I LOOK FOR GHOSTS

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I look for ghosts; but none will force
Their way to me. 'Tis falsely said
That there was ever intercourse
Between the living and the dead.

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH, Affliction of Margaret
The Cavanaugh Psychiatric Hospital for Women is full of ghosts. These spectral residents roam the halls, raising the hair on the back of patients’ necks and causing paranoia among the nurses. *Wasn’t that tray two inches farther to the left?* they wonder, scratching their heads and trying to ignore the unnatural chill in the east wing. The orderlies who have been there longest joke that it’s Old man Cavanaugh himself, back to wreak havoc on the that proudly displays his name on its wrought-iron gates.

Legend says he built the mansion to establish himself after becoming an unexpected success.

“He invented rubber bands,” a night nurse says.

“It was toothpicks,” a cook counters.

Whatever the medium, James Cavanaugh had the means, and he wanted everyone to know it. A bachelor, he built the mansion, then didn’t hire the proper staff to keep it up. The grounds went to waste, and the house fell into disrepair. He became a hermit,
never leaving the grounds, having his food delivered. It was said that the delivery boy
would place the food on the kitchen counter, take the money left for him there, then lock
the door behind him, per instructions taped to the mailbox.

When Cavanaugh died, the grounds fell to the state, and went uninhabited for
many years. For the last eighty, it has been an asylum for women.

However, it's not James who haunts the mansion-turned-nut-house; his presence
ends with the portrait that hangs over the receiving desk. The hospital is home to its own.
Apparitions of girls and women of all ages wander through its halls, mischievous but
rarely malicious. Many just don't know where else to go. Some are buried in the small
lot behind the hospital, where Cavanaugh himself rests in a crypt the size of a small
chapel, complete with an inner sanctum and stained glass windows. The girls' graves are
less elaborate, the earliest markers stamped with numbers, no names. But they do not
begrudge the markers, many having forgotten their names along with the world.

They are happy. Death has set them free from the insanity they could not shake in
life. So, they tease the interns, tickle the ears of the good looking orderlies, and move
papers about in the good doctors' offices. They waft through the air, passing on their
chill with a touch or a smile and commune in Cavanaugh's crypt.

No, it's not the dead girls who give the hospital its eerie atmosphere; it's the live
ones less living than their ghostly counterparts who keep the halls gray and the rooms
darkened.
Little girl, why don't you go home
Back to the place you've always known

Leave when it's over
You make this place all new
Cry on this shoulder but don't turn away, yeah
Swim in the ocean
And fly into tears
Pretend that it never happened here

lyrics from *Lullaby* by Augustana
Lullaby

Crystal, memory of age 4

When I think of that moment, I close my fists around it and will it to last, will my eyes to stay open this time, to talk to mama. But I was only four, and her presence was enough. To listen to her talk and see her smile was all I could manage. She changed soon after that, or maybe I just started noticing the change. I realize now that she even lost her accent, let go of it as surely as she let go of her sanity in the years between that night and now.

I was lying in bed, my hair washed and dried, feeling the delicious soreness in my ribs and lungs that so often accompanies a child's swim, when she entered to tuck me in.

"Can you feel the water, baby?" she whispered, "rockin' ya still in your bed?" She pulled the comforter up under my chin, sinking to the floor and leaning back on her heels.

I shook my head, disappointed that I was missing out on yet another of her many secrets.
“Well. That’s just ’cause you swam in little ol’ pond water, baby. But the ocean,” she paused and looked over my head and out the window, seeing beyond the branches of the old oak there, “it never really leaves your system. It saturates you, fillin’ in the spaces and spillin’ into your blood, and you never quite lose that sway.”

She began to move from side to side ever so slightly, and I could feel her movement next to the bed. “The ocean’s responsible for my walk and my signature grace.” She smiled then, and I smiled back, her heavy Southern accent turning “walk” and “grace” into two syllables as they floated out over my head and into the night. She seemed to come back to herself then, aware of my presence in the room, and she began fanning my hair out on the pillow behind me as she talked.

“Someday, I’ll take you home, little girl, and we’ll spend days at the ocean, see the blue meet the blue where water and sky are one, and we’ll ride the waves so long that the feeling never leaves us.” And in the lilt of her voice I could hear the waves returning to the sand and feel the sensation of being lifted and dropped, lifted and dropped.
She Spins

*Stella, 31; Crystal, 9*

*Everything spins.*

She hears the words in a voice of authority from her childhood. Perhaps it’s Mr. Hill, her high school science teacher. He had explained how the world was constantly moving, turning on its axis, and all the while the air, the molecules in the earth, the atoms that make us up – they were all moving too, faster than could be seen with just your eye. The thought of it had made her dizzy.

Today, however, she is a stone, rounded with time and sadness, a lump beneath yellow rosebud sheets. And he is a stone next to her. She feels his weight before she fully wakes. His weight creates a valley, pulling her to him. She fights off memory and reason and reaches for him.

*Empty air.* Reason tells her.

*He’s been dead for a year,* Memory chides.
But she feels him there. Warmth radiates from the body-shaped indentation next to her. *He’s only up making coffee. He must have just left.* She can smell his Old Spice. *He’s not here.* Reason is stubborn, forcing its way through her psyche, reaching her at last, Memory in its wake.

