his book.

He's only halfway through the first chapter, when a man casually walks into his room, sits down in the chair near the fire place and starts to light up a cigar.

Mr. Harvey, as you can imagine is frozen in shock at this man who seems to have made himself quite at home in his room. So, of course, without any previous context or knowledge of how to handle such a situation, Mr. Harvey asks the man what anyone would ask of a stranger warming himself by the fire.

“What the fuck are you doing in my house?!”

As the man turns his head, Mr. Harvey can now clearly see the man in the firelight. He is relatively young, thirties, has slick, dark brown hair, soft features, and is wearing a matching pinstriped dark purple and gold suit and fedora.

“Well, I thought you'd never ask,” the man says, taking a drag.

“Get the fuck out of my house!” Mr. Harvey cries, his voice cracking uncontrollably as he grabs for the shotgun on the shelf above his bed.

“Now, that's no way to treat a complete stranger, let alone a guest. I expected more from a man of your upbringing. At the very least I thought you would offer me a beverage,” the man says.

“Sonafabitch,” Mr. Harvey says, struggling to load the gun.

“Ah, well. I guess I'll have to pour my own drink,” the man says, helping himself to the bottle of whiskey Mr. Harvey always keeps on the table next to his fireside chair.

“I'm gonna shoot you. Do you hear me? I'm—I'm gonna shoot you! I'm gonna blow your brains out right now if you don't put that glass down and get the hell out of here, you...you...son of bitch!” he roars, shakily pointing his shotgun at the man.

“Mr. Harvey,” the man says after a beat, “there is no need for hysterics.” The man turns fully towards him now, while tapping his cigar out in the ashtray. “I’m not here to injure you in any way. On the contrary, I’m here to help you. Now, if you’d be so kind as you put down your...well to be quite frank, comically large shotgun, we can get down to business.”

The man says this with such calm and coolness that Mr. Harvey finds himself placing the shotgun back on its shelf.

“Who the hell are you.” Mr. Harvey asks warily.

“I’m your lawyer from Hell!” the man says giving him a trademark smile, then holding up his drink, as if toasting Mr. Harvey.

“I know,” the man says, emptying his glass of whiskey down his throat. He pounds the glass back down on the table.

“It sounds like a line. I bet you think that I’m putting you on, right? That this is some sort of sick *Christmas Carol-It’s a Wonderful Life* joke? That this is all a dream? Well, it’s not! You, Mr. Harvey, are getting the real deal here. I’m your lawyer from Hell and I’m here to help *you* plan for your afterlife insurance.”

“*Afterlife* insurance...?” Mr. Harvey ventures, the confusion apparent on his face as the fire’s glow reflects off of it.

“Yes,” the man says. “Well, you *are* going to die soon. I assume you know that. You have a tumor growing inside your brain. I think it’s about the size of a tennis ball now. Any day now you’re going to...well, you need a plan, a strategy for how you’re going to tackle the afterlife. It does last an eternity, you know.”

The man takes another drag and crosses his legs.

“How the hell did you get in my house,” Mr. Harvey asks.

“Oh! Well, through that doggie door you have there,” the man says, casually.

“The *doggie* door?”

“Yes,” the man says. “See lots of people have lawyers from hell, you’re not going crazy. I just happen to be yours, but there are countless others of us out there. Anyhow, we have to get into people’s houses somehow. And, well, with the chimney taken and no other conventional way of getting in, we’re forced to enter through the doggie doors.”

“I don’t even have a dog!” Mr. Harvey mutters to himself. “What if...people...don’t have one?” he says slowly to the man.

“Ah!” the man says, sitting up straight and emptying his cigar again.

“Well. *Then*, things get *really* tricky,” he says, puffing his smoke.

The orange glow of the fire dances over the man’s face. Mr. Harvey keeps a steady stare.

“Mr. Harvey,” the man continues, sitting up straight and folding his hands in his lap, “I’ve been watching you mostly your entire life and I have to tell you as your lawyer from Hell that your odds for the afterlife are not looking good. They’re terrible. Wretched actually. Your unpleasantness, lack of kindness and good spirit, foul language, pessimism and beastly attitude towards life has gotten you the worst afterlife insurance policy you could imagine. You, sir, have condemned yourself to an eternity in Hell. And not the good kind. No, sir. There is no hope for you, my friend. You’re skipping Purgatory altogether as it is and going, as they say, ‘straight to Hell’. Others are able to save themselves or to weasel their way out, but not you. You’ll be living the afterlife down in the inner circles of Hell with ol’ Lucifer himself.”

As the man takes a long drag from his cigar, Mr. Harvey takes a minute to digest all of this.

“I’ve never hurt anyone, though,” Mr. Harvey says, finally. “I never killed anyone or cheated anyone, or done anything to deserve to be condemned to the inner circles of Hell.”

“Ah,” the man says, “but you’re wrong. A terrible misconception you humans have is that a life ill-spent or, rather, a life not lived at all is not a sin. In fact, it is one of the worst sins imaginable. You’ve lived only for yourself, you’ve never given back, never shared anything that is yours, never even ventured to love. As we say down in the Pit, ‘a life that wasn’t worth living deserves an afterlife that is just as worthless.’ ”

“So then why are you here? Come just to tell me what a rotten life I’ve had and how I’ll have just as rotten of an afterlife?! I know who I am, the choices I’ve made! And if that’s all you’ve come to tell me, then get out of here!”

The pressure in Mr. Harvey’s head suddenly becomes crushing from yelling and he lays his head back for a bit.

“I can see you’re in pain,” the man says gently, watching Mr. Harvey. “I do apologize for the late night interruption, but you see, these matters do need to be taken care of as soon as possible. I’ll get on with it then.”

The man tosses his cigar in the embers of the fire. Then, he stands up and walks over to Mr. Harvey, while pulling something out of his inner suit pocket.

“Here,” the man says, “This is all of the money in world. Literally. Try counting it. You won’t be able to. Because it’s infinite.”

Mr. Harvey gingerly takes the stash and begins to thumb through it. An endless count of 1s, 5s, 10s, 20s, 50s, 100s, and beyond fly past his eyes as he flips through it. Then he goes through it slowly, fingering each bill and counting it, but he quickly loses count. “It’s true what they say, ya know,” says the man. “Money really can buy anything. I’m giving you a chance to redeem yourself with it right now. This money, right here, will be able to save you from your pitiful and desolate afterlife insurance policy you have. All you have to do is make a decision. With this money you can choose to perform any act of kindness, any one at all, and you will instantly be saved from the fires of Hell. And I know all that stuff they say about how one act of kindness is not enough to redeem a man of a lifetime of wickedness, but this is the Devil’s advocate you’re talking to, so, anything is game here.”

Mr. Harvey grins a bit at this.

“With this money, you can do anything you want,” the man says, gesturing to the stack.

Mr. Harvey shakes his head in disbelief. “I wouldn’t know where to start,” he whispers, overwhelmed.

“May I offer a few suggestions?” the man ventures. Mr. Harvey nods.

“Well, you can give it to all the world’s poor. Think of it. No more poverty in the world. Every man, woman, and child with enough food and water, a home, medical care, happiness and peace. Think how much joy you could bring the world, all the problems you could solve by relieving the world’s poor.”

The man smiles wide and long at Mr. Harvey. Then he continues.

“Or...you can take this money and donate it to science to find the cure for cancer. It’s out there, ya know. It’s not a myth. Think of it, Harvey, the man who cured cancer. True, you wouldn’t be alive to see it happen, but you could admire your work from above. Just imagine all the little children, all the moms, dads, grandparents, friends that wouldn’t have to suffer, that could live the long, healthy lives they were meant to.”

There’s that trademark smile boring into Mr. Harvey. He feels a prickly chill down his spine.

“So there you have it, Mr. Harvey! Those are just a few of my brilliant ideas, but please, do what you want. Whatever *you* want to do to be kind.”

Mr. Harvey stares down at the wad of infinite cash. Just thinking.

“However...” the man says, his tone darker now as he slowly moves over to the fireplace, “relieving the world’s poor would drastically over-populate the world...and curing cancer only saves those that...well...have cancer.”

The man’s focus is on the orange flames of the fire. He continues, not bothering to turn to face Mr. Harvey, “Huh. Shame everyone can’t really be saved. Well, no good deed goes unpunished, I guess.”

The man is silent for a minute, then, staring at the flames and rubbing his chin. Mr. Harvey stares hard at him, then down at the money.

“Ah well, the choice is yours,” the man says, suddenly very chipper, turning back to Mr. Harvey with a smile. “So, without further ado, Mr. Harvey, how would you like to spend this money?!”

A long silence follows. Then, slowly, Mr. Harvey sits up and maneuvers his way out of bed, clutching the infinite wad of cash.

Back and forth he goes in front of the fireplace. Once. Twice. Three times...

Then it hits him. Like a ton of bricks. Like a light bulb switched on for the first time.

Thinks he can pull one over on me? Mr. Harvey thinks to himself.

Thinks I'm too old and sick to know what's up? I may not be a saint, but I'm sure as hell not going to die a sinner and an idiot. There's blood still pumping through my heart, yet. I'll live while I can. But I'll play his little game...

"I've made my decision," he announces, turning to the man.

"Excellent! And what is that?" the man replies, looking pleased.

Without a word, Mr. Harvey spins around and throws the wad of cash into the fire. The man makes something of an effort to stop him, to say something, but then doesn't. A huge green, then orange, then red, then white flame shoots out, the white possessing a blinding light that causes Mr. Harvey to cover his eyes. After a few seconds, it's over. He expects something more to happen, but after a minute or so the flame dies away, the leftover embers of the fire sputtering and crackling. Then silence.

"Congratulations, Mr. Harvey," the man says slowly after a time, turning to him. "You passed the test. You chose to die instead of performing an act of kindness that, while kind, was not selfless. You, sir, have just earned yourself the best afterlife insurance policy you can." The man turned his eyes to the sky.

"Tell the man upstairs He won this time, but I'll get him the next time around."

And with that he winks and is gone.

Later that night, though his head throbs and his body aches, Mr. Harvey slips into the most restful sleep he's ever had. And as his heart slows to a stop and he begins to leave his body, Mr. Harvey smiles for the first time in his life.

Forbearance

“Elbows off the table!”

I pressed my elbows into the ridges of the table, and then slid them off and inspected the red indents they left on my skin.

“We’re at a nice restaurant, Alex. Keep your hands in your lap. And sit up straight for God’s sake.”

Calvin said this without so much as glancing up from his *Le Parisien*. He reclined back in his chair and went back to pretending I didn’t exist. I didn’t like Calvin, but he had the unprecedented privilege of being my father, so I guess I had to like him a bit, or at least pretend like I did.

I bounced my leg under the table and played with my fingers. I thought about asking Calvin for part of the paper, but then I saw I had forgotten to unwrap my straw. A feeling of pure adrenaline and mischievousness crept down my spine. Carefully I pulled it into my lap and began to peel the paper off of the bottom half of it without Calvin noticing. I glanced up a few times, but he was in his own world again with his head stuck in the paper.

Slowly, I brought the straw to my lips. I thought if I could aim it right and blow *just* hard enough it would land...right in Calvin’s glass of water!

“Stop that!” he said, his voice rising, his eyes glancing up at me fiercely, but only for a moment. Gingerly, he removed the straw wrapper from his drink and flicked it to the ground. Then he snapped the paper and turned the page, just like they do in the movies.

“Pull anything like that again while we’re here,” he said without looking up, “and I’ll make sure you stay hungry for the rest of the day.”

I fought every urge to lay my head on the table. Instead, I slid down in my chair, laid my head back with my eyes closed, and listened to the sound of my stomach grumbling.

When my Mom saw me off, she tucked a new book she’d bought me in my carry-on bag. “*Forbearance*, Alex,” she said. It was a reminder and a command all in one. Then she kissed the top of my head. I read the entire book on the flight over, which I regretted no more than twenty minutes after I landed, on the cab drive over to the hotel. My mother must have had more forbearance than a *monk* to put up with Calvin for thirteen years. I couldn’t even put up with him for twenty-four hours!

He dragged me here for “a cultural immersion experience.” And because he said my recent behavior was giving Mom migraines again, which...I kind of see his point. In addition to talking all the time and having an affinity for starting arguments in public places—which is enough for Mom to handle already—I had recently got into a fight at school. I *did* break Tommy Livingston’s nose, but, in my defense, I was just standing up for this kid that Tommy wouldn’t stop picking on. I got suspended anyhow. No good deed goes unpunished, I guess.

Anyway, apparently France would make me a better person or something. Or maybe it was a smarter person. A more artistic person?

It hadn’t done any of that for me, though. In fact, by the time Calvin had carried my things up to the hotel room and I saw the three presents wrapped and waiting on my

bed—so *poorly* wrapped that I could see the *Wii* logo peeking out in the corner of one box—I realized this trip was nothing more than Calvin’s sad attempt to win me back after nine months of Wednesday night phone calls, alimony checks, and absenteeism.

The presents, the promises, the suite with two balconies, a Jacuzzi, and a king-size bed all to myself were just part of the act so that he would pass the test when I went home and told Mom everything. None of it was ever meant to last.

See, the thing is that Calvin is like a...like a giant turtle. He will only move if there’s something in it for him—food, money, a promise that I’ll put a good word in for him with Mom. When he wants something, he is on the move, and he will even *snap* at you if necessary. But otherwise, he spends his time in his shell, and woe to the man that dares disturb him.

This is why I was so surprised when Calvin woke me up at eight the next morning with a rare, and oddly creepy, smile on his face. He promised to take me out to this really *cool* breakfast place if I endured a few hours of sightseeing with him for some bonding time.

Turns out, “sightseeing” was a three-hour bus ride through the city. Twice it left without us at rest stops—which meant we didn’t get to see half the sites we were supposed to, including the Eiffel Tower and Notre Dame!—and apparently the tour description didn’t mention that you needed a special pass to get breakfast at the tour bus station, so we went all morning without eating anything.

To make matters worse, “breakfast” turned out to be at this really snooty restaurant where you get to sit on this balcony overlooking all of Paris. It was apparently a big deal that we got reservations here. The restaurant was on some “Top 20 Restaurants

of the World” list, so naturally Calvin sold a kidney for us to get in. Calvin only ever wants *the best* when he’s traveling.

I normally wouldn’t complain about this, but the waiter took one look at my *Fall Out Boy* concert t-shirt and jeans and stuck us in the back of the balcony behind this huge shrub. (In my defense, Calvin never told me we would be going to a fancy restaurant.) I have to say, the balcony really was beautiful, even from behind the shrub, with ivy crawling up the walls, pots of flowers everywhere and above the restaurant was a hotel that towered another ten stories into the sky. Once we sat down, however, the only thing I could find eatable or *pronounceable* on the menu was a croissant with jam, for which I had been waiting for almost forty minutes.

Suddenly, I had an idea. I know I’m supposed to “think twice” about asking this sort of stuff before it comes out of my mouth. But I can’t always help it. I had to know.

“Hey, Dad,” I said, opening my eyes and slowly sitting back up.

“Hmmm,” came the response.

“So I was talking to my friend Kayla. You know Kayla—blonde hair, freckles—we’ve been friends since kindergarten? We were in the AV club together in grade school?”

Silence.

“Anyway, Kayla is really into all this philosophical stuff and *she* said that in the olden days criminals used hide out in churches and claim ‘sanctuary’ like Esmeralda did in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. And we got to talking and things got really deep and we thought about what would happen if like all the terrorists and white supremacists and

criminals of the world starting doing that again. What if they all started running into churches when being chased by the cops and started claiming ‘sanctuary’? I mean it’s not like the cops could really do anything. I mean they *could*, but then you’re shooting someone in front of Jesus and that’s really bad. Even if you’re not a religious person, per say, you have to think about how that’s gonna affect the nation and all the religious people out there.”

“Alex...” Calvin said through a sigh.

“Well, I was just thinking, with Notre Dame right around the corner and with all the terrorist attacks that have been happening in Europe, I thought all it would take is one, just *one guy* to claim ‘sanctuary’ and then a whole copycat frenzy would take place. I mean just think about it, that would be the ultimate F-you to the Western world because most of us are Christian and we’ve gotten so out-of-touch with our Catholic Christian roots and to go into one of *our* places of worship and claim ‘sanctuary’ and test both our morals and our faith is pretty messed up.”

Calvin set his paper down.

“And *then* I was thinking about how that would spiral out of control. I mean could a physically abused kid run into a church and claim ‘sanctuary’ the way a criminal could? Or what about someone on the run from the IRS? I mean the possibilities are *endless!*”

“Alex, *please*,” Calvin said, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Well, I was just thinking about how you could accuse anyone of anything by claiming ‘sanctuary’ and hold whoever it is accountable and *then* I started thinking about what *I* would claim ‘sanctuary’ for—”

“Alex,” he said, working his forehead like he was rolling dough.

“Well, what I was really wondering is what *you* would claim sanctuary for. Like if it be from work, or credit card debt or mo—”

“ALEX!”

And the whole table shook. People at a nearby table looked at us.

I had awoken the snapping turtle.

Calvin collected himself, then took off his glasses and massaged his temples again.

“Alex, *pleeeeee*, this talking, this obsessive, constant talking, can’t you see *this* is why your mother can’t put up with you?”

It was a statement, not a question.

“Dammit, just act like a normal teenager once in a while. Would that kill you?”

Yes, yes it would, I thought, feeling a short but sharp sting.

“Please, go now and take a break,” Calvin said, eyes closed, hands on his face, “I need a minute to myself. Go. NOW!”

I crossed my arms over my chest, and then rolled up and out of my chair with all the grace of the angsty fourteen-year-old that I was. I dragged my feet across the balcony to the railing. I figured I had the right to enjoy the view at least *once* while our waiter was busy and before my breakfast came. And before I had to spend the rest of the day with Calvin.

Sometimes I didn’t get Calvin. Or really anybody for that matter. People are always talking about how we need all these great thinkers and great ideas to save the world, and I have a lot of them because I spend a lot of time thinking and a lot of time philosophizing and a lot of time *talking* about what I think about to Kayla and other people who care. But when I tell people like Calvin or my mom or most other people,

they really don't want to listen and most of the time they either pretend they have a headache or get angry or just walk away. Calvin is the master of all three. Sometimes he does them all at once.

I rested my arms on the railing and then rested my chin on top of them. I gazed over the city. I spotted the Eiffel Tower and wondered if Calvin's little "cultural immersion trip" would ever involve us actually getting to climb to the top of it, or if I had missed my chance on the tour this morning. Then, I looked straight down and watched the little toy cars find their way through the city traffic. I watched all the little ants meander into the city's museums, churches, cafes, and tourist traps.

Both Calvin and my Mom had suggested that I read up on Paris before coming here. They claimed it was "what every good traveler does" and that "it was all part of the experience." Being me, I overlooked all the tourist guide books with cliché photos of the Eiffel Tower on the covers and went straight for Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. I figured a novel would teach me more about Paris than a travel book ever could. I was right, of course. Many major Parisian landmarks were in the book, plus I got the extra history and literature lessons from it. Since reading it, it has become one of my favorite books. Mostly because I find I relate a lot to Quasimodo. I'm not exactly your average teenager, as Calvin so kindly pointed out.

I took a few steps back from the balcony and made a frame with my thumbs and pointer fingers. Then I squinted through it at the city. I tried to imagine what the city would have looked like during the late 1400's, when Quasimodo was rescued by Esmeralda's kindness and, in turn, rescued her from being hanged. I tried to imagine Frollo in all his lust and Phoebus in all his longing. Then I leaned my head back and

turned my frame to the sky. The hanging flower troughs, ivy, and white stone of the restaurant fell into view. I looked all the way up to the top of the building, squinting against the sun.