“He’s gone.” She speaks the words aloud, bitter and resigned. She gives into Reason, but holds Memory at bay a bit longer. She does not want to revisit that day, that phone call, still bleeding, so fresh. *A year is no time at all,* she tells Memory.

Someone *is* making coffee. She raises her head, sniffs the air, and listens to the quiet swishes of movement – the sound of a young girl moving so as not to wake her mother.

“Crystal?” she calls.

The girl appears in seconds. *She is unbelievably fast,* Stella thinks. She *spins.*

“Are you ready for your math test?” She is certain the 9-year-old mentioned something about a math test yesterday.

“It was two days ago…” The girl looks concerned. She holds the molding of the doorway tightly, tiny tendons in her fingers pulled taut.

“What? I thought you said it was on Wednesday.”

“It’s Saturday, mama.” Her voice is so soft. So careful. Stella has lost days again, burrowed in the cave of yellow rosebuds, the world and its truth blurred by 150 thread counts of cotton.

“Oh.” It is not unusual, but it always makes her feel tilted to learn that days have
gone by like minutes. She has left the bed to use the restroom, trudging through the kitchen, watching only her slippered feet. She has drunk the water Crystal brought, never realizing how thirsty she was until she first sipped. She doesn’t think she’s eaten. Her stomach is tight and sore. Lying on her back, her stomach falls inward, leaving a gap between her pajama pants and her flesh. “Have you been eating?” The words are quiet but accusatory.

“Yes, mama.”

“Have I been eating?”

The girl tilts her head, thinking. “I brought you some crackers with peanut butter on them.”

Stella turns her gaze to the plate on the table by the bed. Cracker crumbs and bits of peanut butter litter its daisy pattern. “Oh.” She says again. The fog is lifting. His side of the bed is not warm; it is cold as it has been for over a year. *He’s gone.*

“But we’re here.” Crystal says.

Stella is surprised. She must have spoken out loud. “Yes,” she says with a smile, “We are, aren’t we?” She pushes herself to a seated position and stays still a moment, waiting for the throbbing in her head to abate. “We have lots to do, don’t we?”

“I did dishes, mama.” The little girl is more comfortable, moving from the door frame into the room. She lays her small hand on her mother’s. “I kept things up,” she said.

“Well then,” Stella said, “I should get up too.” She slowly swivels, placing first
one foot on the floor, then the other but stays seated on the edge of the bed. She rubs her arms. “Could you bring me a cup of coffee, sweetie?”

The girl spins and runs to the kitchen, her bare feet making slapping noises on the linoleum.

Stella laughs, “Don’t burn yourself, hon. Walk slow.”

Crystal returns, her long brown hair hanging down the sides of her face as she bends toward the cup, concentrating so as not to spill. When she reaches her mother, she carefully raises the cup.

“Thank you, hon. That’s perfect. I’m going to drink my coffee. Tell me about your numbers. Did you have to do the times tables on the test?” Stella asks.

Crystal nods. “Do you want me to do some? I know my fives now.”

“Well, let’s hear them,” Stella says between sips. The coffee is making warm fast tracks through her veins, and her eyes focus with its smell so strong and close.

Stella listens as Crystal begins with five times one and moves through the fives table, and she can feel her energy returning. She knows that she is often excitable following the darker days, and she vows not to yell or move too quickly. She is ready to leave the bed – wash her hair, brush her teeth, scrub something, anything. She has to remove the memory of this week, the mother she’s become, right along with the soap scum and the sure-to-be sour milk. She can make this better. She always makes it better.

Crystal has finished the fives and is moving on to the sixes. Stella has finished half her cup and feels like a bowstring pulled tight, ready to fly. She suddenly wants to
dance, to sing. After all, she and Crystal are alive. She pushes the thoughts of his voice, his scent, his warmth away, and stands. Placing the coffee cup on her dresser, she claps.

“You are just too smart, little girl. How about pancakes for my mathematician?”

Crystal jumps and gallops from the room. Stella follows in her daughter’s wake, no longer stone; she’s been brought to life through numbers, caffeine, and a spinning girl.
A little girl needs Daddy
For many, many things:
Like holding her high off the ground
Where the sunlight sings!
Like being the deep music
That tells her all is right
When she awakens frantic with
The terrors of the night.

From *A Little Girl Needs Daddy* by Nicholas Gordon
One of the benefits of sleeping in a psych ward was the quiet. At night there was a stillness. Not that it was silent; there were occasional piercing wails, the hum of the night shift’s whispered conversations, the beeping of monitors and intercoms — but it was all just backdrop for that stillness.

And all that was left to do was think.

I’d been putting off sleep, shoving it off me as I tried to avoid the dreams. Lately, the dreams about Dad had been more frequent, more concrete. His outline was fleshing out in those dreams, and there was something disturbing about thinking of the word “flesh” in relationship to dad.

You see, my father died when I was eight.
I was the only child in the funeral home — he was an only child himself, no siblings to produce cousins for me, so there were lots of middle-aged men and women, friends of my father’s from work, mom’s coworkers, all of whom decided a funeral wouldn’t be healthy for the children they left at home with babysitters and spouses.

It certainly didn’t do my health any good.

I remember looking up at the cherry wood he slept in, my eyes level with its opening.