And that's when I saw him.

He fell gracefully. Oddly enough, that's the first thing that came to mind when I saw him. Actually, the first thing I thought was that someone had dropped a coat off the roof. Kinda silly if you think about it. I dropped my hands and my chin and followed him with my eyes rolling down like they do when studying a huge painting. I analyzed the fabric of his black coat with all its waves and wrinkles as he passed the balcony railing. Then I took a few steps closer and looked down. As he tumbled down to earth, I watched the ants scatter. I followed him all the way down until he was nothing but a mere speck of black, until he stopped.

When my mom finally grew some balls and asked Calvin for a divorce and they made it official, I was sent to the school psychiatrist to “sort out my feelings”. The psychiatrist was a very pretty lady with thin brown hair and a nice smile. She sat me down and handed me a box of tissues “just in case”. She said she heard my parents were “separating,” and then said through a big, wide smile with a hand on my shoulder

“It is not your fault.”

And I said,

“I never said that it was.”

Then she told me it was perfectly ok to be angry and said she was sorry for assuming my feelings and then asked me straight,

“Alex, how do you *really* feel about the divorce?”

Without skipping a beat I told her,

“It’s been a long time coming. I’m just glad they finally both got the balls to go through with it. Maybe now there will be some goddamn peace in our house.”

The look of utter and complete shock on her face is forever cemented in my mind. It might sound a bit diabolical, but sometimes I find myself grinning when I think about it. I wasn’t sorry I said it. It was the truth. I saw my parents’ divorce coming since the day I was born, or really since the day I learned to distinguish between talking and yelling...and screaming.

But never did I ever think I would get to witness that *look* ever again. Not until I looked up from watching the man and found not one, but eight other people with that same look on their faces. They were on either side of me, some leaning over the rail of the balcony, others standing a bit further back, just staring.

“Was that a man that just fell?”

I turned to see a young woman in a purple dress looking at me. Her accent told me she was probably a British tourist. My *Fall Out Boy* t-shirt must have given me away as an American. I looked into her pleading eyes that conveyed all the confusion and innocence of that moment and suddenly the reality of what had just happened set in. But before I had time to respond, Calvin came up behind me and put his hand over my eyes.

“Don’t look, Alex!” came his voice. He pulled me back and I squirmed a little, but I found that I had suddenly lost my voice.

“It’s ok, Al. I got you. It’s all over now. It’s ok.”

Slowly, he walked me backwards, then turned me around and guided me out of the restaurant, all the while saying,

“It’s alright Alex. It’s all over now. It’s *all* over. Let’s go home, kiddo.”

The moment I got in the cab I knew the inevitable was to come: Calvin would take me back to the States and tell Mom everything (if he hadn’t already) and they would want to *talk* about it with me and quite possibly I would be sent back to see a psychiatrist. Quite possibly the same woman I had to see during the divorce.

And all this just because I looked down when he fell. Calvin didn’t even have to drag it out of me. He just asked how much I saw and I told him “everything”. And that was enough for him to know that even though I didn’t see all the blood and gore, I saw enough to “affect” me and he told me he was booking the next flight home.

The weird thing was, I didn’t feel “affected” at all by what happened. The truth was I felt very far away from it. I had seen this man fall and die and still I hadn’t really *seen* him. To me, he was an ant squashed on the sidewalk, not a man who had committed suicide. That’s not a very nice way to put it, but that’s the best way I can describe it.

This man could have very well been an inanimate object to me, and yet...at the same time, he felt very *real* to me. I suppose in the same way you see an ant squashed on the sidewalk and you feel a small sadness in your heart because you know he’s one of God’s creatures and he felt pain in his short, little life, as we all do. I know that doesn’t sound a whole lot better, though.

Against Calvin's wishes I searched the news, desperately wanting to know more about the man. Between the mix of French and English subtitles and a few different news channels, however, I really couldn't decipher who he was.

He was no one really. No one important I mean. Left behind no one. Left behind no legacy. Left behind no note or clue as to why he jumped.

He was a stranger.

On the cab drive to the airport the next morning, I watched the rain slide down the window, giving my view of Paris a kind of tear-soaked look to it. The little rivulets on the glass would run when the cab went fast and when it stopped the window collected a new accumulation of drops. It was an endless cycle of running water and new teardrops, running water and new teardrops.

It was stop-go for over a half hour after we left the hotel. Between the rain and the weekend traffic and the investigation at the restaurant closing down a whole street, I figured we would get to the airport by my 21st birthday.

"Can you go *any* faster?" Calvin half-yelled.

"I am trying, sir. The roads...too blocked up. This fastest I can go," the driver said in broken English.

"Honk at them. Make them move up a little more," he said, craning his neck to try to see ahead on the road. Then he turned to me.

"We're gonna get there soon, Alex. Don't you worry. If you're getting carsick from all this I can give you some Aspirin," he said, a half-hearted smile on his face.

"No thanks," I said, turning to stare out the window.

Calvin was on edge. On any other day he would have been cursing left and right, screaming at the cab driver. Ever since “the incident,” however, Calvin had been walking on eggshells around me. Like my witnessing the suicide made me a different person. As if I was so “affected” by what I saw that I was now too fragile and disturbed to be treated like normal. Calvin had always ignored me and, to use the cliché adults say, “was never really there for me,” but now I had become the center of the universe for him, and my fragile state combined with the road rage made him a ticking time bomb.

We moved up a little more. Through streams of rainwater I could see the two towers of Notre Dame illuminated by spotlights. The cathedral looked magnificent, menacing even, in the dark of the rain. It pulled me in. *Sanctuary*, it whispered.

“Hey, Dad, I uh...really have to pee. Do you mind in I run in real quick?”

“What, in *there*?” he said, gesturing with his head toward the cathedral.

“Yeah, I’ll just be a minute.”

He looked at me funny. And right then I knew. I knew it was wrong, but I wasn’t going to get around Calvin any other way. I had to play the victim card.

“Come on. It’s the only restroom near enough. And...well we haven’t really had the chance to do any sightseeing since...you know...”

Calvin sighed, and his whole body relaxed with it as he looked at me.

“Ok, but don’t be any longer than five minutes. If we move up, I’ll text you, but try to be quick.”

“I will,” I said, opening the door and running out into the rain.

Once inside, the silence drowned out the rain and my senses took hold. It was magnificent, astounding, divine, absolutely resplendent! All the words you know and don't know in the English dictionary could never come close to describing what it looked like. It was the essence of beauty, and yet...it was exactly the kind of beautiful I had imagined it to be. Not underwhelming or un-climactic by any means, but expectedly unexpected. If that makes any sense.

My sanctuary. That's what this place was for me. I felt like Esmeralda just then, only I wasn't hiding from the law. I was hiding from my own father—a different kind of law, parental law. I could finally breathe here, in this space. When I saw the church through the dark and the rain, one glance and I knew I had to come in. I needed a break from Calvin before I spent an entire flight back home squeezed next to him, forced to talk or not talk to him.

If I'm being honest, though, it wasn't just Calvin and my teenage angst that drove me to come in here, the stranger's suicide had been on my mind for the past twenty-four hours. And I know what parents say about saying you're "fine" and talking about these kinds of things and how they can haunt you for the rest of your life if you don't talk about them, but that's not what this was. What this was—it was a restlessness. It wasn't a shadow over me or a hole inside me. Instead it was a rush down my spine, the kind you get the night of Christmas Eve or on the way to Disney World. Only this was different. It wasn't a feeling of excitement or anticipation that came with it, but a feeling of the inevitable.

In a way, I felt like I owed this man, this stranger, something. I didn't know anything about him or his life or if he was religious, but at the very least, I felt I owed

him a prayer. After all, he had no one to so much as pray for him and I feel like everyone needs someone to pray for them when they die. He probably spent a lot of time in the morgue, possibly even getting an autopsy done on his body. Who knows if he even got a proper funeral and burial. Someone had to pray for him and Notre Dame had pulled me in, had told me it was me who was meant to do it.

Staring down the aisle, I looked to the right and left of me, noticing the two rows of pillars that stood resolute on either side of the aisle. I pictured Frolo hiding in one of the pillar's shadows. Then, as if on cue, the bells rang and I jumped a little in my skin. I couldn't help but think it was Quasimodo up there ringing them for me. That maybe he would go to meet Esmeralda in secret somewhere in Paris tonight.

Taking a seat in one of the back pews, I crossed myself, lowered the kneeler and knelt. I gazed up at the golden castle behind the alter and felt like I had stepped back in time; a time when religion was just that—religion—not political, not plastered all over the news, not corrupt, but was something people truly believed in and gave their lives to. It was a time when people built places like this out of sheer fear of the Lord, to please a power they couldn't see, but loved beyond all measure.

I bowed my head then and said a silent prayer for the man. I prayed that even though I remember from Sunday school that suicide is a sin in the Catholic Church, that God would make an exception for him and let him into Heaven anyway. *I dug deeper.* I prayed that if he left anyone behind—a wife, a son or daughter, a dog—that they would be ok and get through their grief. *I dug deeper.* I prayed for everyone who saw the man jump, that they would find the strength to move on and not have to go to a ditzzy psychiatrist like the one I had to go to, but would find real help and healing. *I dug deeper.*

I prayed for all the people who had died like this stranger had. I prayed for all the jumpers and pill-takers and wrist-slashers and hangmen, and all the others. I prayed that there be no more mystery men because everyone deserves to die loving someone and knowing they were loved by someone, and honestly I couldn't stand the idea of other people like me who have to witness these things and carry it with them and have the responsibility to pray for these people like I do. *I dug deeper*. Finally, I prayed for me, that I would give my Mom a break with the talking once in a while, that I would try being a normal teenager for a day...or an hour this week, and that maybe I wouldn't be so terrible to Calvin *all* the time because he *is* trying.

When I opened my eyes, the lights were fuzzy and harsh and there was a green haze over everything. Slowly, I sat back down on the pew bench and crossed myself, feeling the weight a thousand tons lifted off my chest.

As I bent down to lift the bench back up, I saw something inscribed on the wood of the song book holder on the pew in front of me. Crouching down more, I fingered the words and grinned quietly to myself. I didn't have to squint or look twice to know what they said. They said it all. I didn't have to think twice about where they came from. They came from here. They were the silent answer to my prayer.

SPIRA SPERA

Breathe. Hope.

Ms. Perfect and the Weird Girl

She was the kind of girl you would know. She had short brown hair tied in a red ribbon and soft hazel eyes. She liked to wear dresses to school and on special occasions her mommy would put her hair in braids.

Everyone knew who she was. She was friendly and kind and always waved “hello!” to you in the hallway. She was sweet and lovable and brightened everyone’s day. All the teachers, secretaries, even the janitor that closed up at the end of the day smiled when she walked by.

She had many friends. Perhaps you were one of them or maybe you weren’t, but either way, you knew who she was. When she walked down the hallway or sat next to you in class or even passed you on the street on the weekend, you went out of your way to greet her because, like everyone else, you wanted so much to talk to her, to befriend her, to be her.

Her name was Mary.

Yes, one look at her and you knew who she was, what she was: a little white girl of upper middle-class status who grew up in a good home with good parents in a good

She was the kind of girl you would know.

She had dark black hair and milk chocolate skin. She liked to wear her abuela’s chal to school and everyday her mamá would style her hair in one long braid down her back.

Everyone knew who she was. She was shy and quiet and rarely spoke in class. She sat by herself at lunch and played by herself at recess. All the teachers, secretaries, even the janitor that closed up at the end of the day, shook their heads and felt sorry for her when she walked by.

She had no friends. You may have had a class with her or maybe not, but either way, you knew who she was. And, like everyone else, you avoided her at all costs—whether she walked down the hallway or sat next to you in class or passed you on the street on the weekend because, like everyone else, you wanted absolutely nothing to do with her.

Her name was Maria.

Yes, one look at her and you knew who she was, what she was: a little immigrant girl from across the border who had grown up in an alien land full of uncertainty and neighborhood in a good town; who had been raised with all the care and love and good intentions that a white upper middle-class American family could provide.

Mary was in her element at school. She saw herself as the kind, sweet girl that was friends with everyone and who everyone looked up to. She wasn't quite too proud or self-centered—for she had been raised with all the right morals—but, rather, was content with how things were going for her. She was well liked and well loved and she knew it.

And yet, she was blind to her own white privilege.

That is...until the day she met Maria González.

violence; who had been raised with all the love and care and grace that an

impoverished immigrant family could provide.

Maria had fallen through the cracks at school. She saw herself as an alien in a land that was supposed to be full of promise. But she tried not to lose hope, even on the worst days—for she had been raised with all the right morals—but, rather, dried her tears and prayed for a better tomorrow. She was an outsider and a weirdo and she knew it.

And because of this, she was ashamed of the color of her own skin.

That is...until the day she met Mary McAllister.

The #2 pencils that lay on Mary's desktop shook and spun sideways as her leg bounced under the desk. They usually sat perfectly parallel to each other, 1-2-3 in a row right next to her panda bear eraser. Today, though, they sat awry and disorganized. The panda bear eraser, once in pristine condition, was now missing nearly all of its right ear.

It goes without saying that this was not like Mary at all. She was the kind of girl that had the reputation of tapping you on the shoulder to say, "Here you go!" and handing you a freshly sharpened pencil when she saw you scrambling to find one right before a test. She was the kind of girl that was organized, who had a *system* for keeping track of homework and assignments, who went over her notes every night just in case Ms. Cooley gave out a pop quiz. Mary was the kind of girl that didn't have trouble in school, especially on the day of a math test, for which she had been studying for a week.

But today, Mary was having trouble concentrating. She stared down at the same problem she had been staring at for nearly seven minutes—one she would have usually solved in thirty seconds. She bounced the end of her pencil off the desktop and her desk vibrated as her leg shook faster and faster.

Come on! You know this! she said to herself.

Order of Operations—Parenthesis, E...something, Multiply, Divide, Add—wait, do I add and then multiply? And what does the “E” stand for. Come on! You know this! Think!

From the outside it may look like Mary was just having a bad day, but what you have to understand is that Mary didn't have bad days. And on the rare occasion that she did, she never *ever* let it affect her schoolwork. No, the painful truth was that she was secretly very sad—in a way that she had never experienced before and, now, it was wreaking havoc on her emotions.

It had started the night before when she stayed up past her bedtime to study for the math test. She left one of her practice worksheets on the kitchen table and when she snuck downstairs to get them, she overheard her parents talking. Without letting herself be seen, she hid behind the door to the kitchen and listened.

“I just can't believe she's gone.” she heard her mom say in a dark tone.

“I know. I know, but you hadn't seen her in *six years*, Emily. I mean there was no way you could have known it was that bad,” her dad said, trying to be gentle.

“Chris! I didn't even get to say goodbye!” her mom half-yelled, “I'm the oldest. I should've...I should have been there for her. I should've flown there when I had the chance, when Johnny called last month. I should have gone.”

Mary saw the shadow of her mother through the crack between the door and doorframe. She was sitting at the kitchen table with her head in her hands. Her dad had his arm around her and was kissing the top of her head.

“Emily, you cannot put this on yourself. There was a reason you and your mom were not talking. Remember? She had been sick for years, you knew that walking away from her. You cannot feel guilty about this.”

“But I do!” her mom sobbed. Mary could hear her crying uncontrollably now, “I do feel guilty. Chris, Mary didn’t even know her own grandma. I just wish things had turned out differently between her and me. Maybe she could have had a real life here with us.”

“I know, Em,” her dad said, stroking her back, “I know.”

It was at that point that Mary decided she had heard enough and went back upstairs. But as hard as she tried she couldn’t get back to sleep. As she tossed and turned all she could think about was what her parents had said.

She went through every memory she had, all the way back to her earliest ones, but she couldn’t remember this mystery grandma. All she could remember is that a card came on her birthday and Christmas every year with some money in it, signed “Grandma Carol,” but her mom never said anything much about it. Every time it was always “That was nice of Grandma” or “I’ll have to send Grandma a thank-you card for that” and then she took the money to put in the bank and never said anything more.

Eventually, Mary gave up and fell asleep, but these thoughts didn’t go away, they were merely put on the backburner of her mind, and didn’t start bubbling up again until morning.

Mary was sitting at the breakfast table eating her Cheerios with her mom sitting across from her, drinking a cup a coffee. Her mom didn’t look particularly tired or sad or anything. She was just flipping through a magazine and sipping her coffee and looking very...mom-ish.

Mary bounced her leg under the table and poked her spoon around in her cereal bowl. She couldn’t take it in any longer. She had to ask. But right as she opened her mouth, her dad walked in.

“Hey!” he said, bending down to kiss her mom, “How are my girls doing this morning?”

“Good,” Mary answered curtly, immediately stopping her leg.

“Just fine,” her mom said, without taking her eyes off the magazine, “Hey hon, I have to go visit Laura this afternoon, so you’ll be on your own for dinner.”

“That’s fine,” her dad said, gathering his things, “I gotta scoot, but I’ll see you tonight, Mary. Since we’re own tonight, maybe we’ll order some pizza!”

After they said goodbye and Mary heard the garage door open and close, she turned back to her mom.

“Why are you going to visit aunt Laura?”

“Oh...just to visit,” her mom said, casually turning the page of her magazine.

“Is she sick?” Mary asked, trying her best to sound concerned.

“No, honey she’s not sick. I’m just going for a visit,” her mom said through a sigh.

“What are you gonna do? Are you going to get your nails done? Are you going shopping?”

Finally, her mom put down the magazine and looked up at her.

“No, we’re not going shopping or anything like that. We’re just...taking care of some family stuff, ok?”

“What kind of family stuff?” Mary asked, taking a spoonful of cereal and trying her best to sound curious and naïve.

Her mom rubbed her face with her hands for a bit.

“Mary, it’s just family stuff, ok? Can you finish up your breakfast and get ready for school, please?” her mom said, a bit of edge in her voice.

It was quiet between the two of them for a while. Mary stirred her spoon around in her cereal bowl for a few minutes, then, staring at the tiny “o’s” moving around in her milk, asked,

“Does the family stuff have to do with Grandma Carol?”

Mary could feel her mom's eyes on her. She kept her own eyes on her cereal for as long as she could, then looked up when she could no longer stand the silence. Her mom's eyes had a look she'd never seen before, they were hiding a sadness.

"Mary, why would you think that?" her mom asked, suddenly gentle.

"Just cuz...I know she sends me cards every year and I know you said she was sick before so I was just wondering..."

"That's right," her mom said, now in her "let's talk about tough stuff" voice, "that's right, Grandma Carol does send you cards and she has been sick for a while. I'm glad you care about her so much. And I know we don't get to see Grandma Carol a lot, but you know she loves you. You know that, right?"

"Yeah, I know," murmured Mary, sipping her orange juice. Her mom went back to her magazine. Mary waited a minute, then took a deep breath and asked,

"Mom, why don't you and Grandma Carol talk?"

Her mom breathed in and out deeply, then looked right at Mary, in a hard, but motherly way. It was a look that told Mary her mom knew she was listening last night or at least knew that her daughter was smarter than she thought. Her mom knew there was no way out of this one. She took a deep breath and looked Mary in the eye.

"Mary, your grandma and I...we fought a lot. And usually when people fight they say 'I'm sorry' and 'I forgive you' but, you know, sometimes if the other person isn't willing to say 'I'm sorry' then it can be really hard to forgive them. Sometimes, just like with the parents of your friends who fight and then get divorced, it's better for two people to separate than to be with each other, even though they still love each other. Do you understand?"

Mary nodded. For once, her Mom was making sense trying to explain something grown-up to her. The analogy actually made sense and Mary felt like, for the first time ever, her Mom wasn't trying to dumb things down for her; she was actually talking to her like she was a person

an not a just a naïve kid. Feeling confident in this realization, she decided to push a little further, and asked,

“What did you fight about?”

“Well,” her mom said, looking up as if remembering something, “Grandma said some things to me that weren’t nice, about some choices I made...and she wasn’t willing to apologize for it.”

“What kind of things?” Mary pressed.

Her mom put her head in her hands.

“Just...” she sighed, “Mary, I had you when I was very young. I was in college and I was in love and I was stupid. But I gave up a lot so that we could have what we have now. So that we can have a house and a car and so you can go to school and...your grandma didn’t like that. She didn’t like the choices I made, so we fought.”

Mary sat back in her chair and digested all this. Her mom had never poured out her life to her like that. She had always talked down to Mary and avoided the subject when conversations about “where she came from” came up. It scared her to know that her mom had this other life.

“I need you to go get ready for school now,” her mom said, head still in her hands. Mary could hear tears behind her voice. She cleaned up and got ready without saying another word.

The unresolved business and unwanted truth of the morning followed Mary to school and started to cloud her head the moment Ms. Cooley handed out the math test.

Now, she was frantically doing what math she could, switching between problems every thirty seconds, scribbling down numbers and then erasing them. By the time Ms. Cooley called, “Times up!” her test looked like it came from the lab of a mad scientist.

At lunch, Mary sat with her three best friends—Sydney, Meghan, and Lily—at their usual table. She and her friends always brought their own lunches and they always pooled their desserts together to share.

“Ok, I got a Ring Pop and a Gogurt—that’s a dessert, right?” Sydney said, throwing her food in the center of the table.

“I got leftover carrot cake from my mom’s book club,” Meghan said, making a face.

“Well, I got you *both* beat,” Lily said, holding her lunchbox in the air and dumping out its contents, “because I have three home-made chocolate chip cookies! Ha! Dig in!”

“What do you have, Mary?” Meghan asked.

“I’m not really hungry,” she said, turning away from her friends.

“Well, at least give us your dessert!” Lily said, half-jokingly.

“Lily, shut up,” Sydney said, “Mary, come on, something is bothering you. I know it. You can tell us if something is wrong, you know?”

She leaned in closer.

“We’re your best friends.”

“Yeah. You can tell us,” the other two chimed.

Mary could feel all three pairs of eyes on her, but she just couldn’t bring herself to look at them.

“I’m fine, I swear,” she said, “I think I’m just coming down with something. Here,” she threw a bag of Gushers onto the table, “you can have these if you want.”

“Sweet!” Lily yelled, tearing open the bag and showering Gushers all over the table.

As all three of them got distracted by the rain of candy, they got caught up in their own conversation and their voices faded away in Mary’s mind as she stared off into the distance.

Watching all the other sixth graders eat their lunches and mess around with their friends, she noticed things she was usually too busy to notice.

At one end of the cafeteria, Lynn, the lunch lady, was telling Timmy Warner, for the fiftieth time, that there were no more pudding cups. Near the center of the room, some boys were having a contest to see who could fit the most M&Ms in his mouth. And on the other end of the room, Mary saw Cynthia Drake and her horde of girls in pink all in a circle. She figured they must be talking to some boy or something dumb like that.

Mary was what you would call a good girl, but while she dressed nice and was popular, she also had a kind heart and was a bit wise beyond her years. She had known since the day Cynthia asked her to sit with her at the snack table in first grade that she was bad news. Since then, she had avoided her like the plague.

Now, in sixth grade, they were both at the top of the middle school social hierarchy. But while Mary had a reputation for being everyone's friend, Cynthia Drake had a reputation for making enemies with everyone who *wasn't* her friend, and that was the key difference between the two girls.

Watching the backs of their heads, their hair so perfectly shiny and straight, Mary just shook her head and wondered if, beneath the blond hair and matching pink outfits, they were secretly robots. Then, as if controlled by a button, they all laughed at the same time. Mary watched them giggle and it almost made her want to vomit. But when the girls spread out around the table, Mary saw what they were laughing at. Without thinking, she got up and made a beeline for them.

The sound of Mr. Franklin's voice droned on in Maria's head like the warbling of the adults in the Peanuts' movies.

"Waw-warw-warw-waw-waw-warw."

She checked out five minutes ago when he had started going over some practice problems for Friday's math test on Order of Operations. She knew the material like the back of her hand.

Maria was the kind of girl to whom math usually came easy, and so she decided it was ok to put Mr. Franklin on mute this morning and pulled out the one thing that got her through the day.

It was an old photograph her abuela had given her when she was little. It was a black and white snapshot. In it, her mamá, her mamá's sister, tía Lucia, and her abuela were standing on a huge rock on a beach. Her mamá and tía were both teenagers and her abuela was

beautiful—the image of her mother. The beach they were on was somewhere in Baja. She didn't exactly know where, only that they went there every summer for three weeks growing up.

Maria kept the snapshot in the side pocket of her pencil case. She took it out on occasions like this, when she was bored or feeling a little down and needed cheering up. Somehow seeing her mamá so happy in such a mysterious and beautiful place gave her hope. At times she even imagined she was there with them. Though the photo was black and white, she could still see the turquoise of the sea and feel the breeze blowing through her hair.

This was pretend, of course. Maria knew that. And she knew that while her mamá looked happy in the picture, only a year after it was taken her abuelo lost his job at the hotel and her mamá's dream of going to college in California to become a teacher was destroyed. In the years that followed, her mamá fell in love with her papá and they settled down, but the gang violence in Baja got increasingly worse and they eventually had to leave for America, where the promise of peace and opportunity presented a chance at a new life.

Maria came to the States with her parents, abuelo, and abuela when she was about two. She didn't remember anything about the trip over, but whenever she asked her parents, they just shook their heads and looked tired. She was glad she didn't remember any of that life, though. Her earliest memories were happy ones, of her house being filled with music and laughter and family. And of her mamá homeschooling her and her four siblings, reading them Mexican folktales and taking them to the farmer's market on the weekends.

At least that's how it used to be. Things had been hard lately. Up until this year, her home had been her school. Maria's mamá knew living in a mostly white town would mean that Maria would stick out like a sore thumb at school and she didn't want her daughter growing up like that. But money was tight, like always, and her mamá had had to get a job. She said that Maria was old enough to handle school now.

So here she was, the only Mexican girl in the entire sixth grade class, and only one of a handful of kids of color in the entire school. But it was a good school and her papá's boss was paying for it, so she had to go, even if it meant being bullied every day.

Maria gently ran her thumb over the photograph and sighed. It was only October and already she didn't know how much more she could take. Mostly she didn't tell her parents about the bullying, though, because she knew they had enough to worry about.

"MARIA!"

Suddenly she snapped back into reality. She looked up to find Mr. Franklin and the entire class staring at her.

"Maria, would you care to tell the class the answer to the question on the board?" he said.

Maria stared back into the fifteen pairs of eyes that were on her and then glanced at the problem on the board: $8^2+5x(2+1)$

"Uhh...umm... $2+1=3$ and... $8^2=64$... $5x3=15$...so $64+15=...$ 79?"

The entire class raised their eyebrows at her.

"Uh...that's very good, Maria. Yes, 79," Mr. Franklin said, turning to the class, "As Maria showed us, you do what's in the parenthesis first..."

But Maria wasn't listening anymore. She stroked the photo in her hand and then started looking at the clock every thirty seconds for the remainder of class. It read 11:20. In ten minutes, class would be over and that would mean lunchtime—the worst part of Maria's day.

Maria was the kind of girl you spotted out of the corner of your eye at school, but never actually cared to talk to. Even though she stuck out like a big, brown thumb amongst a sea of white, there was only one of her, which meant her alienness made her just as easy to forget. The way one bad apple can spoil the whole bushel for you, but other times, you can just as easily forget about one bad apple in a bushel of good, ripe ones. Either way she was a bad apple.

This simultaneous invisibility and noticeability meant a certain kind of life at school for her—a life full of taking the long way to class to avoid being laughed and stared at, a life of being picked last or not at all in P.E., a life of vulnerability at the lunch table.

Sitting in the spot she always picked in the back corner of the cafeteria, Maria quickly got out her lunch bag and hoped she could eat quickly, so she could slip into the bathroom for the rest of the period and avoid...her.

She took out her lunch for the day, which turned out to be her mamá's famous chili and some pita bread. There was also a small Tupperware of rice and corn. It was her favorite meal. At the bottom of the paper bag, she found a small note written in her abuela's handwriting.

Nieta,

¡Ten esperanza! Hoy es un nuevo día. Te amo.

Abuela :)

Maria smiled and tucked the note into her pocket. Then she unscrewed the top to the thermos of chili. But she had barely let it touch her lips, when she saw three pairs of matching pink shoes under the table and heard that infamously familiar voice.

“Hey, weirdo!”

Maria looked up to find Cynthia Drake and her posse of girls in pink standing around her table.

“Why don't you go back where you came from?!” Cynthia sneered.

“Hi, Cynthia,” Maria uttered.

“We know you've been hiding from us in the bathroom and we just wanted to come by and say hello. Right?”

“Yeah! Right,” said the other two. Cynthia smiled at them, then turned back to Maria.

“My daddy says that your dad used to sell drugs and that he stole Mr. Donovan's job carrying golf carts at the club.”

“Yeah!” echoed the other two.

“Th-that’s n-n-not true,” stuttered Maria, “Mr-Mr. Donovan left. He retired. My dad took his old job, fair in square.”

“That’s not what I heard,” said Cynthia, staring her down.

“M-m-my dad doesn’t sell drogags—I mean drugs. He’s never sold drugs.”

“Listen to her,” said Cynthia, “she can’t even say it right!”

With that, she threw back her head and laughed and the other two followed.

“S-stop,” said Maria, but they just kept giggling.

The noise filled her head. The girls’ laughter seemed to echo off the walls and she felt as though the room was folding in on itself around her. She didn’t know how to turn it all off. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw someone coming towards the table.

“Hey, Cynthia!” said Mary.

Caught by surprise, the girls stopped their laughing.

“Why don’t you cut that out!” she said, jabbing her finger at her.

As if on command, all three girls spun around to face her.

“Hey, Cynthia!” Maria heard the girl say.

She watched the grins disappear from the girls’ faces.

“Why don’t you cut that out!” said the girl.

Maria had never seen a girl look so angry.

Coolly, Cynthia and the girls spun around to face her.

“Look! It’s little Ms. Perfect,” Cynthia sneered.

Mary was fuming, but stood her ground.

The girl gave Cynthia a hard stare.

“Mary, Mary, quite contrary. How does you garden grow,” she sang.

She and her girls erupted in another fit of giggling.

“Cynthia,” said Mary, calmly, “stop bullying her and go pick on someone your own size!”

“Bullying?” said Cynthia, pointing to her chest, “Me? Bully? No, we were just saying hello, right girls?”

“Yeah, just saying hi,” they echoed.

“Stop it,” said Mary, “I know what you’re doing. You were teasing her. Now go away and leave her alone.”

“Oh really?” said Cynthia, slinking closer,

“What are you gonna do about it?”

The two girls stared each other down, only inches apart.

The three girls threw back their heads laughing.

The girl stayed right where she was, though.

Then, in shock, Maria watched this girl stand up for her.

She had never seen this girl in her life. She had heard things about her—if she was the Mary she’d heard about (because everyone knew who Mary McAllister was)—but she had never had a class or any kind of interaction with her and yet here she was standing up for Maria in the middle of the cafeteria.

Silently, she watched the two girls go back and forth, until they were eye to eye.

“Girls!”

All five of them jumped and turned to see Mrs. Rollins, the vice principal, headed right for them.

“Girls, what is going on here?!” she asked furiously.

They all looked at each other, clueless as to what to say.

“We, we were just...” said Cynthia, who, for once, looked truly scared.

“I was just helping her...” stuttered Mary, pointing to Maria.

Maria sat there in silence, trying to form words. Cynthia’s girls gaped at the vice principal.

“You know what?” said Mrs. Rollins, finally, “I don’t want to hear it. You can all come sit in my office during study hall and think about how to behave like young ladies. And I do not want to see you girls causing a raucous like this in the lunchroom again! Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Mrs. Rollins,” they all said, warily.

Once Mary got back to her table, Sydney, Lily and Meghan stared at her. “What was *that* all about?” asked Meghan. “Nothing, said Mary, avoiding her friends’ eyes. “Why were you talking to Cynthia and the weird girl,” asked Sydney? “She’s not weird!” Mary spat. “You don’t even know her, ok? So stop calling her mean names.” “Ok,” said Sydney, standoffishly. The four of them were silent for the rest of lunch.

Maria watched Mary leave and then the other three. Slowly, she began to open her lunch again, but kept her eyes on Cynthia. She saw her take a few steps, scan the lunchroom for Mrs. Rollins, and turn back. She glared at Maria, as she walked straight back to her table and leaned in, right in her face. “You were lucky this time, weirdo, but next time Ms. Perfect won’t be here to save you.” And with that she knocked Maria’s lunch off the table and walked away.

After school was done for the day, Mary got her things from her locker and took the long way out of the building through the courtyard. Given how things had gone at lunch, she didn’t think it would be wise to confront Lily, Meghan, and Sydney. While Mary had always been popular and had had countless friends throughout the years, those three had always remained in her inner circle. They had been best friends since preschool. They had always told each other everything and had always worked out their differences before, but this was different.

See, this incident had changed Mary. She felt it deep inside her. She couldn’t exactly say what it was, but what she did know is that she felt something she had never felt before when she looked across the cafeteria and saw the look on the Mexican girl’s face. Watching her sit there and be tormented by Cynthia and her girls made Mary sick. She felt the anger boiling up inside her in that moment and she had to stop it. She just had to. She couldn’t explain it.

Now that it was all over, her heart was slowing down and she was trying to make sense of what she’d just done. She had seen that girl around school before, but had never had a class with her and from her table in the cafeteria, she usually didn’t see her because she was always too

focused on her friends. *Has Cynthia been tormenting this girl everyday?* Mary thought. The twisted knot in her stomach told her yes, but why she chose to look over at her table today of all days—Mary just couldn't figure it out.

What she had figured out, though, is that her bubble had been popped. Even though everything else about the day and her life was generally the same, Mary's world had exploded as a result of the incident in the cafeteria. She had been made aware of everything she had right now and for her whole life. Suddenly, it didn't seem fair that Mary had so much more than this other girl, that this girl had to endure being bullied every day, while Mary sat just a little ways away, obliviously laughing and goofing off with her friends.

If Mary had been a little older, she would have realized that what was happening to her was that she was recognizing her own *privilege*, but she didn't have the word for it at the moment.

She just knew that being who she was with her red ribbon in her hair and nice dress and shoes made her look at other people in an unkind way sometimes. And she didn't even mean to, it just happened. They didn't have something that she did, so she could never understand them. They were foreign to her all of a sudden and she didn't know how to relate to them, even though they were kids just like her.

No more, she thought, *no more not-noticing, no more being mean on accident*. Mary was done letting her privilege get the best of her, but if Lily, Meghan, and Sydney wanted to remain blind, then that was fine with her.

As Mary was coming out the front door, she heard her name being called.

“Mary!”

It was the girl from the cafeteria. She stood up from a nearby bench and walked over to her cautiously. Now that she wasn't distracted by Cynthia and her gang, Mary felt like she was

seeing this girl for the first time. She had long, black hair that was styled in a braid down her back and was wearing a worn shawl and dress that looked like it was definitely a hand-me-down. She had skin the color of something like toffee or milk chocolate and the thickest eyebrows Mary had ever seen.

“Your, your name is Mary, right?” the girl said, frowning her brow.

“Umm...yes,” Mary replied, turning towards the voice.

“You don’t have to catch a bus, do you?” the girl asked. Mary shook her head. “Cuz I kinda wanted to talk to you. If you want,” she trailed off.

Mary took a moment to think. Her revelation had given her a moment of clarity, so to speak, but now that this girl was standing in front of her and Cynthia’s girls were long gone she was no longer sure how to handle the situation. Not that she didn’t trust this girl, but her act of heroism was done in the heat of the moment. She wasn’t thinking. She just did it. She wasn’t trying to save the day. It was something about seeing Cynthia and her girls laughing like that. It made her feel like her head would explode. But she knew she owed it to this girl.

“Yeah. Sure,” Mary said, finally, “Let’s go inside—to the music room. It’s open until choir practice at 3 and it’s always quiet there.”

“Ok,” said the girl, showing the slightest hint of a grin.

Once inside the music room, Mary and the girl sat on the risers, side-by-side.

“I’m Maria, by the way,” the girl said, “Maria González.”

“I’m Mary, Mary McAllister.” Mary said.

“Huh,” said Maria, laughing a bit, “That’s funny.”

“What is?” Mary asked.

“Your name is my name in English...I mean my name is your name in Spanish. I speak Spanish, that’s how I know.”

Maria looked down, suddenly looking embarrassed.

“That’s cool,” said Mary, trying to smile.

The two sat quiet for a while, fidgeting with their hands and hair.

“Thank you,” Maria said suddenly, making Mary jump, “for standing up for me in the lunchroom.”

Now it was Mary’s turn to feel embarrassed.

“Oh, well, Cynthia can be a real ‘you-know-what’ sometimes. She picks on people a lot...and it looked like you needed help...I mean—”

“I know,” Maria said, “I’m sorry I got you in trouble.”

“It’s ok,” Mary said, looking at her, “It’s just like Mrs. Rollins to do something like that and punish everyone when she doesn’t want to deal with us. Besides, her office wasn’t so bad. They didn’t even call our parents.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Maria said, “and it was fun to watch Cynthia squirm like that.”

“Yeah,” Mary said, laughing and Maria joined in. When they stopped, Maria looked over at Mary.

“What’s that?” she asked, pointing to some workbook pages Mary had scribbled on her hand.

“They’re practice problems. I had a math test today in Ms. Cooley’s class and was studying last night.”

“Oh, Ms. Cooley,” Maria said, “I heard she’s hard. How did you do?”

Mary turned away from her.

“Not good. I don’t know. I’m really good at math. I am. But today I just...felt weird. I couldn’t focus on the test. My brain felt like mush.”

She buried her head in her hands.

“I’m sorry,” Maria said, gingerly putting a hand on Mary’s arm.

She felt it and let her leave her hand there. It was gentle and warm. And, oddly enough, it felt nice to have someone besides Sydney, Meghan, or Lily comfort her. Those three had seen her

through some hard times, but just like everything else in her life, Mary was beginning to realize that they were all part of her little bubble she had lived in all her life. This girl was exactly the kind of girl that, even a few hours ago, she would have turned her nose up at. Now that she had her hand on her arm, though, things were different –this girl who lived outside her bubble was in her life now and it felt nice.

It was quiet again for a minute or two. Then Mary looked up and studied the music chart that hung on the wall straight across from her. It had the DO-RA-ME-FA-SO-LA-TI-DO scale written on it. It made her think of *The Sound of Music*.

“My Grandma Carol died yesterday,” she said, matter-of-factly, eyes still trained on the music chart. Maria sat still, looking at her.

“That’s sad,” Maria replied.