He looked like he was wearing a mask. A perfect mask, cast to his face, but a mask nonetheless. He didn’t look like he’d sit up and speak or like he was sleeping, as I’ve heard others say; he was a life-sized Ken doll, his arms folded, his cheeks unnaturally pink, and I remember thinking that if I touched his wrinkled hands, they’d be cool and slick, like latex.

But I had to.

I had to touch those hands, more glove than hand to me, not really Dad, but the skin he wore all plumped up and shiny for people to pass by and remember that he had laughed, done dishes, yelled, and was momentarily poetic, and that he would never do or be any of those things again.

I also wondered why the curtain hung just past his knees. Did they chop his legs off? Why would they do that? Or was it possible The Wizard of Oz had told the truth and legs just shrieveled up, rolling up like window blinds when we die?

I had to know.
So I dared myself to lift the curtain and see his legs (or not legs) and make myself understand.

I wanted to be sure we weren’t burying the warmth that was my dad, cherry pipes and hugs that hid me; we were burying this facsimile instead. Touch would confirm what I already knew.

So I glanced at the many men and women dabbing their eyes and speaking softly, lost in themselves and their memories, and reached out with my index finger, dragging it from his wrist to his folded thumb.

It was just as I’d imagined; heavy (though I didn’t lift it) and cold, an impossible hand, not the one that had patted my head every night and held me in church – someone else’s hands were in that coffin, folded and ready for the end. I hear others speak of that touch as horrific, knowing the life was truly gone from their loved ones, but that cold was comfort to me.

It made me brave.

I swallowed, took a deep breath, and lifted the purple curtain puddling at his brown tweed knees. At first I thought his feet were bare, black and impossibly charred, but then I realized it was his shiny patent leathers – his legs were there, just as dead as the rest of him, present beyond the purple divider.

I dropped the curtain and began to weep, hiccupping and unable to breathe as the crying took my entire chest and monopolized my lungs.
They surrounded me then, legs in tan pantyhose, my mother’s friends holding me up, my face pressed into one of their perfumed bosoms, and I was ashamed. The back of my neck was hot, my eyes were shut; I didn’t want to see anyone.

I was terrified I would see my mother, and I couldn’t let her see because she’d know, she’d be able to tell that it wasn’t grief making tracks down my face; it was relief.

Back in my bed at Cavanaugh Psychiatric Hospital, I lay in that maddening stillness, knowing I was only forestalling the inevitable. The dreams that had started when I was about 12, four years after his death, would find their way in behind my closed eyes. Why they waited those four years from his funeral to the night after my first day of sixth grade I don’t know, but I imagine them lurking in closets and under the couch gaining strength until they were finally able to pierce my sleep. They were generally fuzzy and troubling, not coherent enough to be frightening. My dad was always there, either chalky-white and encased in purple or disturbingly alive. Comforting, yet still disturbing because I can’t turn off that part of me that says he’s gone, not even in the dreams.

The latest dreams had had a clarity to them that stayed with me throughout the day making even the most sun-shiny rooms a dull gray.

That night was no exception.

I was standing at my father’s casket.

But I was also standing at the back of the room, leaning against the wall, watching my younger self.
“Why’d you look under the curtain?”

I turned to my father, standing beside me, watching the adults milling around the receiving room at his own funeral.

“I had to know what was under there,” I shrugged. “I was eight.”

“Yeah, I know, Sugar. I know. You still are.”

“Actually, I’m fourteen...” but I could see it was a moot point. I came to his waist, and I was wearing the green velvet dress I’d worn to his funeral nearly a decade before. “Oh. Right.”

“I didn’t mean it, you know. I didn’t want to leave,” he said.

“Sure you did.”

He pulled back the sleeves of his brown tweed suit and showed me his arms. They were smooth and pale. The freckles I’d inherited spread sporadically elbow to wrist, but they were otherwise unblemished.

“That proves nothing,” but even as I said it, I became aware of the bandages on my own wrists.

“My time was up, baby girl.” He was smoking a pipe, and the cherry smell made my chest tight. “Yours,” he motioned to my slender arms with his pipe, “wasn’t.”

I stood quietly, watching myself peer over the top of his coffin and into his face. I remembered the nervousness of that moment. More worry than fear that I’d be caught before I finished my mission.

“You were a brave kid, Crystal. What happened?”
“She did it. She killed me.”

“Way I heard it,” he said, “you owe your mother your life.” He traced a line on the pages of a file that had mysteriously appeared in his hands and continued, reading,

“Her actions, while out of the ordinary –”

I reached up an impossible distance and put my small hand over his mouth.

He laughed and pushed it aside. “It’s the truth, Baby. She’s off-kilter, she’s messed up, but I’m real proud of the way she saved you.”

“Proud of her? Proud of her? I saved her!” But the argument was dying on my lips. I didn’t want to fight anymore. “What am I going to do, Dad? What am I supposed to do? If I tell the truth…”

“If you tell the truth. If you tell the truth, they might not believe you anyway.”

“So many times I asked you, so many times I needed help, needed one sane person in my life to answer my questions, and I’d ask you, I’d speak to the air, dying to feel you, to feel… something,” my hands fell empty at my side. “You never gave me anything.”

“Sorry, Babe. Dead,” he shrugged and puffed his pipe, and I realized that at some point it had stopped being cherry, and it now smelled like bacon. “Oh,” he said, elbowing me like a spectator at a football game and pointing to the other me in front of his casket, “here it comes, the big finish.”

And my eyes opened to the white room of the psych ward.

“Well,” I said to the room at large, “that was disturbing.”
The smell of bacon *was* in the air, causing me to look about for just one second for the brown tweed suit. But they were obviously just making breakfast rounds. He was gone, curled like smoke to linger in the corners of my mind until I closed my eyes again.
Postcards from My Past

Crystal, age 13

I use my dad’s death as protection.

It's just so convenient, always on the tip of my tongue. I pull it out of my pocket like a cocktail napkin, the writing blurred with moisture, and I wave it in front of the faces of those I need something from.

Like Richie Fay my eighth grade year. We weren’t even really dating: neither one of us could drive or had parents willing to chauffer us on “dates,” but we did find time alone. After school we would meet at the swings, talking, giggling, flirting the best we could, and he would kiss me, pressing his lips so tightly to mine, so hungry even at that age, that my gums often ached on the ride home.

At some point, he hinted that he’d like to get to second base, and I slapped him. Hard. I was still getting used to the idea that boys weren’t the enemy – the elementary ideals of pink versus blue were fading to a confusing gray.
At some point, I decided I loved him. That flappy feeling in my chest, like a bird caged within my ribs, could only mean that I loved him, right?

So I let him go to second base.

Second base for us was French kissing, and I let him invade my tiny mouth with his large, slobbery boy tongue. I put up with it, closed my eyes and waited for it to be over.

It was horrible. My grimace welcomed his opening eyes upon completion of the act, and the look he returned was a mixture of anger and disgust.

I’d hurt his 14-year-old pride.

I spent weeks trying to make it up to him, writing him long notes and bringing him cookies.

One Thursday afternoon he asked me to meet him by the swings.

I could see he was going to dump me.

I knew it before he spoke – he had that caged animal look, you know the one: eyes darting, pleading for mercy, "Just open the door, I won’t bite you on my way out of your life."

So I reached into my pocket and pulled out my father’s death.

“I’ve never really had a father,” I half-lied.

“What?”

“My dad... he died when I was 8.”

“Oh, wow... I didn’t know...” his voice was awkward, and he looked away.
“Yeah, well. I don’t tell it around. And no one ever asks. He died in a hotel room.” I let the implication hang there, leaving out the fact that dad had been away on business and alone in that room. “He hung himself from the ceiling fan.” I pictured the fan turning slowly, bent with his weight, maybe falling to the ground before the maid found him. Of course, the truth that my father had died in his sleep was not any less traumatic to me, but I knew suicide was a good watch word, if pity was the goal.

And I preferred his pity to his absence. He didn’t break-up with me. He didn’t ever finish the speech he’d begun. He rubbed my back and took my hand, kissing its palm.

And we were like that for a few weeks, he moving about me carefully, keeping his words delicate, his steps soft. But then I found him in the janitor’s closet with Katie Fozworth, a tangle of limbs and short breaths. He’d reached second base and was rounding third, and once the light was on and his eyes found mine, I shrugged and gave him up – to Katie, to himself, to the words he’d tried to say. It wasn’t as though he hadn’t warned me.

I guess I’ve always seen my past and even my present as a ready arsenal, a way to have the things I feel I need – entitlement to people and attention. And though I rarely use these weapons, it’s comforting to know they’re there.
Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged
Missing me one place search another
I stop somewhere waiting for you.

_Song of Myself, Walt Whitman_
Doing the Math

Stella, age 36

There were forty-six resident rooms, a high-ceilinged lobby area, and four bathrooms between Stella and Crystal. Stella had figured out the distance by looking at her own surroundings and guessing her daughter to be in a similar room in the opposite wing – several pairs of heavy metal doors and the lobby in between them. She had not been allowed to see her daughter yet, but she’d been informed of Crystal’s arrival at The Cavanaugh Psychiatric Hospital.

It was just as well she hadn’t seen her yet; Stella’s anger was a snarling thing, trapped behind her pill-induced placidity. She could feel it there, raw and leashed, ready to consume her the moment she granted it freedom. She had told Dr. Rachel about it, about the pain at the back of her neck that she knew was more an emotional than a physical malady.

“Perhaps you’d better wait to see your daughter, Ms. Perry,” Dr. Rachel said.

“Yeah. I think that’s best… is that your first name? Rachel? I feel silly callin’ ya
Dr. Rachel. It’s like in kindergarten we called our teacher Mrs. Becky, and I don’t know why now. Why didn’t we just call her Mrs. Peterson? Is Rachel your first name? ‘Cause...,” she gestured to the white diploma-covered walls of Dr. Rachel’s office, “this sure ain’t kindergarten.”

“Rachel is my last name, Stella,” Dr. Rachel paused to write something in the notes in front of her, then reached for her coffee cup. “Did you notice that your accent seems to have returned?”

“Huh?” Stella looked up from her clasped hands, startled. She hadn’t realized that her Southern roots were showing, but then it made sense. Her grip on language always loosened during her “little breakdowns,” and this one had been far from little.

“Why did you join your daughter, Stella? When you saw she was in the bathtub?”

“Well,” Stella said interrupting with a raised hand, “you just get right on to it, don’t ya?” She paused, letting her hand drop back into her lap and her gaze followed. She found it easier to concentrate on her hands, on herself, than to open her eyes to where she was, where her daughter was. “I’m not sure I’m ready to go there. I’m sure ya understand. ‘Sides, like I told the cops and the ambulance workers, I was savin’ her the only way I knew how.”