“I never met her in my life,” Mary said, “But she sent me cards on my birthday and Christmas. I heard my parents talking last night. They didn’t know I was there. My mom was crying.”

“I’m sorry,” Maria said again, squeezing her hand on Mary’s arm.

“I tried to talk to my mom about it this morning,” she continued, “but she just got upset and started saying all this scary stuff about why she and my Grandma Carol stopped talking and it was all I could think of during the math test. That’s why I did bad.”

Maria took her hand off of Mary’s arm, “My grandpa—my abuelo died a few years ago,” she said, “I was only eight when he died, but I still remember him. We were very close.”

“I’m sorry,” Mary said. She didn’t put a hand on Maria, but her words were genuine.

“It’s ok,” Maria continued, “My abuela wailed and cried for weeks and my mamá...I’ve never seen her like that. She just slept all the time, and when she wasn’t sleeping, she was just walking around. She wasn’t herself. It was like she was a zombie.”

Mary scooted closer to her, until their elbows were touching.

“It really wasn’t until El Dia de los Muertos that we all started to heal.”

“What’s that?” Mary asked.

“El Dia de los Muertos? Oh it’s a Mexican holiday,” Maria said, “My family comes from a part of Mexico called Oaxaca where it’s a very big deal. El Dia de los Muertos celebrates the return of the people who died that you love. There’s food and dancing and a parade. And at night you go to the cemetery to visit people who died. It’s on November 2nd, right after Halloween here.”

“What do you mean the *return of people who died*?” Mary asked, “Like ghosts?”

“No,” Maria said, shaking her head, “We believe that the souls of people who died come back and visit their families. We put food on a special table for them to take. We also put things up there they loved, like treats and pictures and stuff.”

“Why?” Mary asked.

“Because,” Maria said, proudly, “we believe it’s very important to remember people who have died. We have to care for them even in death or the spirits of people we love get angry and we have bad fortune.”

“Bad fortune?” Mary asked.

“Yeah. Bad stuff happens.”

“Oh,” Mary said, trying to wrap her head around it all, “But isn’t that just like Halloween?”

Maria laughed at this.

“No, it’s more like a festival. We are celebrating death by dressing up, not trying to scare it away, like at Halloween. And it has a lot to do with our faith. It’s fun, but also kind of serious.”

Mary thought about this for a moment. She hated how she had felt that morning. She never wanted to feel like that again, like something was eating at her from the inside out. She wanted to be okay with the death of this grandmother she never knew and she thought that this Dia de los Muertos thing was worth a shot.

“You said this helped your mom and grandma heal after your grandpa died?” she said slowly.

“Yes,” Maria said, nodding gently.

“Do you think it would help me? You know...with my grandma?” Mary asked truly and honestly, looking into Maria’s dark eyes.

“Yeah...” Maria said plainly, “Yeah I think it could.”

They both looked away. Then after a minute or so of silence, Maria said,

“If, if you want you could celebrate El Dia de los Muertos with my family. We could make a table for your grandma and you could help me and my Mom bake stuff for the party. My mom hosts every year.”

“Really?” Mary said, looking up.

“Yeah,” Maria said, meeting her eyes, “It’ll be fun. There will be a lot of people. My family is pretty crazy,” she said, looking down for a moment, “but we can always go to my room if it gets too loud. And after dinner, we all go to the cemetery and visit our loved ones. The tradition is to sleep there, next to your relatives’ gravestones, but if it gets too cold we can go back to the house and you can spend the night. ”

Mary smiled. “Ok,” she said.

Maria’s face lit up with a smile too, and for the first time since meeting, she looked happy.

“Ok,” she said back, “Hey.”

“Hey what,” Mary answered.

“Does this mean we’re friends?” she asked, slowly.

Mary pretended to think about it for a moment.

“Hmmm....YES!”

The two girls erupted in laughter.

That night, Maria sat at the dinner table with a smile on her face and ate her entire dinner—something she rarely did. So rare, in fact, that her parents shared worried looks across the table and her abuela stared at her the whole time. Even her younger siblings thought she was acting weird. Finally, her papá gave her mamá a prodding look and she spoke up.

“You like the dinner tonight, huh, hija?”

“Mmm-hmm!” Maria answered, mouth full.

“You’re acting muy extraño...” said her abuela, slowly.

“Mamá!” her mamá whispered harshly, giving her a look.

“Maybe someone slipped her something at lunch!” said her younger brother, Jose

“Jose, silencio,” said her mamá curtly.

“Maybe she’s sick with a fever. People get all smiley and weird when they have a fever,” said her youngest sister, Clara.

“Clara, hush,” said her mamá gently, “So...” she continued, “hija, how was school today?”

She winced a bit, waiting for the answer.

“Oh, it was great!” replied Maria, shoveling another spoonful of rice and beans in her mouth.

“Oh?” asked her mamá, suddenly very curious.

“I met this girl who has the same name as me! Well, her name is Mary, but it’s basically the same. She’s really nice. We’re friends now.”

“Ahh, you made a friend, hija? ¡Que maravilloso!” said her papá, giving her a playful punch on the arm.

“How did you two meet?” her mamá asked.

Maria lowered her eyes and pretended to cut her chicken. Her parents knew school was “hard” in the sense that people often made comments or looked at her funny, but they had no idea that Cynthia and her girls had been tormenting Maria for the past few months. And Maria intended on

keeping it that way. No way she was ever going to let her family know the truth. It would just make them feel guilty, especially her mamá for going back to work, and that was the last thing Maria wanted—to shame her parents. Unfortunately, though, she was never very good about thinking on the spot and now that the whole family had eyes on her, she didn't know what to say.

“At lunch. She...uh...spilled her milk and I helped her clean it up. We sat together for the rest of lunch and had a...really good talk. Now we're friends.”

She shoved another spoonful of food into her mouth before her parents could ask another question.

Her four younger siblings shared a look.

“Really?” asked her abuela, reclining back in her chair. Maria averted her gaze.

“What did you say her name was?” her mamá asked.

“Mary McAllister.”

“McAllister!” said her brother, Miguel, “That guy is loaded!”

“¡Miguel, silencio! ¡Ahora!” said her mamá. Then turning to her papá, said,

“McAllister, doesn't he belong to the club, Jose? I've heard his name a lot around town.”

“Ah yes,” said her papá, “his company has business outings at the club a lot. Once in a while, he will rent out the reception hall. Mi amigo, Luis, carries his clubs sometimes. He always gets big tips from him.”

“Sounds like an important man,” her mamá said, eyebrows raised.

“I heard he has three swimming pools,” said her youngest sister, Clara, “and Mary had a huge pool party for her birthday and she got a pony.”

“Well,” said Maria's other younger sister, Gabriela, “I heard she went on vacation to China last Christmas and stayed in a Chinese castle.”

“Yeah!” agreed her other brother, Carlos, “And last year she went to England and met Princess Kate and Prince William!”

“¡Eso es suficiente!” yelled her mamá, “I did not raise my children to act like this! Silencio. It does not matter how much money Mary McAllister and her family have. What matters is that she is Maria’s new friend and is welcome in our house. Comprende?”

The four of them silently shook their heads and it was quiet for a while. Maria smiled a tiny smile to herself. Oddly enough, it didn’t bother her that they were making fun of Mary like this. She didn’t care. She knew the real Mary McAllister, the one who stood up to Cynthia in the lunchroom, the one who sat next to her in the music room and told her about her grandma’s death, the one that was now her best friend.

“So,” said her abuela, breaking the silence, “do you and this ‘Mary’ have any plans for the weekend?”

She grinned smartly at Maria.

“Actually, abuela, I invited her to our El Dia de los Muertos party,” Maria said, finally meeting her abuela’s eyes.

“Really? Oh Maria, that’s wonderful!” exclaimed her mamá.

“¡Qué supresa!” her father said.

“This is wonderful, just fantastico,” said her mamá, beaming, “Tell your friend to come on the bus with you after school the day of the party and she can help us set up and bake, how about that?”

“Sounds good,” said Maria, smiling back.

“And you just met her? Just today?” said her father, smiling in disbelief.

“Yep!” said Maria, crossing her fingers behind her back and deciding, painfully, to stick to her spilled-milk story, “She spilled her milk and I helped her clean it up and we just...got talking. And now I guess we’re friends for life!”

Maria’s parents laughed at this. She laughed along with them, trying to sound believable.

Her abuela then excused herself from the table, and on her way to the kitchen she leaned down and whispered in Maria’s ear,

“Liar, liar, pants on fire!”

Maria felt a small knot in her stomach, but not bad enough to keep her from smiling the rest of the night, all the way until she laid her head down on her pillow and fell asleep.

The two girls planned carefully over the next few days. Maria took Mary to the school library and taught her everything she needed to know about El Dia de los Muertos. At home, Mary gathered up anything and everything she could for her grandma’s table, which she now knew was called an *ofrenda*.

She eavesdropped on her mom talking to her aunts and uncles on the phone and learned all she could. One phone call was especially helpful.

“Hi, Laura,” she heard her dad say, “I’m so sorry we have to talk like this, but Emily is just beating herself up about this whole thing and I know we have to have a plan by this weekend....ok...yeah well Em wrote down some stuff for the funeral...looks like flowers will be sunflowers?...ok...yeah sure. I can order them...and you and Emily picked out that blue dress she liked for the wake?...right...and you want to serve peanut butter and jelly sandwiches...her favorite? That’s sweet. Really? Ok...Thanks...

By the end of the week, Mary had gathered up a bouquet of sunflowers, some blue ribbon, a jar of peanut butter she found in the back of the pantry, and the only picture she could find of her, which she had to dig for in her mom’s dresser while her mom was in the shower.

She was a little scared her mom would miss it, but Mary needed it, she needed it to heal. She needed something to see, not just a card or a fact from a phone conversation—she needed to see her grandmother’s face.

Mary studied it for hours in her bedroom. It was black and white and it could have been a portrait photo if it was bigger. In it, her grandma was young, in her thirties. She had the short, curled hair like they did in the 50’s and was wearing a nice plaid dress with buttons down the front. She had the face of an angel in Mary’s opinion and the most beautiful smile.

She reminded her of one of those housewives, like from that show her mom talked about watching when she was a kid—*The Dick Van Dyke Show*. She looked like she would be the perfect mom, a great cook, and the kind of woman who always kept the house clean and looked presentable for when her husband came home. But she also looked young enough that she must have still had a lot of fun. Maybe she was a good bowler or a killer tennis player. Maybe she even went out with her girlfriends when her husband was away on business. Mary smiled at this and, for a moment, almost liked not knowing who this woman was. She liked how she was in her own head.

But while Mary was busy planning and collecting info, she had totally forgotten about Halloween. When Sydney called her and asked, despite the weirdness between them at school, if she was still going trick-or-treating with them, Mary told her she had family plans. It sounded totally lame, but it was partially true.

“We’re really sorry about the other day, Mary,” Sydney had said, “We know you’ve been avoiding us. Can we just forget the whole thing and have fun tomorrow night?”

“Sydney, I’m sorry too,” Mary replied, “These last few days have been weird for me too, but there’s something I have to do tomorrow. I really need to do this by myself.”

There was a long pause on the other end of the phone.

“Are you hanging out with that weird girl?” Sydney asked, sounding snarky. This stung Mary right in the heart. After all she’d learned about Maria in the past few days, she couldn’t stand the way people treated her new friend.

“Her name is Maria! Ok?! And she’s my friend. And you know what, Sydney? She is actually a really cool person. She knows how to cook, and braid hair, and speak another language. She is the coolest, best friend I have ever had!”

Mary knew she was out of line, but she couldn't help it, all this anger had been building in her over past few days was now gushing out. Suddenly, she didn't care about her friendship with Sydney; she just wanted everyone to stop attacking Maria.

"Fine!" Sydney yelled over the phone, "If you want a new best friend then go ahead! I don't care. *I* was the one that came up to you on the first day of preschool and *I* was the one who cried with you when your dog, Baily died. *I* was your first best friend, even before Lily and Meghan and you know it! But you want a new best friend, then fine with me!"

"FINE!" Mary screamed into the phone.

"FINE!" Sydney screamed back.

Then Mary hung up the phone. She felt like crying, but didn't. She didn't want to waste any tears over people like Sydney or Lily or Meghan. None of them understood. And she was beginning to think that they never would, and if they didn't, if they were really worth keeping around as friends.

The day of the party, Mary lied to her mom and told her she was going trick-or-treating with the girls, then over to Lily's for the night. Her mom didn't suspect a thing. She was going to be busy at her uncle Johnny's house planning the wake and funeral, anyway, and her dad was away on business, so Mary's imaginary plans actually made things easier for her mom.

Maria and Mary giggled and talked on the bus ride to Maria's house. In the bathroom before school ended, Maria had put on her more traditional Mexican outfit, which she wore special for parties. Mary had worn her favorite blue dress (in honor of her grandma) with a new red ribbon in her hair. Both girls had their hair in a braid.

Once at Maria's house, the girls got busy in the kitchen with Maria's mamá, and while things baked, they decorated the house. Maria had never prouder to show someone her culture and family. She had never had anyone to share that with. Maria didn't know it, but secretly Mary liked going to someone's house where, for once, it didn't smell like mac and cheese or

microwave popcorn. Instead, heavy spices, homemade dough, and Mexican perfumes filled the air. She loved everything about Maria's house. It was different.

In no time at all, the guests started arriving and the girls took their places, with Maria greeting people at the door and Mary setting out appetizers. Within an hour, the house was full with over thirty people. Finally—after what seemed, Maria imagined for Mary, like an eternity of talking to total strangers, but for Maria, people she hadn't seen in months who pinched her cheeks—they all sat down to eat.

Empty chairs were left at the table for those loved ones that had passed and the ofrendas for Mary's grandma and Maria's abuelo were set up at the front of the dining room. Maria's abuela said a beautiful prayer in Spanish, which Maria could tell was a tad uncomfortable for Mary since she didn't understand, but she still smiled politely and held hands with everyone.

After dinner, the women cleaned up the dishes, while all the men and children went into the living room. Maria and Mary were excused from dish duty and went to join the guests. Going their separate ways about the room, they were both lost in the ambiance of the party.

Maria was amazed by it all.

All her family and neighbors and new best friend were all in the same place.

She saw her mamá and the women in the kitchen, and the men smoking and talking loudly in the living room and the niños running around everywhere and was proud of where she came from for the first time.

She had forgotten what a celebration El Día de los Muertos could be.

In fact, until she met Mary, Maria hadn't thought about death as truly sad.

Even when her abuelo died and things got quiet in the house for a while, she always knew that his spirit was close.

Seeing everything now, Maria realized how much her family was celebrating death.

Circling the room, she stared at it all.

Los papeles picados, las luces, las máscaras, las Calaveras de azúcar.

Mary was amazed by it all.

The lights, the food, the people.

It was all so overwhelming.

She walked over by her Grandma Carol's *ofrenda* and looked over everything on it. Looking at her photograph, Mary saw that her mom was the image of her grandma. She thought of her mom then, planning a wake and funeral with her aunt Laura and uncle Johnny for a grandma she never knew. And for a grandma her mom didn't know either, it sounded like.

She'd honestly been scared to show this part of her life to Mary, but, surprisingly, Mary had wanted to know how to speak Spanish and knead dough and braid hair.

She had to admit, at first sight she knew Mary was one of "them".

One look at her clean dress, shiny black shoes, and \$20 lunchbox and she knew Mary was a white girl.

She honestly didn't think a girl like that would care to learn about her life.

The masks some of the children wore as they chased each other around the house. The tiny candy skulls that were laid out on the coffee table.

The Christmas lights that were strung about the room.

"Enjoying yourself?" Mary heard behind her and jumped.

She turned to find Maria's abuela smiling down at her.

"Yes, very much," she said.

But she did and here she was talking with her abuela.

It was all so sad and empty.

Not here. Here, Mary almost forgot her grandma was gone. She was present here at the celebration. Her spirit was happy and Mary could feel it.

Circling the room, she stared at all the decorations and food.

The paper cutouts that hung like flags.

Watching her abuela lean down and whisper something in her ear, she hoped they were getting along ok.

She knew that she and Mary would be best friends forever.

Somehow she knew it from the moment she heard her yell, "Hey, Cynthia!"

It seemed silly now. Cynthia. She wondered where she was at that very moment.

Probably sitting at the dinner table with a mom that was too busy playing Bridge and going to the club to spend any time with her. Maria smiled at this.

"I've never been to a party like this."

"Listen, I know what you did for Maria."

"You do?" Mary asked, surprised.

"Well, I don't know exactly what happened at lunch, but I know you must have stood up for her. I know Maria has had a lot of trouble at school this year, but she came home with the biggest smile in the world the other day."

"She's my friend," Mary replied plainly.

"I know," said abuela, "You are a good

friend to our Maria. Anyone who makes her smile like that is welcome in our house anytime.” Mary smiled at this.

After a few hours of fun, everyone bundled up in their coats and hats and prepared to make the journey to the cemetery, where Maria’s abuelo had been buried.

“He said he wanted to be buried in America, ‘the land of the free,’” said Maria to Mary, as they put their jackets on.

“He was a very important man back in Mexico. He went from being a poor farmer to a wealthy hotel manager. Everyone is here to honor him tonight.”

“Wow,” said Mary, as she clutched the photograph of her grandma Carol.

She didn’t know much about this woman, only what little she’d learned in the past week. This made her sad and Maria could see that.

“Don’t worry,” she said, putting a hand on her arm again, “if you listen in the cemetery, your grandma will speak to you.”

Mary smiled at Maria and Maria smiled back. And together the two girls took each other’s hands and together walked out into the darkness.

With a Click, With a Shock

I read about ‘em once somewhere. *Los desaparecidos*. The disappeared ones. It was one of the few times that a waiting room magazine article stuck with me. Maybe the only time. Anyway, if you don’t know about them, los desaparecidos are people who go missing while crossing the boarder. As you probably guessed, the majority of the time these people die of exposure or dehydration out in the desert. Other times, the coyotes get ‘em. Not the animals, I mean, but the people that migrants pay to cross the border. They often have bad intentions, see, and people can end up murdered or gutted or worse as a result of foul play.

Again, this is most of the time. Other times...well other times no one knows what happens to these people. Bodies are never found. Fates are presumed, but never proven. These people just *vanish*.

This is my own meaning that I’ve applied to the phrase. And by vanishing I mean somethin’ very specific. See, somewhere in the gray area of life and death, in the gap between the Earth and space, in the expanse between here and forever, are the souls who go vanishing.

Vanishing souls, of course, are different than those who run away, those who go missing, or those who disappear. Souls who *run away*, well they are either picked up by the police or are lost to the streets. Those souls who go *missing*. Now, the word, “missing,” indicates that something is out of place, like they were supposed to be somewhere—like at home—but they ain’t never got there. The missing are the lost children, the elderly, the mentally and physically handicapped, and random people on the news. They are either found alive or dead, but found anyway.

And those souls who *disappear*...well, they are the ones who disappear from street corners, never make it home after getting off the bus, are lost at sea, climbing a mountain, in the jungle, or while flying. They at least have redemption in the fact that—sometimes—a body or a coat or a backpack or an arm is found. Maybe even someone comes forward years later to claim

responsibility or tell what happened. At any rate, these souls who disappear may not “appear” to the eye, but they still exist. There is evidence that they were here. That they didn’t just cease to exist. There is a *reason* for their disappearance.

Those who vanish, they remain in the space between existence and nothing. They leave no trace or evidence. Their bodies ain’t never found. Their blood is wiped clean from the Earth. Their existence is erased completely. Most importantly, however, unlike the rest, those who vanish leave nothing behind. Except their souls.

These are the souls like that of Etan Patz, who were stuck on milk cartons. They are the dated, grainy pictures in the newspapers, taped to telephone poles, and on billboards. They are the smiling faces that send a chill down your spine every time you read their stories because no body, no evidence, no perp, no trace of existence has been found, and there is nothing normal or human about that.

Our consolation as humans is livin’ in the comfort of the fact that if we can create something, if we do something, we will be remembered, we will create a legacy for ourselves that will out-live us. Inventions, music, architecture, writing, art—all these things are proof that we were here. That we did not waste our measly lives on this earth. They prove that we existed and were alive and human.

When we hear ‘bout people who vanish, there is a deep unsettling within our souls. We crave to have the obvious questions answered: Did she scream for help? Who was the last person who saw him? Was she into anything she didn’t want people to know about—was she living a double life? Did he have a mental illness? When we can’t get answers, we dig more, harder, deeper. Eventually though, we have to force ourselves to accept what is impossible for us humans to accept—people who vanish leave behind nothin’. They are un-resurrectable.

Now, I ain't no Yoda. I don't hold the secrets of the universe. I don't have the power to determine who belongs in which category or know where these people go. I just know these things because I saw someone vanish once.

See, sometimes, vanishings don't happen in nowhere towns or in back lots somewhere or behind the fuzzy screens of televisions. Sometimes, they happen right before your very eyes. Like those that vanish crossing the border, they become *los desaparecidos*.

It happened back about ten years. That summer, I's staying with my grandmother in her apartment. I was saving up for an apartment of my own while I studied music at Chicago University. My grandmother needed someone to look after her anyway after she took a bad fall, so I figured I would kill two birds with one stone. I could be a good student and a good grandson all at once.

Guess I couldn't be a normal black kid from inner city Chicago like I should've been. I couldn't grow up normal, hateful and walk around like I owned this city. I couldn't learn to talk like they do on the street. I couldn't join a gang and be lost to the streets by the time I was 18. Instead, I had to spend my childhood reading, spend my early teen years studying, and continue my piano lessons long after all the other kids had quit. 'Stead, I had to go and learn how to talk good (for the most part a' least), stay indoors practicing my scales while all the other kids were gettin' high and pregnant and shot in the streets, and stay there until it paid off and got me a full ride to college.

There I was that summer, Davie Larson, 22, on my way. I was gonna leave Chicago in the dust as soon as graduation hit and my grandmother was better. The Windy City had suddenly grown very small for me that summer. I longed to stretch out my legs in the Big Apple or maybe even Paris, Hong Kong, Rome. All I knew was that I had outgrown my surroundings. I had to go see the world. I had spent so much time avoidin' conflict, avoidin' what I hoped was not an inevitable end, that I never made time to listen and learn from other musicians. Real musicians.

I was going to take the money I'd saved up and go and listen. I didn't exactly know how long my savings would stretch or where I was gonna go. I just knew that I had kept my head down, my mouth shut, an' my fingers playing for too long. It was time to go answer some questions about myself I had never found time to look for.

One thing was for sure, except for visits or emergencies; I never planned on coming back to this neighborhood ever again.

This all, of course, changed that one July night. A storm raged that night like no other.

I remember it grew dark around 4 p.m. and by 8 p.m., it seemed like it had been raining for years. The wind moaned and rainwater was sprayin' through the window screen into the family room, but it was humid out that night and I didn't want my grandmother to get too hot, so I left the windows open.

The thunder and lightening scared the dog under the bed and my grandmother was havin' a hell of a time trying to get him out. While she waved a chicken bone under her bed and called for Bruno, I finished my dinner and cleaned up the dishes.

"He won't come out. Why's won't he come out, Davie?" my grandmother whined from her bedroom.

"I don't know, Gram. Just leave him be. You need to get to bed anyway," I called from the kitchen while I scraped my plate.

"He won't come out. He done always come out for a meat bone. Somethin' ain't right," my grandmother mumbled, hobbling into the kitchen. "He never acts like this Davie. Usually I can get him out in a snap. He shakn' like it the Rapture tomorrow. I's worried about him."

I closed the dishwasher and pressed the "On" button.

"Don't worry about him, Gram. He just a dog. He'll soon get over it."

“Mmhm,” my grandmother said skeptically, waddling over to the trashcan to throw out the bone.

“Who knows,” I said, trying to cheer her up, “Maybe he knows somethin’s coming. Sees into the future or somethin’ like that.”

“Yeah, maybe the Rapture really tomorrow, you know? An’ ol’ Bruno know it. Ha ha!” she said, letting out a raspy, old laugh.

I couldn’t help but laugh with her.

“Something coming, Bruno?” I joked, looking into my grandmother’s room and finding Bruno under the bed, his glazed eyes reflecting the dim light as they peered at me. “Somethin’ comin’ ain’t it, boy?”

He just stared back at me. Gram and I laughed some more.

I would grow to regret those words.

After my grandmother was tucked in bed and snorin’ loud enough to make the house shake, I made one last half-hearted attempt to get Bruno out from under the bed, but he wouldn’t budge. So I went to my bedroom, closed the door, walked to my small corner by the window, and began my late night ritual.

I sat down at the bench by the window and gave the keys a nice stroke with the back of my hand, pressing down just enough to hear each note faintly. I thought of Bruno, damn dog.

“Somethin’s comin’,” I said, shaking my head and laughing softly for a bit.

Yeah that was it, alright. Fo’ sure. *Somehing’s coming.*

That’s when I realized I had heard those words before. Somewhere. I started ruffling through the sheet music, dug through all the piles scattered around the piano. As I searched, I tried to hum the tune, bring it back to me, but I couldn’t quite remember how it went. Hate it when that happens. ‘S like there’s holes in your brain, or somethin’.

Some...
Something's coming
I don't know
When it...will
...one-handed catch
come on, deliver...me...

Finally.

Tattered and fading, having one of the oldest smells of all my sheet music, I found Sondheim's "Something's Coming". I grinned.

I had bought the sheet music from an old record store down the way. I was there for a' least three hours digging for...something. I didn't know what. I still don't know what about it stood out to me. I wasn't a Sondheim fan or even a musical theater fan. I didn't even find the music with the rest of the book. It'd been torn from a book of music, a faded "55," "56," and "57" on the bottom of its pages. Guess it was the ominous title that drew me in. I figured I'd learn it and it'd be the kind of thing I'd play when I was in the right mood. Like tonight. On a rainy, stormy night. With Bruno under the bed waitn' for something to come.

I closed my eyes. Took a deep breath. Released. As I let the rain wash o'er my thoughts, let the pitter-patter of raindrops serve as my metronome, let the lightening flash over my skin and the thunder jolt my body, I felt a small tingle 'n the back of my head.

I opened my eyes and sat staring at the milky white keys. The stormy sky turned the whole piano a weird blue-ish white color. Slowly, echoing voices found their way to the front of my brain. They called to me. It seemed only fitting that I should play it now. Still, Bruno sat under my grandmother's bed, shakin', waitin'. But for what? If I let go just enough, I wouldn't have to wonder, the music would tell me.

As the intro's notes tumbled out, sounding as if they were stepping up and down stairs, I closed my eyes and Tony came to me, filling the empty space with his sweet voice.

Could be?

Who knows?

As the notes climbed, my pulse climbed with them. Soon my muscles contracted to the rhythm of the beat and veins in my hands bulged from the force of my fingers on the keys. Pulsating.

It's only just out of reach

Down the block, on the beach

Under a tree...

The notes grew windy, anxious, like they were anticipating something. It pulled me in. Grabbed me by the shoulders, shook me. It was as if the music was warning me, trying to make me see what was coming.

With a click, with a shock

Phone'll jingle, door will knock.

Open the latch...

Steadily, the notes, the intensity ascended until. The climax,

Maybe tonight

Maybe tonight

Maybe tonight...

BANG!

It came from outside. At first, I couldn't tell what it was. A thunderbolt? A gunshot? The earth splitting open? Whatever it was, it rattled me pretty good—and the house, too. I waited, hands trembling over the keys. From the feeling of electricity in the air, I could tell the storm was right above our building. I stared outside, counting by the thousands, waiting for the next flash of lighting to strike. Then it came, thunder shaking the Earth, and then...that awful noise again.

Looking outside, I saw the sad little corner of the world I had been forced to look at now for over two years. A cramped, sketchy courtyard-like alleyway, where four buildings backed up ‘gainst each other to form a square where two giant dumpsters and piles of trash sat scattered around the pavement.

I saw them come around the corner. A lamppost on the sidewalk lit up the alleyway just enough so that I could see the figures’ outlines. It was the usual suspects: hoodies ‘n guns. Two tall kids and one short one. They looked otherworldly from where I stood. The rain distorted them, washed ‘em out. I could see they were arguing about something, but being unable to hear their words, I didn’t have a context or meaning to what they said.

All I could think about in that moment was the sheer dark irony of it all. There I was, up in my tower, not even a whole 365 days from leaving this shithole forever, and there they were, trapped here forever. They had become one with the streets and by now I knew there was no turning back for them. I shivered then.

I didn’t want to watch, but felt as though I had to. These kids were nobodies. When this was all over, they’d be forgotten. Even if they managed to get out of this alive, it would happen again. Either way, their reputations and existence would be buried along with their bodies. It happened to all of them.

They lived in a fantasy, believin’ that their reputation on the streets was enough to earn them the legacy they longed for, the story they wanted to leave behind. Their world was so small though. This neighborhood was all they knew. No one had ever told ‘em they could get to Harvard, write the next New York Times bestseller, travel to the moon, or hell, just graduate from high school. All they knew was that if they could prove they were men on these streets, there was a possibility of a guarantee that someone, *some one* would remember them. I’ve yet to see this fantasy manifest itself.

Things intensified outside. The argument continued until something the shorter boy said set the other two off. They drew their guns and slowly pushed the short boy into a corner. He

stepped backwards into a large puddle that had pooled into a small lake beside one of the dumpsters. Shakily, the short boy pulled out his gun, too, but it was clear he wasn't going to win this one. I could now hear the other two kids' voices, but just barely. I could see the shorter boy pleading, his gun looking more like a prop in his hand. Waiting in the darkness of my tower, I became one with the night, silenced by my own wallflower-dom. All I could do was stand and wait for the inevitable.

Suddenly, the brightest lightening bolt of the night lit up the courtyard, revealing the triangle of guys, guns pointing from all three corners. Once everything went dark, I counted down to the inevitable: one one thousand, two one thou—

Then the thunder. Then the bullet. They were one and the same now.

When once again the sky was electrified after another 30 seconds or so, all that was left as testimony to the boy's existence was the ripple of the water in the puddle. Nothing more.

In the weeks that followed, the neighborhood searched tirelessly for the kid. He was one of *those* cases: straight-A student, upcoming star on the basketball team. I believed they used the phrase "bright future" at least four times in the newspaper article. "He had just gotten mixed up with the wrong boys," they said. Wrong time, wrong place. Whether he had it comin' to him or not, I have no doubt that it was fate (or an even greater power) that brought him to that alleyway courtyard that night.

The police done searched through those dumpsters for days. Found nothin'. No blood. No shoes. No gun. No DNA. No nothin'. They did go askn' around the day after. I'll give them that. 'Suppose they cared a micro-ounce enough to ask around. When they came knockn' on my door early the next day, though, I had my lines ready.

"Evening, officer."

"Evening, sir."

"I suppose you're here to ask me about what went on in that alleyway last night?"

I had learned, don't let the cops know you know any details. He would have known right away if I had mentioned a shooting.

"Yes, I am, mind if I step in for a moment? I'd like ask you a few questions."

I let him in.

"I'm sorry, officer. I really can't tell you much. My grandmother, Clarice May Albertson, she's the tenant of this apartment. She's not well and I'm here taking care of her. She's resting right now actually just in the other room."

I hoped that would encourage the officer to be quiet and speed things up. Instead, he looked around my apartment. Scanning. For what I don't know, but I was black, so that was reason enough. Lookn' for any reason he could to catch me, I guess. That's how it is with city cops.

"Did you hear any kind of...disturbance last night?"

"Yeah I heard a fight goin' on."

He started nosing through the kitchen.

"Did you see anyone outside?"

"Yeah I saw a few guys. Two, three maybe?"

Then he was going through my grandmother's meds.

"You hear anything they said? Hear a gunshot, maybe?"

"You know, there was that storm last night. It was too difficult to make out a gunshot with all that thunder and wind goin' on."

He turned to me. There was a knowing in his eyes. Of what I'm not sure. Maybe he was just suspicious. It was enough to throw me off my game though. I started to shift my feet and play with my fingers.

"I'm sorry, officer, I was helping my grandmother get into bed around that time last night. I didn't see or hear what all happened."

He stared. Long and hard. For about an eternity of a minute or so. Finally,

“Alrighty, then. Thank you for your time.”

With that, he left.

What was I supposed to tell ‘em? You can’t even dumb down what I witnessed. There was no way being honest was going to help this poor kid get found. It was the one time in my life where I acted like every other fellow neighbor on the block who didn’t want any trouble and lied to the police. Never had done it before and never since.

Anyway, eventually the police gave up. Just like they always do. They played it like the other two had dumped the kid’s body elsewhere or dragged it to another location. Burned it up maybe. They made up shit like that. But I knew better. The boy’s body hadn’t been dumped or burned or buried. That kid had up and vanished.

I couldn’t take staring out that window after that. I found a nice lady to take care of my grandmother and left to find my own place, promisin’ to come visit her on the weekends, which I did until she finally passed away three years later.

Sondheim sounded sour to me after that. Even now, I have to push my way through his notes and I never play *West Side Story* anymore. I find it aggravates the ghost that already haunts me. Even after I moved out of that place, I couldn’t sleep. I’d have dreams—night terrors really—where I thought I could hear the kid’s voice over the thunder gunshot. It was a melancholy scream, like his soul was cryin’ out for me.

My dreams vanished with him. I couldn’t take how restless my soul had grown and soon after dropped my music major for an education major. Suddenly the thought of traveling the world didn’t appeal to me anymore. ‘Stead it depressed me. I needed to stay here for some reason. Needed to...make sure somehow that what happened didn’t happen to any other boys.

I ended up coming right back to the South Side of Chicago. Right back to the very neighborhood I swore I was gonna leave forever. Dreams are funny that way. Now, I teach and mentor young boys through music. I stay after school at my old high school and offer lessons six

days a week free of charge. I figure it'll keep them in line, keep 'em disciplined and well rounded, keep them in school and off the streets. Secretly, though, I hope that it keeps them from vanishing. If I can keep their souls off the streets, then I figure they are a lot less likely to go vanishing. That's the logic at least.

Not a day goes by I don't think 'bout that boy who vanished. I've tried to rationalize what I saw in every way possible. But I just can't. I do think the powers at be made a mistake. I don't think people are meant to witness, to *see* people vanish. That kind of defeats the very purpose of vanishing. It's not supposed to happen right in front of someone, it's supposed to happen at 3 a.m. on an empty city street, or on a long stretch of road in the middle of nowhere, or in a forest with alcohol or drugs involved so that it's at least partly believable. It wasn't supposed to happen this way—with me see'n everything, only the confusing shine of the lightning to cover things up.

All that makes up that boy's legacy is a single newspaper clipping with yet another grainy, smilin' photo in it. There was a small collection of flowers and candles in that back alley courtyard for a few days after the incident, but no one really wanted to go back there after sunset, so it kind of fell apart...

It tickles me in the pit of my stomach, twists a part of me I cannot name to think it all through. There's nothing human about vanishing. Nothing at all.

My grandmother is gone now. All my friends have moved on to bigger and better things. There is no reason for me to go back to that place, to that small, sorry window tower. And still I do. Once or twice a year now I'll get my camera or clip some paper to a clipboard and go back to my grandmother's old place. She and I were the exception in that we actually kept up with the rent payments, so there's always someone new junkie or immigrant livn' there whenever I go.

Sometimes I'll pretend I'm doing a survey or that I'm a photographer from the Tribune. My grandmother raised me to be polite, see. And a well-mannered young black man is scarce on

my block. All it takes is a flash of my smile at them, a compliment or two, and a teensy bit of begging. They buy whatever I sell. Never question me. I've mastered the art of charm, if for only one purpose—to take just one more look.

While they're in the kitchen fixin' me a glass of ice water or coffee, I find my way into my old room, go to the window and stare down.

With a click, with a shock

Yeah, I guess that's how it happens. Click of the gun, shock of lightening, and they're gone. The vanishing. Like desert dust, *los desaparecidos* are up an' gone.

Off a doorstep, from a street corner, through a puddle.

Something's coming.

Solis Obscurum: A Novella

I.

Pro•logue

God settled our house in the cradle of the horizon, so that we sit right between now and forever. When the sun rises, it slides up like a colossal fried egg to the East of our house and when the moon rises, it bathes us in a lunar shower of light; its craters and mountains sticking out like pores and acne on a nose.

They are tools used by God to dictate time here—always twelve hours of daylight and twelve hours of night. They are the only beings that tell time, seeing as there are no seasons here and no clocks. We don't even have any weather. It's always 70 degrees and sunny here during the day, then 50 degrees at night.

One would think the ocean, which lies on our North side, would give us some indication of time. The tides rise and fall, but it's rhythmically monotonous. Sometimes, I pack a bag and we make the trip to the edge of the cliff, down the zigzag of stairs to the beach and have a picnic. There's this one boulder I like to wade out to. I stand on it, and squint into the distance. I look for anything. A sail. A tower. A hill. I never see anything, and yet I can't bring myself to stop looking.

On our cliff, we are surrounded on all sides by a field of tall grass, which never browns or flourishes. To the South of us, far in the distance, are mountains. We still like to race at them. We run through the field, cheeks red, breathing loudly, and we get far, sometimes running half a day before tiring. But the mountains never grow any closer.

There was a time not long ago when I ran and was sure I would reach those mountains. I would swim for miles or squint out into the horizon and was sure I would

find something. Now I know that day will never come. We're stuck in time, nestled here between two expanses. Cradled in the horizon's womb, we are doomed to remain forever in service to this land, this Purgatory.

II.

Si•blings

There are five of us.

I'm the oldest of us siblings. Maggee. Short for Margaret. A variation of Mary. I couldn't say how old I am exactly, but I'm somewhere in my mid-twenties. I'm strong for a woman my age, though not quite athletic. And I'm stubborn. Quiet too, but loud when I need to be. And tired. I've been tired for a long time.

Then there's Cato—the "wise." He's fifteen and angry at the world. He wants to be a man, but he can't get past that boyish rebellion and holds a grudge against this land for preventing him from growing up. I see a man behind those eyes, but I'm secretly happy he's stayed like this. If the day ever comes when he does grow up, he'll leave. Climb in a boat and set sail at sea or pack up and head for the mountains. If that day comes, I'll lose a valuable asset to this family and a dear friend, and that'll destroy me.

Then there's Dante—the "enduring." He's twelve and the brains of the family. He can take apart the stove and put it back together in under an hour. His bedroom walls are filled with maps and sketches, mostly of inventions he wants to build. He's careful and cautious, meticulous, almost religiously, when it comes to his science experiments. One time, he tried to build a machine that would make the beds with parts he found in the supply closet. Just a few days before he was to reveal it, though, he threw it in the

fireplace, claiming that because one lever didn't work "it was a useless piece of trash". He feels a constant need to seek perfection. And he's lacking in both patience and the ability to let things go. Show him the splendor of a sunrise and all he sees is a giant ball of gas miles and miles away whose energy we harvest to survive. He's still got some growing to do.