“What if she hadn’t climbed out and called 911? Did your plan allow for that?”

“No. I know my own daughter, Dr. Rachel. She. She was tryin’ to hurt me. She was... hell, she was tryin’ to save me, I s’pose, in her own, twisted way. Crystal don’t know she’s the one that kept me together. Oh, I know, I know. I was fallin’ apart to the 25
world and any outsider who cared to look in, but that was only what seemed. Inside, I could always find my way back from the ledge. I had to. Crystal needed me.”

“What if a time came when she didn’t?”

“Ain’t no such thing. I still miss my mama. Crystal will always need me, though wantin’ is whole other thing.” She was looking up now, her voice pleading. “What was I s’posed to do? Watch her die? Call an ambulance and wait, watch the blood spill? No. If she was bound and determined to leave me, she’d a done so the next time.”

“So your answer was to join her in taking her life? To climb into that bathtub and take a razor to your own wrists?”

“I wanted her to see how it felt. She wanted me to see her die, to watch her leave me, bloody drop by bloody drop, and it made me so angry, Dr. I was so darn angry, I just couldn’t see nothin’ but her wantin’ to leave. She didn’t need me anymore – or she didn’t think she needed me anymore. But what about me? I needed her. I was good as dead with her gone, and she knew it. Yet there she lay, water pink and growin’ darker, eyes nearly shut. Leavin’ me. I was so angry. I didn’t do nothin’ she didn’t do first.”

“Yet you say you did it to save her. Which is true? Was it revenge or an act of heroism?” Dr. Rachel was writing again, looking up in between scribbles.

“Both,” Stella laughed. “Why can’t it be both? Angry as I was, I knew. I knew my Crystal would save us. And I knew she’d never try again.”

“Why not? Why wouldn’t she try as soon as she thinks she’s alone for any amount of time? Why would this stop her?”

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“Because.” Stella smiled, looking peaceful for the first time since she’d sat down. “Because she didn’t wanna kill me. She just wanted to hurt me. And she did that real good. She did that. She don’t need to kill herself anymore. She did that all right too…” The peaceful look was gone, replaced by a frown, her voice shaking as she continued, “She didn’t do it neat and nice like I did, either,” she was looking past the doctor as she spoke, seeing what wasn’t there. “She ripped her arms up. My baby must hate me an awful lot. She must hate me almost as much as she loves me,” she hugged herself tightly. “She loves you more?”

“She saved us, didn’t she?” Now her eyes were back on Dr. Rachel, her voice triumphant. “She saved us, just like I knew she would.”

“And if she hadn’t?”

Stella shrugged. “Either way. I wasn’t gonna live without her. She wants to leave me so bad, she can just close her eyes on this world and see me hijacking her into the next. Death ain’t the end, that much I know. Death ain’t the end. I’ve seen things…” her eyes darted about the room, and she had hunched over, her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper, “I’ve seen things. Death ain’t the end.”

Dr. Rachel sighed and closed up the folder on her lap, laying her pencil on the desk, admiring its dull point. “Okay,” she said, rising and adjusting her white lab coat. “How about we end for today?”

Stella nodded quickly and for too long, more to herself than the doctor before her. She raised her head and began to rise, as Dr. Rachel motioned to the door through the
glass window, and an orderly came to help Stella to her feet.

“'I can do it myself, ya know,” Stella said, but she didn’t resist his supportive arm under her elbow. She turned at the doorway, eyes large and said, “It’s catchin’, ya know. Crazy… it’s catchin,” then turned and exited, the orderly at her side.

She knew that crazy was catching because as a child, she’d felt her grandmother’s insanity, yet she’d loved her so and sat too close, shared secrets and cookies with her. Stella’s mother had been somehow immune. Or maybe she knew, and that was what kept her from getting too close to Stella.

“Crystal’s immune,” she said to the orderly, making sense only to herself.

“Crystal, my daughter? She ain’t crazy. She was just tryin’ to hurt me. She ain’t crazy…” her voice trailed off, and she let her fingers slide over the wainscoting, counting rooms as they passed.

If there were twenty three rooms on her side, and she was in the seventeenth, sixth from the far end, and there were twenty three rooms in Crystal’s wing, then her earlier calculations had been incorrect; there were only forty rooms (if Crystal were in the last one in her hall), four bathrooms, and one big, center lobby between them.

Fourteen steps between each room, and the lobby must be three times that... so, fifty-two steps across the lobby, plus four bathrooms at twenty-two steps each...

She stopped in the hall, the orderly quiet, patiently waiting as Stella closed her eyes, clenched her teeth, and did the math. She was very good at math – scary good at math. It was one of her many secrets. Her eyes flashed open and she smiled, satisfied.
“Seven hundred steps between Crystal and me,” she said aloud and began shuffling her way down the hall.

“Yes ma’am,” the guard said.

“Unless she’s not in that last room,” she titled her head, her fingers still brushing the walls. “She might be closer,” she whispered.
Dreams that do come true can be as unsettling as those that don't.

Brett Butler, *Knee Deep in Paradise*
Just a Dream

Crystal, 14

“You shouldn’t pull at them.” These were Dr. Shaw’s first words of the afternoon. Following a rousing game of Stare At Each Other Aimlessly, I’d begun to pick at the bandages on my wrists. They itched – and it’d been how many weeks?

“How long have I been here?” I asked, trying to get under the right wrist’s wrapping.

“A week and a half.”

It was comforting to know I hadn’t lost as much time in the haze as I’d thought.

“Look, I’m no doctor, but shouldn’t my stitches have healed by now? Why am I still wearing these things?”

“Do you think you’re ready to take them off? To see. . . ,” she motioned toward my thin arms.

“Well, gee, doc. Do you really think that this,” I gestured to the gauze, “isn’t just as bad? It’s not like I can forget what happened with these things on.”
“Let’s see how they’re doing then.” She pulled a pair of incredibly small scissors from one of her many desk drawers and held out her hand. I lay first my right arm, then my left in her palm, and she cut away the white.

I’d had my dressings changed before, but I’d always looked away. Now, as the muslin fell, I forced myself to see. Coarse, black stitching staggered through the gashes, the skin pulled tight and shiny, yellow and purple from my elbows to my wrists.

My cuts weren’t very straight. I knew it was a little overzealous, making the gashes so long, garnishing both of my forearms with crooked, running scars. I hadn’t been going for straight and neat; I was thinking it wouldn’t matter. The way my hands would lay in the casket, my cuts would be hidden, and longer was better, more sure. And well, I’d been crying so hard when I’d cut that I couldn’t see.

I closed my eyes and brought my arms to my stomach, squeezing them to me, forcing the images from my mind.

“Are you okay?” she asked, and I wondered if there wasn’t a hint of “I told you so” in her voice.

“I’m fine,” I pushed down the urge to vomit. *I did that. I guess I really gave up.*

“What are you thinking about?”

“Nothing,” I lied.

“Your mother would really like to see you.”
“Yeah. Great. We can compare scars.” I looked out the window over her head, wondering what the day felt like, autumn and gray. Was it cold yet? “I don’t want to see her.”

“Would you like to tell me why?”

I looked back at her and sighed. “No, I would not like to tell you why. Can’t you just ask a question like a normal person?” I could hear myself, the cranky, sarcastic teenager who thinks she knows it all. It wasn’t who I was, who I wanted to be.

“I’m sorry,” I said, softening my voice. “I guess I’m still a little too... I’m not ready to see my mom. And I can’t tell you why, because I can’t. I’m just not ready.”

“Was your mother abusive, Crystal?”

I considered the question, relishing the answers, the options, the outcomes. But ultimately, I said what I always did, “She’s never hit me,” which was mostly true.

“What about words? Is she verbally abusive?”

“Sticks and stones...”

“Crystal, I want to help you –”

“Why?” I asked, not unkindly. “I mean, really, why? You don’t know me. Where’s your motivation, Dr. Shaw?”

“Well, for one thing, it’s my job. For another, your mother is so worried about you; she’s told me so much, I feel I do know you.”

Of course she’d spoken to them – what had she said? To know me through the eyes of my mother... what a truly distressing thought. And how had she painted herself?
The dutiful mother, the mother who was willing to go to hell and back to save her child, the mother whose only concern was for her child—

"Session's over!" I said, standing and pushing her desk calendar flat in one motion. The flaps denoting the days of the week and touting daily words of wisdom went down with a solid thwap! She jumped, her hands flipped up in front of her in a "stick 'em up" pose.

The orderly, Joe, was by my side immediately; he was part of all of our sessions, usually uninvolved and standing by the door waiting to take me back. He put his hands on my arms, gently, waiting to see what my next move would be.

I was surprised, frankly. I hadn't seen that coming. I hadn't meant to scare anyone; I only needed for her to stop talking. If she said one more thing about my mother and her caring ways, if I had to see how she believed it, how she, someone who studied human nature for a living, had bought into it— I'd explode, I'd physically explode, and they'd be cleaning me out of the wall vents for weeks.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, studying the carpet.

"That's fine. We'll pick up from here on Thursday," she said with a forced smile. Her hands remained in front of her, and I noticed they were shaking. "I'll have the nurse remove your stitches first thing tomorrow morning."

I stood there for another minute wanting to make it better, hating who she thought I was.
Joe put his hand on the small of my back. “C’mon, girl. Let’s get you back to your room.”

He was quiet on the walk back.

“You know, I wasn’t going to hurt her. I was just upset.”

He nodded and smiled. In a sudden rush of feeling, I wanted to be his daughter. I wanted to go home with him, drink hot chocolate, and sleep in a clean bed; his wife would tuck me in and smooth my hair, just like in the movies.

“You know, Crystal, you should try going to the lounge a little more. Get to know some of the other girls. I think it would do you some good.”

So he hadn’t lost faith in me. “I will, Joe. Promise. I’ll have a BFF by this time next week.”

Joe let the sarcasm roll off his back. We’d reached my room by then. He smiled, shook his head, and walked away.

Since the restrictions had been lifted, I’d been to the lounge a few times. There was a ping-pong table, but most of the girls looked too baked to hold a paddle, let alone get a game going. A group of them sat on couches and watched whatever was (or wasn’t) on TV. Once I’d seen a younger girl sitting on the couch just staring at static.