After him comes my Zoe, pronounced like "toe"—the "life" of the family. She's small for a seven-year old, which worries me sometimes. And she's always getting herself into trouble because she's not clever like Dante, or athletic, like Cato. But what she lacks in height, brains, and muscle, she makes up for in kindness and serenity. She's got a way with nature. Flowers bloom at her touch and she can coax any critter out of its hiding place. She's my little helper. She almost never complains and is my buddy when it comes to hair and clothes and girl things.

Finally, there's baby Lloyd. "Gray," I suppose for his gray eyes. He's a happy baby and at the fun age of six months. He's my little man. I spend most of my time caring for him, but the other three pitch in. He's healthy and curious and sure knows how to throw a tantrum. He's smart too. He can build towers with his blocks, can almost stand on his own, and when we ask, "Where's the cup? Where's the ladybug? Where's Zoe?" he points and babbles loudly. I worry though. He's not yet said his first word. Sometimes I watch him trying to repeat what we've said, straining to form a word with his lips, but then he gets flustered and cries. I look at him sometimes and he just looks back at me, not making a sound, cocking his head to the side at times. He's a mystery. I don't have the slightest clue what he'll be someday.

I don't know how I know the meanings behind all our names or how I know how old we are, especially since there is no sense of time here. I just do. I've always known.

We five fit together, we do, we each with our own talents, our own skills. The mother and glue of the family, the athlete and eldest boy, the brains, the gifted, and...the mystery, my Lloyd. Like a puzzle, we fit together and make this family function, each providing a different function to make things run smoothly.

We've been stuck here for as long as I can remember. An eternity. Sometimes I think I've known a time when we were younger, when I grew up; a time before Lloyd was born or when I was a young child, even if we ever had parents, but it's like a fragment of a dream. As many times as I swear I have memories from a time before this, there are just as many times I look at all of us and wonder if one day we just all appeared here out of thin air at the ages we are now. And then I wonder if Lloyd will ever talk and walk, and if Cato will ever grow up and leave or if I will ever grow older. Or if we'll remain this way for all time.

III.

In•be•tween

We're situated in a house that looks like a good-sized shack from far away, but is actually much bigger once you get closer and definitely once you get inside. Our front porch faces the field and the far off mountains, while our back porch faces the cliff and the sea beyond.

In our house, we own and operate a bed and breakfast. It's called THE B N'
BETWEEN:

BED AND BREAKFAST, though it appears on our sign looking like this:

THE B N' BETWEEN
E R
D E
A
K
F
A
S
T

(I know. The name wasn't my idea. It's just always been called that.)

When guests enter, they come into the front hall, which opens up into the main dining area, a room that is always able to hold however many guests we have, but on any given day seats about 500-700 people. On either side of the room are the front desk on the right and the grand staircase on the left. The room also has a grand fireplace and a small sitting area, but on the other side of the back wall of the dining hall that shares the fireplace is the recreational room that has couches, chairs, pool tables, chess, board games, arcade games, and a small stage for when Dante and Zoe entertain by playing the violin and harp.

Down a hallway that passes under the grand staircase, is the conservatory with plants from all over Earth, along with fountains, benches, and a butterfly garden. Down the other hallway that passes by the front desk is another sitting room that is meant to be quieter and is connected to the library, but separated by sliding door. This room also has doors that open out to the back porch, where some rocking chairs and a porch swing are situated.

Our quarters are up a separate set of stairs in the kitchen. We all get our own room, except for Lloyd who sleeps in a crib in my room.

Cato, Dante, Zoe, and I are the only ones who work the inn. We all four do the cooking, cleaning, and upkeep. We run it all day, every day. The trips to the beach and races to the mountains usually happen at night because that's really the only time we have to ourselves. Every waking hour, even for Dante and Zoe is dedicated to either working the inn or caring for Lloyd.

Everyday we wake up just before the sun rises. Everyday we clean, cook, and serve tables in the dining hall; we make the beds, shine the shoes, wash the towels, work the desk, water the plants in the conservatory, entertain in the drawing room, and greet every guest with a smile, all for one sole purpose: to ferry the souls of those who have died through Purgatory and onto their eternal resting place in either Heaven or Hell.

We were given this task by God. We've never met God, but His presence is as real as the house we live in and the sky above us. He is in everything we touch and we experience, and we feel His ever-constant watch over us, just as a traveler feels the eyes of the forest on him. We have no direct relationship with God and do not exactly answer to Him, but it is He that moves in us whenever we think about breaking the rules or have to stop a guest from breaking them. Put another way, our connection to Him is not based in faith, but on obedience and a sense of duty.

IV.

Edge

I hate working the kitchen.

Cato and I take turns running the kitchen every other day. He was supposed to only work the lunch shift, but I made him work a double shift because the dining hall is

packed tonight and I needed him to bus tables. He's the only one of us that's strong enough to carry a bin full of dishes. But now I'm starting to regret it. Dante and Zoe are struggling out there and Cato can't do his job *and* help them take people's orders at the same time.

He's seemed to disappear though. I've scanned the dining hall ten times over, but he must be stuck in the back with a difficult customer. As if this night could get any worse.

"Maggee!" It's Zoe, running full speed at the kitchen counter. "The woman at table 9 changed her order AGAIN! Now she wants the soup and the salad and dressing on side, but she don't want the tomatoes or the egg in it cuz the dressing makes the taste bad...or maybe it was walnuts and tomatoes...here, I wrote it down."

She hands me the order slip with barely legible scribbles on it written in purple crayon.

"Alright," I say in one big sigh, "I'll see what I can do. In the mean time, give the woman this," I say handing her a plate of bruschetta that someone sent back, "as a compliment from the chef until her order is ready and then check on tables 5 through 10. Got it?"

"Ok," Zoe says as she runs off, weaving through the tables to the back of the room. I watch, checking to see she holds the plate with two hands. Just as I lose sight of her, Dante's face comes into view.

"Mags, we have a problem," he says coming up to the counter cautiously. "The man at table 4 got very...animated again when telling another one of his war stories and broke two more glasses, and *both* were crystal."

"*Shit*," I say under my breath, throwing my spoon in the bowl I was mixing.

Just then I hear the faint sound of Lloyd crying. Dante and I exchange a look. I let out a long sigh.

“Ok, go tell Zoe she can be relieved from her shift if she gets the baby.”

I do a sweep of the dining room.

“Dante, where’s your brother?” I ask.

Dante rolls his eyes.

“He’s taking a ‘break,’” he says, adding air quotes.

“What?”

“Yeah, I don’t know,” he says as he starts to gather more dishes of orders in his arms, “he came home late last night after he *said* he was ‘going to get more firewood’.

He was really angry, threw a tantrum or something in his room. I could here stuff banging and crashing and he was yelling. Kept me up, actually.”

I let out a sigh and the bin of dishes I’m holding almost falls over. As if I needed something else to worry about. I shake my head.

“Well, where is he now?”

“In his usual spot,” he says, turning to head back to the kitchen. “On the edge.”

Sure enough, Cato is there, about half a mile away, sitting on the edge of the cliff, legs dangling off the side. His silhouette against the setting sun makes him look a lot younger than he actually is, as if he were a small boy fishing at a pond, sitting on the dock contemplating life. Once I reach the cliff, I sit down beside him.

“Hey, stranger,” I say, all the anger gone from my voice. “You know, we’re kind of missing you in there. Could use your help during the dinner rush.”

As I sit down beside him, he turns away from me. I let out another sigh.

“You went running again, didn’t you,” I say, rather than ask, “to the mountains.”

“No,” Cato says, still turned away from me, “I went swimming.”

“Ah, I see. You know, Cato...you’re not—”

“Don’t!” he yells, turning to me, I can see fresh tears on his face, “Don’t say it. I don’t believe it. I don’t fucking believe it, ok? I will find something some day! I will. Don’t fucking tell me I won’t! I will!”

He’s crying harder now. I scoot closer to him and wrap my arm around him.

“Hey,” I say, “it’s alright.”

“It’s not fucking fair!” he says, looking like the 5-year-old I dream I once knew him as, completely helpless and vulnerable.

“Why are we stuck here in this eternal wasteland?! It’s bullshit! Everyone here is bullshit! This job is bullshit, this house is bullshit, everything is just bullshit! I hate our fucking lives!” he says, standing up and shouting over the cliff, a faint echo following afterwards.

“Shhh,” I say, gently pulling him back down. He’s breathing hard, but starts to calm down, wiping his face, sniffing.

“I know,” I whisper, “I know, but Cato, you have to stop going so far. One day— one day you not be able to get back before sunrise and if that ever happens...I—”

“I know,” he says, almost whining, “I’ll try to stick close.”

“Hey,” I say, taking his chin in my hand and guiding it so he faces me, “Hey, I need you to hold it together for me. I may be the anchor of this family, but you are the

sail that makes this family's ship move. The others look to you for guidance. They do. I can't have you losing it now. I need you. We all do."

In that moment, Cado's pale green eyes soften and I see the boy I've always known inside them, along with all the wisdom and courage I know he has in store.

"Besides," I continue, "you know what tomorrow night is, don't you?"

"Full moon" he says, smiling. I smile back.

We may work day in and day out and are almost always exhausted by the time the sun sets, but every full moon we work all through the day, no stops, so that, when night comes, we can spend it how we like. We usually start out running in the field, chasing fireflies and dancing. That's when they all have their races to the mountains. After a few hours of that, I usually pack a basket for the beach and we head down there. We play in the sand and swim until the sun breaks over the ocean waves and signals us to go back up to the inn to start another day.

"Exactly," I say. "Our night off. No dishes, no laundry, no bed-making."

"Just us and the open water, open land," Cato says, grinning.

I follow his gaze out to the sea.

"Yeah, just us," I say.

Cato rests his head on my shoulder. Together, we watch the sun melt beneath the horizon, until it's just the size of a lemon drop, and then until there's nothing left at all.

V.

Clock•work

Our guests come from the mountains. At least that's the consensus among the five of us. We don't really know exactly where they come from, but they come from the direction of the mountains. They just ring the bell or knock and show up at our door one day. Sometimes we can see them walking through the field up to the front porch.

They come dressed as they died, and wear what they have for the duration of their stay. We see people dressed in anything ranging from ball gowns, to overalls, to designer clothes, to tunics, to rags. And yet they all sit together in the dining hall or drawing room completely ignorant of the fact that they are each from a different period in time.

Oddly enough, their clothes are the only other indicator of time for us. That, and their stories. That's how we've learned everything we know, by listening.

The guests don't mind. They are ignorant of everything here. They are ignorant of all time and their whereabouts. It somehow does not worry them in the least that they are staying at a bed and breakfast in the middle of an endless field on a cliff beside an endless sea in Purgatory. As far as they are concerned they are staying at a cute, little country inn for the weekend.

Except for the fact that they don't have to pay. No one pays for room and board at the B N' Between. At least not with money.

(A cruel person might say they pay with their souls, though.)

Guests check in at the front desk and we find their names in our reservation book. Then we open our availability book, which we update daily, give them the keys to their rooms, and help take their bags upstairs.

There are never any children who check in. Only grownups.

When they are ready to leave they come back to the front desk with their keys and we scratch out their names and write down their room number under “available”. Then they take their bags and walk out the front door, making their way back through the field toward the mountains.

Once a guest leaves, we never see him or her ever again.

Guests stay for however long they need to, or for however long God needs them to, I suppose. I’ve tried keeping track of the days for certain guests, but time is a funny thing here and I soon lose count. Sometimes someone will stay for a long stretch of time, and sometimes it will be a very short stretch of time. One thing is for sure, though, no one has ever stayed for just one night. No one. *Ever.*

We always have enough here at the inn; always have a freezer stocked with meat, a cabinet full of bread, appliances that work, running water, heat, electricity, extra linens, enough tables and chairs, enough bedrooms, enough room in general. We always get the job done, despite there being only four of us to do all the work.

There are often long stretches of time when no one checks out and still more guests check in by the dozens. This always worries me, and yet, we always have an empty room available for them, and I always find it. Whether it’s room 15 or room 215, I lead then up the stairs and down the hall and there is their room, empty and waiting for them.

During the day, our guests can do pretty much whatever they want. The drawing room has billiards, chess, board games, plus Dante and Zoe take requests for songs hourly. Guests can read in the library, enjoy a walk through the conservatory, relax out on the front and back porches, or pass the time in their room.

The only rule at the inn is this: *no one leaves the inn during his or her stay*. They can go on the porch, but no further. They can't go back into the field and they certainly can't go down to the beach. This usually, though, isn't a problem. Sometimes I have to tell the occasional curious guest to stay put, but they mostly have this sense that beyond the inn's porch steps is forbidden. None of us knows what will happen if they do leave, but somehow we know, just as we know everything there is to know about this place, that bad things would happen if they did leave.

VI.

Door•bell

The next morning is slow and thank goodness for that. It's a bit after dawn and only a handful of guests are in the dining hall. I'm preparing the day's breakfast in the kitchen. Dante is asleep, head down on one of the empty tables. No doubt exhausted from last night. Zoe is lying on a blanket in the corner of the kitchen, entertaining Lloyd. And Cato. Well, he's nowhere to be found, but that doesn't worry me, especially given his behavior last night.

I knead dough for the cinnamon rolls, while Zoe tickles Lloyd's nose with a dandelion she picked earlier this morning. With the window open in the kitchen we can hear the birds sing their early morning odes and the other nature noises that the early day brings about. Mornings at the inn are definitely my favorite part of the day.

Just as I'm beginning to shape the last of the cinnamon rolls on the baking sheet, I hear the doorbell ring.

"Doorbell," Dante says, without lifting his head or opening his eyes.

“I’ll get it!” Zoe shouts.

“Thank you, love,” I say, handing her some cinnamon dough, “and take Sleeping Beauty with you.”

I watch as Zoe rouses Dante, takes him by the hand, and drags him to the front door.

“It’s just you and me, little man,” I coo, looking down at Lloyd. He stares right back, fingers in his mouth. He doesn’t say a word, just holds his gaze with me. I hold my gaze too, looking into those stormy eyes...

Then I’m interrupted by the sound of Zoe’s voice down the hall.

“Welcome to The B N’ Between Bed and Breakfast. Please come inside.”

I look back at Lloyd, but he’s more concerned with what his feet taste like than me, now. I go back to rolling my dough for a bit, then go out to wash down the tables before breakfast until I’m interrupted once more, this time with a guest. A young woman dressed in a sun hat, beach cover-up, and flip-flops comes up to me. Poor girl must have died in a shark attack or drowning the way she’s dressed.

“Excuse me, I’m sorry to bother you,” she says with a thick Irish accent.

“I was just wondering if you ever take guests down to the beach for the day? My window looks out onto the sea and, oh my, it looks so beautiful down there with all that sand and lots of shade. I grew up by a beach, but I haven’t been in a quite a long time. I’m just aching to get down there. When does it open?”

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” I say in a small voice, “but guests aren’t allowed on the beach. I’m afraid you’ll have to remain within the boundaries of the inn during your stay with us.”

I look at the woman with a heavy heart. I see she reads the truth behind my eyes and suddenly her whole body sighs, letting go of all the joy she felt a moment ago.

“Oh,” she says in a voice so lacking in life and so forlorn that I want to take her hand and hold her like a small child.

“If you are at all uncomfortable here, I apologize. I’ll do whatever I can to improve your experience here at the inn. I can point you in the direction of some of our leisure activities and means of entertainment. Tonight, we have—”

“Oh no, it’s not that,” she says, “It’s just...I’ve been here for a long time, and...well...I’m just getting very tired. I thought the beach would be nice and cheer me up. Nothing you can do, though. Thanks for your time.”

I look into her dulled brown eyes one last time and then watch her walk out of the dining hall slowly, and up the main stairs. Poor woman. That’s how they all get after being here awhile. Their souls get restless.

“Maggee,” Dante says, barely audibly, but waking me out of my stupor. I turn to see him slinking back to his table, “some weird guy is at the door.”

I put my rag down and walk to the front door to find Zoe talking to a man whom is kneeling beside her and is indeed weird. He’s not dressed like any of the other guests. He’s got long light brown hair that goes down past his shoulders, rough, sun-kissed skin, and isn’t wearing a shirt, only white drawstring pants, like sweatpants, but made of a different fabric. Weirdest of all, though, he’s soaking wet.

“May I help you, sir?” I say, walking up to him, gingerly.

“Finally!” he says, struggling to get up. “Are you the person in charge here?”

“Yes,” I venture, “my name is Maggee. I’m the owner of this inn.”

“Good. I need to borrow your phone.”

“Our phone?” I say, confused. As I say this, I’m forced to look into his eyes, which are dark, almost black. I’m also startled to realize that he’s young, about my age...

“Yes,” he says, “I need to call someone right away. Please, it’s urgent.”

Zoe and I look at each other. Even at the age of seven, Zoe knows what he just requested is weird to ask here.

“Sir, I think you are mistaken. The only phones we have are in our guest rooms and they are for ordering room service. You can’t use them for anything else. Who is it that you need to call? Perhaps they are already here.”

“Wait. No, you don’t understand. Let me explain,” he says, starting to breathe more heavily now, “See, I’ve—I’ve come from the sea. That’s why I’m all wet—”

“The sea?” I say, a strange sensation sliding down my spine, “You didn’t come through the field? From the mountains?”

He stares at me blankly.

“What? No!” he yells, breathing even heavier now and looking very confused.

“I came from the sea. I’ve been shipwrecked here. I washed up on shore just before dawn and I—I need to use your phone. Please, I have to tell someone I’m here! I have to call the police.”

It hits me then and a sharp chill goes down my back. I know who the police are. Police officers have stayed at the inn before. If this man is asking to call the police, that means...somehow he’s...*conscious*...

“I’m sorry, sir, but I’m going to have to ask you to leave,” I say and quickly close the door. I feel Zoe shiver then get behind me as I struggle to lock it. I can feel him pushing on the other side.

“Please! Help me! You don’t understand! Let me in, please!” I can hear him shouting on the other side.

“Dante, get over here!” I scream.

I struggle to hold the door closed and almost manage to turn the knob on the lock when Dante comes up beside me.

“What’s going on?! Who is that?!” he shouts.

“Just hold the door closed!” I shout, fighting with all my strength, but it doesn’t do any good. The man pushes the door open and forces his way inside. Dante and Zoe scream and cling on to me.

“PLEASE!” he roars, grabbing me by the shoulders, “Please, you have to help me!”

His hands are shaky, but strong. I freeze where I am and stare into his crazed eyes. He pushes me up against the wall.

“Where am I?” he says, almost a whisper. His eyes begging, belligerent.

“Purgatory,” I whisper, “You’re in Purgatory. It is a land between Heaven and Hell where souls await their final judgment.”

He just stares back.

“No,” he breathes, “That’s impossible!”

He’s shaking more rapidly now and he grips me harder.

“I’M NOT DEAD!!!”

And then there is a loud WHACK and he falls to the floor.

VII.