Maybe Joe was right. I was tired of seeing nothing but my room, hearing my mother in my head and in the walls with no one else around to contradict her. And I was so intensely lonely at times that I found myself missing her. Missing my mom. And that couldn’t be normal, couldn’t be good. I must need to socialize, make some friends, or at
least be in the vicinity of other people more than my twice a week counseling sessions allowed for.  

But not tonight. I was exhausted. They brought in supper, but I pushed it aside and slid between the sheets, lost to sleep almost immediately.  

I was standing in the apartment, the same one we’d lived in ever since I could remember. But something was off. I knew this day, this moment.  

It was the day my father died, or rather the day we’d gotten the news.  

I was startled at the accuracy of the dream; I could feel the shag carpet beneath my bare feet, and the familiar smell of newspapers and cinnamon was all around me. No one was in the living room, but I could hear water running. I walked to the kitchen, and there I was. A young girl of eight, sitting stock-still at the table, studying the Formica, my bangs in my face.  

“Hey,” I said.  

She looked up at me, brushing her hair from her eyes.  

“Where is everyone?” I asked, reading from some script, already knowing the answer, but bound by the dream.  

“Mom’s taking a bath. Dad’s dead.”  

“Yeah... I’m sorry, kid. This is a bad day for us.”  

“Not a good day.” Her eyes returned to the table.  

I crouched down beside her, and tilted my head. “Hey. We’ve got to get in there and help mom, remember? We have to get her some clothes and wash her hair.”
“No. I’m not going to this time.”

“Um. Honey, you have to. We have to. Something bad will happen if we don’t.”

She looked into my eyes suddenly, raising her head sharply and said, “Didn’t something bad already happen?”

“What do you mean?” My pulse quickened, there was something inhuman about her movements; they were jerky, flashes of movement more than flesh.

She reached out, lightning quick, grabbing my hand by the wrist and flipping it palm side up. The scars were bleeding, as if I’d just cut them, blood dripping down our hands and onto the rug.

“What could be worse than this?” she asked, nodding toward my arm, but keeping her eyes steady on mine. “If I do what you say, if I help and work and try, all of those years, we’ll still end up like this.”

“I know,” I took my arm back, hugging it to me. “I know. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I did that to us… I was just… look, if we don’t do something for mom, something bad is going to happen. I can feel it, can’t you feel it?”

“I don’t feel anything.” She was staring at the table again, her bloodied hands now folded in her lap.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered and stood, turning to the bathroom and the sound of running water. “I’ll do it, then.”

I faced our bathroom door. The last time I’d been in this room, I’d slit my wrists. I’d sat in the tub, bleeding into the lukewarm water. I’d resigned myself to die.
Now I was going back in. My palms were slick with blood. I reached out to the doorknob. It turned uselessly, the brass slipping through my fingers. Water was still running on the other side. Finally, the knob turned, and the door slowly opened more by will than mechanics.

I could see the back of my mother’s head in the tub.

“Mom? Mom, I’m here to help. You can cry to me... you can...” As I reached the tub my words stopped, caught in my throat, an iciness gripping my chest.

Mom was in the tub, but she was still dressed, her waitress uniform saturated, turned from a light tan to coffee, and the water was pink.

She looked up at me slowly. I was rooted in place, unable to look away.

“What took you so long?” she asked, reaching for me, long slashes from her hand disappearing up past her elbow to her underarm, the blood running freely from her arms and chest into the water.

I screamed, and sat up in bed hyperventilating, the image of my mother still with me.

It was dark, but I wasn’t sleeping anymore tonight. I forced myself to slow my breathing, whispering, “Just a dream. Just a dream. Just a dream.”

I needed daylight to work its magic and dispel the nightmare, banish my ghosts.

I stepped out of bed and walked cautiously to my door. The nurses’ station light was on, and a few girls on the night shift loitered about. The radio was playing *Hey Joe*
softly in the background. I walked down the hall to the desk, the concreteness of the music and the voices of the nurses making me feel foolish for having been so frightened.

“Hon, can we help you with something?” The nurse at the front of the desk had kind eyes and a motherly tone.

“I was just wondering if I could get a drink.”

“Now you know you can get water from the faucet in your room,” the nurse behind Kind Eyes said with an edge.

Nurse Kind Eyes ignored her. “I never could stand to get my water from the same room I leave it in,” she said and winked. “I’ll get you some water, sweetie. Have a seat.”

She left me with nurse Meanie, a heavyset woman, her hair the color you get when you’re hoping for auburn, but the home dye kit delivers clown orange instead. Her accent and her worn scrubs screamed low-rent district. She was filing with her back to me.

She huffed her disapproval and spoke to the files and open cabinet before her, “She’s too nice for her own good. You girls will never leave this place with the way we wait on you hand and foot. Why would you?”

Her words caught me off guard. Why would someone choose to stay here? “Are you crazy?” The words fell out before I could stop them.

She turned and looked at me, testing my face. When she saw what she was looking for, she began to laugh. “Now that’s what you call a textbook case of irony,
girl.” She smiled then, and there was a kindness to her eyes after all as she said, “Yeah, sugar, maybe I am.”

I returned her smile and looked down.

She laid her folders on the desk between us and leaned over it, resting her large breasts in her arms. “What about you, Sugar? You crazy?” She asked, another smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

“Considering the dream I just had... probably.”

“Now, see I find that interesting. You’re sitting there scratching on them wounds that are still not quite healed – and it’s a dream that’s keeping you up at night.” I could feel her eyes even as my own went to my lap and my hands there, palms down, so the marks weren’t staring back at me.