The•Stran•ger

I'm pacing behind the front desk. Back and forth. Back and forth. I've worn a path on the floorboards; I've been doing this so long. I know the dining hall is extra crowded today, but the guests don't exist to me right now. All I can think about is this *stranger* lying in Cato's bed upstairs. That's what he is after all. He's not a guest. *He's a stranger.*

After Cato knocked the stranger out with the frying pan, he and I managed to drag his body upstairs to our living quarters. I didn't want him anywhere near our guests. Cato's room was closest and the guy was heavy, so, despite Cato's reluctance, we decided we should lay him there for the time being. Then we locked the room and went about our day taking care of the inn. Or as normally as we could anyway, considering our day consisted of our inn getting broken into, me getting attacked, and having to lock the man that attacked me up in the bedroom where my brother sleeps.

Whatever I do I can't get him out of my head! I just see his wild dark eyes, his long hair, and soaking wet, shaking body every time I close my eyes. I keep trying to reason through it all, but nothing makes sense.

"Maggee!" I whip my head up. It's Zoe.

"He's AWAAAAAKE!" she shouts, racing through the dining hall and up to the front desk.

"Shhhh!" I say, "Keep it down, Zoe. Not so loud."

“He’s awake,” she says, out of breath, “And he started talking. Told some *crazy* stories. Most of them didn’t make sense. I told Dante to keep him in the room while I went to get you.”

“That’s very good, Zoe. Now I need you to take charge of the desk for a bit while I—”

“Uh oh,” Zoe’s face goes pale and she points behind me. I turn to see the stranger come out of the kitchen door and survey the dining hall, then watch in horror as he goes up to a couple eating dinner and asks the man something, after the man replies, looking confused, the stranger takes the man by the shirt collar and starts yelling in his face.

“I thought you said Dante was watching him!” I say, running out from behind the front desk.

“He was! He was! He must have gotten out!” Zoe says, running after me.

“Cato!” I scream and he puts down the tray he was serving and comes running. Together we manage to pull the stranger off the guest and drag him back to the kitchen, all while he screams “I DON’T BELONG HERE! TAKE ME BACK! TAKE ME BACK! I WANT TO GO BACK!” We push him through the storage closet and out the back door, and then lock it.

“Go take care of the couple,” I tell Cato, “I’ll deal with *him*.”

Cato looks hesitant, but leaves anyway.

I take a deep breath, unlock the back porch door and open it to find the stranger sitting on the porch steps, face in his hands. I wait a minute, then slowly make my way beside him and ease myself down on the steps, but I sit a good distance away from him,

just to be safe. It's only then that I realize that the man is crying. I wait awhile, but he doesn't stop. Then he starts talking.

"I don't belong here. I don't. I—I want to go back. I want. To go back," the stranger sobs.

"Sir, I know that you are upset, and, believe me, I'm as confused as you are as to why you are here, but you cannot behave that way in our inn. We have very strict rules here and if we break them we—"

"I don't belong here!" the stranger says, picking up his head.

"I need to go back and no one will tell me anything!" he yells, his voice sounding hallow on the cliff.

I take a deep breath and inch a bit closer.

"You said...you were...shipwrecked," I say slowly. "Where's your ship? Maybe it is repairable?"

"It's not," he says, burying his head in his hands again, "It's splintered to pieces."

"Alright then," I say, inching even closer. "Can you tell me anything useful about yourself, like a name maybe?"

The stranger stops crying and starts to calm down. He is quiet for awhile, then turns away from me, revealing a deep cut that runs down the back of his left shoulder.

"You're hurt!" I say, standing up in horror.

"What?" the stranger says, peering over his shoulder nonchalantly, "Oh that. It's just a scratch. I got it a few days in at sea when I fell trying to adjust the sails. Then one day I fell in the water while trying to fix a crack in the ship and was praying on my knees

it wouldn't get infected, but oddly enough the water seemed to *help* it heal. Then I thought for sure it would split open again during the storm—”

“Storm?” I say, feeling that same shiver down my back. I stand up and gaze out onto the horizon. The sun is beginning to set. Like always, I squint and shield my eyes, but there's nothing.

“But we don't have any weather here...” I trail off. I scan the horizon over and over. Then over again. Not a cloud in the sky.

“Really?” the stranger says, standing up.

“Yes,” I say, eyes trained at the line between the sea and sky.

Then I turn to him suddenly.

“Where did you come from?” I ask.

“I told you—”

“No, before that,” I say, frustrated.

“Nowhere,” he say, almost casually. “I just woke up and I was on the boat, lying on my back, staring up at the sky.”

He says it while standing here, looking at me with these oddly calm eyes. I turn back to the sea.

“Yes, but what about before that?” I ask. I hear him sigh and sit down.

I follow, sitting back down slowly and watch him stare off at nothing in particular.

“How much do you know about Earth?” he asks, as if he's choosing the words as he's saying them.

I straighten up.

“Probably more than I should know,” I answer.

The stranger gives a half-hearted laugh.

“Yeah I figured,” he said. He suddenly seems more relaxed now. “It’s a cruel thing having to live here, I bet. Stuck between death and life, Earth and space, Heaven and Hell.

“On Earth, Purgatory is just something the nuns in school use to scare children, something you learn about in Sunday school. It’s not real.”

The man continues to stare out into the prairie grass. He talks as if I no longer exist, like he’s saying this all to himself.

“I always thought that when I died it would all be over. I wouldn’t have to deal with any kind of ‘gray area’ ever again. Once you’re dead, you’re dead. That’s it! You know? But turns out that’s not the case for everyone. There are dead people and there are living people, and then there are those who are stuck in the in-between, trapped in a kind of mortal purgatory on Earth.”

I’m suddenly very uncomfortable. I’m almost too afraid to ask.

“Mortal purgatory. What do you mean by that?”

“A coma.”

He looks me in the eyes when he says it. There’s a tiny hint of a grin on his face, too. I suppose he thought he was being clever with his words.

“I was in a coma back on Earth. Still am right now, actually. I uh...slipped and fell down some stairs at the train station. I didn’t have any family left, but the man who found me refused to let the doctor’s take me off life support. So there I stayed—trapped in my own body, while I guess my soul had other ideas,” he says, kind of laughing. “It decided to take me to Purgatory and leave my body behind on Earth.”

Suddenly it all makes sense. Not in a logical way. I mean I still don't understand *why* he's here, but the underlying paralyzing sense of panic is gone from my body now. Slowly, I try to piece it all together verbally.

“You're stuck here in Purgatory with us...just like you're body is stuck on Earth. It's like...your mortality is on pause or something. Your body can't go anywhere, but your soul can, the rest of you can. Your whole being is just...lost. That's why you're not like the rest of them. That must be why you came from the sea. You're not...not really dead.”

The man smiles for the first time, a real genuine smile. And he looks at me while he smiles too. His eyes no longer look deranged and wild. If anything, they look...human. A warmth spreads in my cheeks and I turn away. I feel the need to properly introduce myself now that things have relaxed between us, but I can't bring myself to look at him.

“My name is Maggee, by the way. I guess I already told you that, but...” I trail off awkwardly. He doesn't say anything for a very long time. I finally decide the conversation has been exhausted and I get up to leave, when he speaks again.

“I had a girlfriend named Maggie once. Back on Earth.”

I freeze.

“You did?” I say, sitting back down.

“Yeah,” he says, turning to me now.

“You remind me of her a bit.”

I feel a rush of heat in my cheeks again, stronger this time and turn away again.

“Really?” I say, still turned away.

“Yeah, but I wouldn’t take that as a compliment,” he says, readjusting himself on the steps.

“Why not?”

“Because,” he says, staring back out into the horizon, “I didn’t treat her very well.”

I feel a kind of sadness, the kind I get whenever I hear guests talk about their past lives.

I know what sins are. And regrets. I don’t think we have them here. We just act. But knowing that our guests come here with a lifetime of sins and regrets sitting on their shoulders, forced to think about them, I can’t even imagine.

“Well...” I venture, “as long as you loved her. I think that’s all that counts, really.”

“Ha!” laughs the stranger. It’s kind of a cruel laugh.

“Do you know how many times I’ve told myself that?” he continues, “ ‘Oh! As long as I love her I can forget the small things.’ ‘As long as I love her I can lie my way out of this.’ ‘As long as I love her I can sleep around.’ ‘As long as I love her I can hit her and she’ll forgive me. Because I know she loves me too.’ ”

I stare at him.

“And that’s not even why she left,” he says, his voice empty.

He turns to me briefly and sees the question begging in my eyes.

“She left because she found out that I was...killing Jews...”

He drags out this sentence, word by word, like pulling gum apart. There’s a gravity to these words that makes my lungs dry up and my heart nearly stop.

“I’m not an idiot, Maggee. I’m from the 21st century. I am *not* the first coma patient. And I’m smart enough to know that while there’s no such thing as logic here, there are rules, and I am an exception to those rules.”

He turns to me now and inches a bit closer, his eyes growing wild again.

“Maggee, I have to tell you right now that I am not here by accident. I’m not here because my soul is confused. I mean—maybe that’s part of it...but...I think God is finally having His say with me. I’m finally ‘getting what I deserve.’ Maggee, I don’t think I’ll be leaving anytime soon. In fact, I don’t think I’ll be leaving at all. I think I’ve become like you and your siblings. I’m stuck, bound to rot here forever, well past the time when they pull the plug back home. I’m not human, Maggee, I might as well be a ghost. I’m just a shard of being, a whisper of life. Stuck here. Forever.”

He’s right in my face now. I hate how he keeps using my name. His eyes are wily, animal again. Using what very little air I have in my throat, I utter,

“What are you then?”

He recedes a bit, seeming almost put off that I was so bold in my questioning.

“I’m the last of them, Maggee,” he says, almost matter-of-factly.

“I am the last Nazi soldier.”

I feel like a small black hole has formed at the bottom of my stomach. I let out all the breath in my lungs. He looks at me, watching my reaction.

“Don’t you see? It ended that day. Everything good and sane and kind in my life died the day I was handed that uniform. I might as well have never been a child because after I joined the army, I undid every act of kindness in my life.”

I clutch my stomach. He curls up on the steps, knees to chest, his eyes glazing over like he's sinking into the past.

“Hitler was taking over Germany then.”

He turns to me then, suddenly, as if he forgot something.

“It's a tiny country in a land called Europe. I don't know if you know who Hitler is, but he had this plan—”

“To eradicate all Jews and anyone he considered inferior or a threat to his vision of the Third Reich,” I say as if I'm reciting a textbook. I turn to look out to the sea, but I can still feel the man's eyes on me.

“He rounded up Jews, gypsies, gays, and anyone inferior in his eyes and sent them to concentration camps where Nazi soldiers used unspeakable methods such as gas chambers, medical experiments, and other means of torture to kill everyone. The Americans and others eventually found out about the camps, liberated them, and held the Germans responsible at the Nuremberg Trials. That part of history has now become known as the Holocaust. *I know*,” I say, turning back to him, “Nazis have never stayed here before, but Nazi wives and Germans have. I've listened to all their stories. I know everything that happened.”

Now it's his turn to stare at me in silence. I don't feel like talking anymore and relax my body on the stairs. Enough time passes and the stranger eventually stops staring and then he relaxes, too. We both watch the sun as it sinks beneath the sea.

“I belong with them all,” he says, quietly after some time, “in Hell.”

I look over at him confused.

“It’s true,” he continues, matter-of-factly, “I belong in Hell with the rest of those bastards. I don’t deserve to be alive, even in the afterlife.”

This gets me for some reason and I find myself feeling sorry for the stranger all of a sudden.

“That’s not true. There must be some reason God *chose* to send you to Purgatory and not Hell. You must have been different.”

The stranger takes a long moment to think about this.

“I was put in charge of the trains,” he says, “I did all the unloading. I kept track of the train schedules and how many were coming. I wasn’t a very good soldier, never was very bright, so I never moved up in rank. But I did my job.”

He takes a moment and laughs to himself.

“You know, I was so naïve at the beginning that I actually asked to see their tickets so I could punch them, as if they were on a round trip, as if they were going back! Little did I know...

“I suppose I wasn’t such a terrible person, not in the beginning at least. I would sneak food to the kids as they got off the train. I remember one little girl took the biscuit from my hand and gave me this smile that I’ll never forget...and I never saw her again. For a while I thought she had just gone home. I thought they all went home.

“But as time went on, that place got to me. Soon it wasn’t humans I was dealing with, but animals, creatures, beings that deserved to be annihilated. And I did it, not because I believed in Hitler’s vision or because I was evil, but because I was doing my job. I was taking orders like a good soldier and I never questioned anything because we were taught not to.

“People always asked me afterwards how I could do such a thing, how I could look into the eyes of children and send them off to the gas chambers without so much as a second thought. I always told them the same thing: I was just doing my job. I was not unlike the secretary that shreds papers at the oil company headquarters or the construction worker that overlooks ecological regulations to build a new hotel, or the slave owners that have built some of the most successful and powerful empires and nations in the world. My actions were just on a different scale.”

“Maybe that’s why you were sent here,” I say, “because you knew the truth the whole time and now all you need to do is reflect on your...naiveté, and then you’ll be delivered into Heaven.”

“No,” says the stranger, shaking his head knowingly, “I was sent here as torture. I’m the last of the Nazis, I’m the scapegoat—ironically—so now God is giving me an extra long, agonizing punishment just for kicks. I guess He wants to make sure the last of us really suffers. Because *this*,” he says looking around, “is waaaay more painful than Hell. Being here, stuck here forever. *This* is suffering.”

I look at him and shake my head. It hurts a bit to hear someone say our way of life is torture.

“I refuse to believe that,” I say, shaking my head, “I refuse to believe in such a cruel act from God. No. I think you were sent here because God is giving you a chance. He’s giving you a chance to really think about things and one day when you have it all sorted out, He will deliver you up to Heaven. He sent you here because you are the last of the Nazis and, therefore, you deserve one last chance.”

“I don’t know,” says the stranger, burying his face in his hands, “All I know is that I don’t belong here. I don’t belong anywhere. I didn’t belong in Heaven, apparently, and I didn’t belong at sea, and I definitely don’t belong here,” he says, his voice cracking. Then I hear the man start to cry again.

“I thought when I died it would all be over. I thought I would never have to think of my life and my days as a soldier ever again. I thought there would just be nothing after I died. If I had known that there is life after death and regret and memories, I never would have done any of it! I would have just lived my life quietly and died a long time ago.”

I find myself wanting to wrap my arms around the stranger’s shoulders. I’ve never seen anyone in such pain before. I just want it to stop. We sit there for a long time. Just being silent and sad together.

Then, as the stranger shifts his weight under my arms, something falls out of the waist of his pants and makes a “clanging” noise on the stairs.

“What’s this?” I ask, picking it up.

I realize it must be a telescope, one of Dante’s better inventions. After all the guests’ stories of pirates, seafaring, star-gazing, and space programs, Dante decided he wanted to do some exploring of his own and invented his very own telescope.

“Dante gave it to me,” the stranger says, taking it from me and examining it, “He wanted me to have it so I won’t get lost when I go back to sea.”

“When did he give this to you?” I ask.

“After I woke up in the bedroom. He and Zoe and Cato, all three of them were there. I talked with them a bit, told them some stories about my life on Earth. Dante thought this would come in handy.”

“What kind of stories?” I venture, feeling a bit uneasy.

“Nothing about the Holocaust. Oh no! I mostly told them about my travels to India and Africa. I told them about how I escaped to America after the war and how I opened my own clock shop and sold hand-made German clocks in Boston. I told them about my mountain climbing and how I once tried to climb Mount Everest with a friend and almost died. And I told them about my sunset years as an old man finally at peace with the past, all the way up to the day I fell down the stairs at the train station. I suppose you wouldn’t know that from looking at me, though. I’m frozen in time on the day I became a soldier—the day I *really* died. God has a sense of humor, I guess.”

I laugh at this. It’s a true, deep belly laugh. It’s been a long time since I’ve laughed like that.

“I never could have guessed you were such a worldly man,” I say, “And I had *no* idea that Cato, Dante, and Zoe were bothering you for so long.”

“Oh, don’t, please,” says the man in protest, “They weren’t bothering me at all. I enjoyed telling them my stories. They’re great kids.”

“They are,” I say, and we smile, looking into each other’s eyes.

“*Excuse me?*”

We both jump and turn around. A man dressed in fireman’s clothes is standing on the back porch.

“I am so sorry to bother you, but I was wondering if I could check out now? I don’t mean to be rude, it’s just getting dark out and I’d like to head out while there’s still some light.”

“Of course,” I say, suddenly feeling like someone has slapped me across the face. I get up, “I’ll walk you to the front desk.”

“Thank you,” the man says, gesturing apologetically and walking back inside. I look over my shoulder at the stranger as I walk through the back door, hoping to catch his eyes one more time, but he’s gazing through Dante’s telescope at the sea.

VIII.

Re•main•ing

Once at the front desk, I get out the reservation and availability book.

“Name, please.”

“Harold Kane,” he says, “Room 316.”

I go through the reservation book all the way to the “K” section and scratch out his name, then change the availability of his room.

“Do you have your room key with you, sir?” I ask.

“Yes. Sorry. It’s buried in here somewhere,” he says, frantically looking through his pockets, then opening up his suitcase. I don’t want him to feel embarrassed so I ask,

“How long have you been staying here, sir?”

“Oh I don’t know. I pretty long time.”

“Have you enjoyed yourself?” I ask, opening up the key cabinet.

“Oh yes! Especially the live music. That kid with the violin is somethin’ else.”

“Thank you,” I say, smiling, “Did you request any songs while you were here?”

“Oh no, I just like to listen. It reminds me of my grandfather. He grew up in the early 1900’s and was the son of a slave. He played these old slave songs on his fiddle. I used to stay up for hours listening to him play at night. It was such a sad sound. It made me want to cry sometimes.”

My heart aches listening to his story. Every one of our guests’ stories breaks my heart. They are all so eager to tell them, though. That’s what gets me the most. These people want so much to share their stories with me and with everyone else here, like they want someone else to remember their lives and their loved ones’ lives, even in the afterlife.

I’m forced to come back to reality as I hear the man mumble and curse as he digs through his belongings.

“If you can’t find your key now, sir, it’s not a problem. Maybe you’d like to stay one more night and get a head start early tomorrow? I could make you something in the morning. I’ll be up anyway—”

“No, please,” says the man, “I’ll find it. I just—I have to leave tonight. I promise I’ll find my key any second now. Then I’ll be out of your hair.”

“It’s no trouble,” I assure him, “Perhaps you just left it in your room.”

“No, I have it here somewhere... Ah! Here it is!” he says, handing it to me, “It was at the very bottom.”

Then he begins to clean up everything that fell out of his suitcase.

“Thank you for the offer, ma’am, but I have to go tonight. I’ve been here long enough and well, to tell you the truth I’m getting a bit restless. It’s nothing against your service here. Nothing at all. I’m just ready to move on. You know?”

I smile back silently. *No, I don’t, I think.*

“You never know,” he says, picking up his suitcase, “Maybe this isn’t goodbye. This is the only inn in a hundred miles. You might see me around again real soon.” And with that he leaves. I wait to answer until the front door is shut and I can see him dragging his suitcase through the field.

“But I won’t,” I whisper, “I won’t ever see you again.”

IX.

Lu•na

The air is crisp and clear, the dying sunset’s colors still in the sky. I stand on the front porch and gaze at the field that is preparing for a night’s full moon. I see the deeper purple of the mountains and the field grass that sways in the evening breeze and spot a few fireflies out there. Just a little while more, just a little bit darker, and we’ll be ready.

Back inside, things are dying down. Only the night owls are still up, sipping wine in the dining hall or having late night conversations in the drawing room. I can hear the other three rustling upstairs, gathering their things. I go into the kitchen and wash a few more dishes and scan the dining hall, making sure no one needs anything, but all the guests look pretty settled in for the night, so I start packing a picnic basket for the beach.

As I pack, I think of the stranger. I haven’t seen him all evening. Cato said he saw the bathroom door closed and figured it was him, so he left him alone. His story has been

stuck in my head all day. Even years upon years of listening to guests' stories had not prepared me for it. I've never had a guest talk so openly about their life on Earth before. And never have I ever sat right next to them when they do so.

I take a deep breath and exhale slowly with my eyes closed. I can't focus on him right now. Right now is about my family and the spectacular night that awaits us. As much as I feel for the stranger, tonight is not the night to dwell on him. We only get nights like this once in a while and I can't let some mysterious stranger's sob story distract me from enjoying it. I pack the last of the supplies in the basket and go upstairs to get the others.

As I walk down the hallway, I hear whispers coming from Dante's room. I ease down the hall, so as not to make any noise and peep through the door that's open ajar. All four of them are in there, sitting on Dante's bed. Lloyd busies himself with a kitchen spoon in Zoe's lap, while the rest of them look like they're having some kind of meeting.

"I think it should be tonight," I hear Dante whisper, "It has to be! Tonight is the only time I have to finish it. If we wait for the next full moon, it might be too late."

"Too late for what?" Zoe says.

"I don't know, I just have this weird feeling inside me," Dante says leaning closer to them, "I checked the availability book earlier today. Hasn't either of you two noticed that no one new has checked in since he got here?"

Cato and Zoe look at each other and share a worried look. I, myself, feel a tingle inside me. Now that I think about it...Dante is right. No one new has checked in since he came.

“He’s not like the other guests,” Dante continues, “I think something bad might happen to him *or us* if he stays too long. The sooner we can send him back the better.”

“Ok, you have a point there,” says Cato, “but do you really think it’s gonna work? I mean yeah he came from the sea, but do you think he can really go back that way too? Maybe we should give him something that will get him to the mountains quicker. That’s where they all come from anyway.”

“No,” says Dante, shaking his head, “If he came from the sea, he needs to go back to it.”

“Does it have to be tonight?” asks Zoe, “I like him. He has the best stories.”

“I know, Zoe,” says Dante, turning to her, “but he needs to go home, just like all the other guests. We need to help him get back.”

They’re all quiet for a minute.

“Remember his story about how he pet that tiger in India?” Cato says, grinning.

“Yeah,” says Dante, laughing, “My favorite was when he tricked that guy at Buckingham Palace into thinking he was a British ambassador and got a private tour.”

“That was funny,” said Zoe, giggling, “I liked the story where he met that lady in New York and took her to California to see those big trees and they slept under the stars, and then they fell in love.”

“Yeah,” says Cato, “that was a good one.”

Silence.

“Hey,” Zoe says slowly, “did any of you notice how...never mind.”

“No, what?” Cato asks.

“What were you gonna say?” Dante asks.

“Just...” she looks down at Lloyd, “Lloyd kinda acts different around the stranger. Didn’t you see? He stood up all on his own against the bed when the stranger was telling us stories? He’s *never* done that before.”

The boys glance at each other.

“*And*,” she continues, “he was babbling more, like he was trying to talk or somethin’. He’s never done *that* before either.”

I feel a cold shiver down my spine.

I watch all three pairs of eyes turn on Lloyd then. He just stares right back, spoon in his mouth.

“Let’s see if he does it again,” Cato whispers.

Zoe picks him up and drops him gently on the ground beside the bed.

“Come on, buddy!” Cato cheers. “Come on up!”

The rest join in.

“Come on, Lloyd! Use the bed to stand up! You can do it. Stand up! You got it. Stand up!” they all cheer.

But Lloyd just sits there, sucking his spoon.

“Guess not,” sighs Cato.

There’s silence again for a while.

“Maybe we could wait a few more days?” asks Zoe, gently picking Lloyd back up, “We could see if the stranger can make him do it again. We can show Magee!”

“No,” says Dante quietly, “He has to go back tonight.”

“Ok,” Zoe says, after a minute.

“You’re right,” Cato says, “I’m in, too. What’s the plan?”

I step an inch closer, impatient to hear what they say next and accidentally step on a creaky floorboard. I hear all three of them freeze and know they are looking at the door. I cover my mouth and stay as still as I can.

“It’s too risky here,” says Dante, “I’ll tell you on our run.”

I hear them all get off the bed and I manage to scurry into my room before they open the door. I decide right then and there that they can’t know I was listening. I have to go along with their plan. If I ask to run with them or spend too much time with them on the beach, they will know something is up. I wait until I hear them run down the stairs and hear the front door close, then go back down to the kitchen to grab the picnic basket, and then out to the front porch to meet them.

They are all standing waiting there, Cato, Dante holding Lloyd, and Zoe. I stand beside them and together we all stare at the vast dark expanse that possesses an eerie lunar glow.

“Ready?” I say, staring straight at the mountains.

“Ready,” says Dante, handing me the baby.

“Alright!” I shout, “On your mark. Get set. GO!”

And they’re off running. Baby Lloyd gives a supportive scream as Cato, Dante, and Zoe disappear into the field’s grass. Now I have to squint to see them, and even then it’s hard. Even after they are long out of sight, though, I can still hear their shouts and whoops and laughter.

I walk down the porch steps and wade into the field, bouncing Lloyd in my arms. His eyes dart around, falling on the mountains, the field, and then the moon. He even grabs

at a few fireflies, but misses. I catch one for him and let it sit on my finger until it lights up. When I show it to him, his eyes go wide as dinner plates and he babbles in excitement.

I think about what Zoe said about Lloyd during their meeting. If it's true, if it's *really* true, my whole understanding of the stranger has just been shattered into million pieces. If it's true, he's an enigma I'm never going to solve.

Part of me agrees with her, that we should let the stranger stay and see if he can make Lloyd do it again. Maybe, after and supposed eternity, this stranger will be good for Lloyd, help him grow.

He is so far behind the rest of us. And I know that sounds wrong considering the fact that, despite the small advances in Dante's inventions or in Cato's swimming record, we really don't evolve. We are stagnant here in the in-between. And yet...Lloyd still feels left behind. Like he didn't fully form before he was dropped here.

Maybe now that could change.

I stand up, take his hands in mine and stand him up in front of me.

"Come on little man," I say, loosening my grip, "walk for me."

I let go. He wobbles a bit and tries to take a step forward, but ends up losing his balance. I catch him before he face-plants onto the ground.

"Alright, let's try again."

I set him on his feet again.

"One, two, three..."

I let go, but once again, he loses his balance and stumbles forward. I catch him just before he falls on his butt. He starts to moan and whimper.

“That’s ok,” I reassure him, setting him back down on the ground. “I won’t do it again. I just wanted to try.”

I sit down in front of him, so we are face-to-face. He just gives me that same famous look: gray eyes and fingers in mouth.

Zoe runs towards us then, breathing loudly.

“I went farther this time!” she says, out of breath.

“Really?” I say.

“Yep,” she says, kissing Lloyd, “I made sure to pace myself better. It helped me go faster.”

“Good job, Zoe!” I say, giving her a high-five.

Just then Lloyd lets out a soft cry and we both turn to see that a firefly has landed on his knee. He starts to babble louder. I try to tell him to be quiet or he might scare it away, but it’s too late. The firefly takes off into the night. Lloyd lets out a sad noise, like he might cry.

“It’s ok, Lloyd,” says Zoe, “I can catch more for you. Watch this.”

She takes a few steps back and then starts spinning, dancing almost. She spins faster and faster and then stops suddenly...and stands still. I wait and wait and wait. Zoe doesn’t say anything and Lloyd grows a bit fussy. Right when I’m about to tell Zoe to stop teasing him, though, I see them: dozens of fireflies gathering above us.

“They’re coming,” whispers Zoe, slowly standing up.

One by one, they land on her outstretched arms. First there are dozens, then hundreds of them. They land on all of us, but mostly on Zoe. One of them lands right on

Lloyd's nose. He does the cutest little cross-eyed face, and then it flies away. He grabs at more, but it isn't long before another lands on him, and another.

"There you go, little Lloyd," says Zoe, flapping her arms and releasing all the fireflies at once. They all fly up in a cloud of fire into the sky.

"Wasn't that cool?!" she says.

I look at her in agreement, but am secretly masking my shock and awe. Leave it to Zoe to completely astound you. It's like she has a secret power the rest of us don't. Just then I hear Dante running up to us.

"Hey," he says, out of breath, "Did Cato come back yet?"

"No," Zoe says, shaking the last of the fireflies off her.

"I figured. He must still be running. He said he wanted to beat his record from last time. Anyway, I'm ready to go down to the beach. How about you guys?"

Zoe starts jumping up and down and clapping and even the baby babbles in agreement. I almost remind them we have to wait for Cato, but then I remember their secret meeting. Usually, we stay out here for a few hours, but they must be eager to put their plan in action. If I ask them to wait, they'll start to wonder.

"Let's go then," I say, "Cato will just have to meet us down there."

I hand the picnic basket to Dante and together we make the trip to the cliff and down the zigzag of stairs to the bottom. Once there, Zoe makes a beeline for the water and Dante throws the basket down and runs down the beach, yelling over his shoulder, "I'm working on another invention! I'll be back by dawn!"

"Ok," I shout back, trying not to sound too worried.

I shake my head and think about their talk earlier tonight and my spine tingles, but I fight the urge to ask him anything more. I walk a little bit until I reach a good spot to settle down in. I place Lloyd on the ground to crawl around a bit while I set up the picnic blanket and food. I decide the water is little too choppy for me, so I stretch out and watch Lloyd explore the beach. And yet, while I try to focus my attention on him, my mind wanders.

I close my eyes and those flashes of a dream come back. I imagine a time before Lloyd was born; a time when I was Zoe's age, or even younger, and could run for miles without a care in the world. I see Cato as a little boy and Dante as the child genius at only a few years old. There are other people there in my memory. A mother and a father. I can almost feel my mother stroke my hair and hear my father's laugh, but then it slips through my mind like a loose kite.

I'm interrupted then by the sound of footsteps on the rickety zigzag stairs. I raise my head to see Cato race down the steps and head straight for the sea without so much as a "hello". He paddles out pretty far and soon I lose sight of him in the waves. That boy. I swear he's *determined* to find an end to these expanses we are stuck between.

Once the moon is high in the sky, I climb the stairs a bit and announce that it's dinnertime. My voice carries nicely over the hallow-ness of the cliff into the sea, beckoning Cato onto land. Dante doesn't come, however, so I have Zoe carry a small sack of food to him. It takes every inch of me not to wander down the beach and see what he's working on, but I know I can't. Instead, the three of us and Lloyd eat while reminiscing about past full moon nights and then play I Spy.

After dinner is over, Cato goes back into the water and Zoe says she wants to take Lloyd to visit Dante, so I decide I'm long overdue in visiting my favorite boulder. I wade out as far as I can go. The water is cold and the waves are high. It takes awhile, but I slowly make it out there and climb on top.

I'm relieved to find the sea is exactly how I left it the last time I was here. No sandbars or new coral reefs; no change in temperature; no more than the normal amount of seagulls and fish; nothing new on the horizon. As always.

I sit down on the boulder and start my ritual squinting into the distance, knowing in my heart nothing is there, but letting myself get excited with the possibility that there could be. I squint and wait, squint and wait. At times, I can see Cato's body move, almost machine-like, through the water. I watch him go further and further out to sea.

Keep going, I think.

Keep going and don't stop until you get there.

What must be hours later, I finally jump down and make my way back to land. I find Lloyd fast asleep on the picnic blanket and Zoe building quite an elaborate sand castle.

"What's that?" I ask, pointing to it.

"It's the Taj Malal," she says matter-of-factly.

I laugh.

"I think you mean the Taj Ma-HAL. Where did you hear that?"

"The weird man was talking about it."

"He was," I say, grinning to myself, "and what exactly did he say?"

“How he visited it and then he told a story of the king who built it and how it was for his favorite wife, who died having a baby. The Taj Malal is a giant tomb for her.”

“Huh,” I said, “ I didn’t know that.”

I help Zoe add to her masterpiece. We take turns getting water from the sea to mix with the sand to shape it and collect shells and rocks to decorate it with. Once the sandcastle is done, I sit back and roll my neck, looking up at the sky. As I lean my head back, I spot the stranger, hair flying like a flag in the wind, body statue-still, standing on the edge of the cliff.

X.

Mag•gie

As dawn approaches, I begin to pack up our things. Zoe watches Lloyd while I climb halfway up the stairs and call out once more for Cato and Dante to come back. Dante does come back this time, but his face gives nothing away, nothing to tell of what he’s hiding.

Cato takes the baby while I carry the basket back up the stairs. By the time we reach the top of the cliff, the moon has disappeared halfway beneath the horizon and the slightest amount of daylight can be seen in the sky. The fireflies are gone and the field has lost its nighttime glow. As we make our way back to the inn, the five of us look behind us one last time at the sea.

Once we are back walking up to the house, I take the baby from Cato. As we get closer, I see the stranger sitting in one of the rocking chairs on the porch, reading a book.

“You’re back already,” he says, looking at the sky, “That went by fast. I’m ready to go.”

I stop in my tracks.

“Ready to go where?” I ask. I look at the kids and see that the three of them are all grinning. I drop the basket on the porch steps and shift Lloyd in my arms.

“What’s going on?” I say, staring them down.

“We have to show you something!” Zoe says, taking the stranger’s hand, “Come on!”

And just like that, the three of them run off towards the cliff, dragging the stranger behind them.

“WAIT!” I scream, cradling Lloyd’s head as I run after them.

I run-walk to the edge of the cliff and follow them down the stairs to the beach, all the while making sure not to stumble or lose hold of Lloyd. Once in the sand I watch them disappear down the beach, going in the same direction as Dante did earlier tonight. I finally catch up to them, out of breath. Thankfully, Lloyd is awake, but too sleepy and disoriented to cry.

“You three are in huge trouble! Don’t you dare run off like that again. It is nearly dawn and you all just take off?! Do you know what happens if we—”

But I’m cut off by the stranger, who puts a finger to my lips and turns my head away from the kids and towards a crevasse in the cliff wall. As I look up, I gasp and almost drop the baby. A large ship sits before us in the sand. The whole thing is made from driftwood, but it’s been polished and sanded. It has large, white sails made of bed sheets that are rolled up on the mast, a crow’s nest, a wheel, portholes, and, at the front of the

ship, is a girl carved from wood. She has long braids and has soft features. Her arms are stretched out on either side of the ship, as if she is pushing against it. Just below her chest is the name “Maggie.” Not spelled like my name, but with an “i” and an “e.”

“I made it!” Dante says, patting the ship’s side.

“Oh, Dante, it’s beautiful,” I say.

“I spent all night making it just for you,” Dante says, turning to the man and handing him the spyglass. “So that you have a way to get back home across the sea.”

“We all helped,” says Cato, “I snuck back into the house after our race and got the extra sheets to make the sails. I dropped them over the cliff down here so Maggee wouldn’t see,” he says, turning sheepishly to me.

“And I helped carve,” said Zoe, pointing, “I helped carve the wheel, crow’s nest, and the lady. Even Lloyd helped some. He helped me nail that peg in place,” she says, pointing to a random spot on the railing.”

“And look!” she shouts, pointing to the wooden woman, “We even made the lady from your story. It’s Maggie!”

The stranger’s shoulders sag and he walks up to the carving. He fingers the woman’s braids gently and looks into her eyes.

“So, what do you think?” says Dante.

The man continues to keep his hand on the wooden lady. He slowly leans his head against the wood of the ship and stays like that for a minute or two. We wait.

Finally, he straightens up, walks over to Dante and kneels beside him.

“Dante, this is the most magnificent ship I have ever seen. I could thank you a thousand times a day forever and still that would not be enough to tell you how grateful I am.”

Dante smiles wide at this.

“But I can’t take it.”

“What,” Dante says, his smile suddenly melting.

“I can’t take it. I’m *so* sorry,” Believe me, I want nothing more to climb aboard “Maggie” right now, to feel the wind in my sails and the spray of the sea...but I can’t. I can’t quite explain it, but...I don’t think I can go back the way that I came. I think I need to go to the mountains. Maggee is right. The guests all come and go from them. I think what I’m looking for is up there.”

“But my boat,” says Dante, starting to cry.

“Keep it,” says the man; putting an arm around him, “It’s your creation. Besides, it’s far too big for me to steer alone.”

The stranger means this as a joke, but Dante turns away, clearly devastated.

“Hey,” he says, taking Dante’s chin in his hand and lifting it, “You might need it someday.”

“Me?” says Dante.

“Maybe you, or maybe your brother might. It’s a lot easier than swimming” the man says, winking at Cato, “Either way,” he says, turning back to Dante, “keep building” he orders, smiling gently. “And never stop being curious,” he whispers.

Dante smiles a bit at this.

Then he stands and starts to make his way over to me, but on the way, gently pushes the telescope into Cato's hands. I watch as Cato fingers it with a newfound gentleness and focus.

"As for you," he says, finally turning to me, "Thanks for the talk and thanks for...well...everything."

I hand Lloyd over to Zoe and take few steps towards the stranger.

"It was nothing really," I assure him. "You did most of the talking anyway."

He cracks a small grin.

"Really, though, *thank you*," he says, extending his hand out to me. I glance at it.

"*Really*, though," I say, giving his hand a firm shake, "it is *I* who should be thanking *you*."

His brow furrows slightly.

"Me? Why?" he asks, confused, almost laughing.

"You did something here," I say. "You helped us."

"I helped you do what?" he says, not letting go of my hand.

"Progress."

His whole body smiles at me then, even his eyes, and we remain there for a long moment, hand-in-hand, looking into each other's eyes. A pull between us, like an energy, courses through our interlocked hands. Lost in the moment, I feel warmth gush through my veins, I lean forward—

"Look!" cries Zoe, "Look at Lloyd. He's standing!" Zoe points towards the ship.

I whip my head around, the sudden rush of adrenaline jolting my body back awake. *Lloyd? Where? My mind races.*

Sure enough, standing like a baby doll, staring up at the ship is Lloyd. All by himself. I run over to him, praying he doesn't fall before I reach him. I hear the others follow behind me.

"Lloyd!" I say kneeling down beside him, ready to catch him, "I'm here."

But he doesn't even acknowledge me. He just stares at the ship.

"Bo-bo-bo-bo!" He babbles loudly. Suddenly in clicks with me what he's trying to say.

"Yes, baby! That's right. It's a *boat*."

"Bo-bo-bo-bo!" he babbles louder.

"Bo-bo-bo-bo," I say, turning to everyone, who's standing behind me. "Looks like he wants to go with you," I tell the stranger. He smiles back.

I've filled an extra pillowcase with water and food and anything else I thought the stranger would need on his trip. The sun is high in the sky now. We stand on the front porch, watching the stranger leave the B 'n Between. As he starts out into the field, we all wave good-bye.

"Good-bye, Maggee, Cato, Dante, Zoe, Lloyd!" he calls.

"Good-bye!" we all shout.

"Wave good-bye, Lloyd," I say, pointing at the man.

The man grows farther and farther away until he's just a speck of black in the early morning golden haze.

The three continue to shout and wave at him.

"Good-bye," they all shout.

We're about to lose sight of him for good when Lloyd starts flapping his hand in the air, waving.

“Bo-Ba-baaa...bye. Bye bye, bye bye!” he says, “Bye bye, stranger.”

THE END