“Real life is a lot scarier than whatever our minds come up with when left to their own,” she said.

I didn’t respond. That just didn’t seem true right on the heels of those images of my mother.

“Tell you what. If you ever want to know about your dreams, you just ask me.” She held out her hand over the desk, and I stood to take it, “I’m Shirl, and I know about dreams.” She held onto my hand and looked into my eyes, a crease in her forehead.

“And you had you a doozy, huh?” When she could see I was uncomfortable and offering nothing, she let my hand drop. “Where is she with that water?” She said, turning toward the hall where Nurse Kind Eyes had disappeared.
“See?” I said, my confidence returning, “With service like this, we’ll all graduate.”

Shirl smiled her approval, and for the first time since my suicide, I felt connected to another person, the playing ground leveled with sarcasm.

By then Nurse Kind Eyes was back with my water, and Shirl returned to filing. I thanked them both and shuffled back to my room.

Despite the scare I’d had I was more tired than afraid. I was in a room surrounded by rooms of frightened people, and though I knew I was completely and totally alone in my room, those other people, layers between me and the outside world, were also alone, and that, somehow, made me feel less lonely. After all, it was just a dream.
Red Berries

Crystal, 14

“Ice cream for dessert,” the nurse chirped, as she arranged the tray on the small table next to me. Nurse Chipper, as I’d deemed her, was a true mystery to me. In my short time here, I’d already determined that the psych ward was not a pleasant place, yet she never ceased to be bouncy and annoying, and, well, chipper.

I glanced at the tray she’d carried in, as she swiveled the small table in front of me, laying out the spoon and fork (no knives for the insane) and folded my napkin. The thought of food was nauseating. Up until now, I’d mostly been fed intravenously with an occasional Jell-O cup. The ice cream was already melting.

“Now, you save that for dessert, okay sweetie? You’ll feel better if you eat,” she patted my hand.

Once she’d gone, I reached straight for the ice cream. If they’re going to bring it in with the rest of the food still steaming, they can’t expect it to keep until dessert. It was strawberry, my favorite.
“Remember that one time we had strawberry ice cream?” a voice asked by the window. I jerked up straight, turning to its source.

It was my mother. But I’d never seen her come in. Had I lost consciousness?

No, the melting but still fairly intact bowl of ice cream testified no time had been lost.

“Oh, now look what you’ve done,” she clucked coming to the foot of my bed, pointing out the pink ice cream drips on my sheets.

“Ma… mom?”

“I asked you a question, Crystal. Really, you’ve only been in here two weeks, and you’re already feelin’ the mental effects?” She hunched over my bed suddenly looking scared, lowering her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, her eyes darting to the open door, “It’s catching you know… crazy is catching. Maybe you shouldn’t eat that.”

She eyed the small bowl suspiciously. It was now just a scoop of pink mush in my warm hands. I was clutching the cup tightly – too tightly I realized, but I could do nothing about it. I was paralyzed.

She smiled then, “But you do remember the strawberry ice cream, don’t you?”

I did remember. Though I’d had strawberry ice cream many times in my life, I knew exactly which time she was referring to. Her voice sent the images out into the air to settle inside of me.

It had been the first day of my first period. I’d awoken in a wet, sweaty, slippery tangle of sheets. When I’d gotten out of bed, there’d been a red blossom on the bottom sheet in the shape of a large strawberry. I’d run to get my mother, who was in the kitchen.
washing dishes from the night before. When she saw it, she hugged me and spun me around, laughing. I was still a bit frightened— we’d never discussed this day, and I was only partially sure I wasn’t dying.

She’d finally stopped twirling and dropped my hands. “My little girl is growin’ up,” she’d said with mock sorrow, tucking a curl behind my ear. “This calls for ice cream!” and she’d straightened, marching back to the kitchen with me in tow.

But she passed through the kitchen and went to the bathroom instead. She ran the water and motioned for me to climb in. “Ice cream after you’ve cleaned up. Crystal, don’t look so horrified, this is a good thing. You’re just growin’ up. It happens to all of us, silly. Without it, you yourself wouldn’t be here.” She chuckled then, a secret known only to her. She reached the door and began to close it, pausing only to add, “Southern girls – ‘scuse me, Southern ladies need their privacy,” then closed the door gently, leaving me to my thoughts and the white tiled walls.

I’d heard enough to know this was normal, but until it had happened to me, I’d thought maybe the other girls at school had been exaggerating.

“No school today, Crystal, and I’m callin’ in sick to work. We’re celebratin’,” she called to me from the other room.

Once the bath was over, and I was dressed – the mysterious boxes under the sink, a mystery no more – we sat at the kitchen table eating strawberry ice cream.

And then she’d gotten serious and told me about her own first period.
“I went to school that day” she began, “wonderin’ if I was gonna die. I thought about telling the nurse, but the blood was comin’ from such a personal place…” she chuckled sadly and shrugged, “I guess I was more willing to die from blood loss than embarrassment. …And when I got off the bus… my mamma was there to meet Helen and me.”

She rarely mentioned her dead sister – it was a forbidden topic. Now the name rolled off her tongue easily because this wasn’t Helen’s story. It was hers.

“She’d found my stained underwear in the trashcan,” she continued, her spoon toying with the melting ice cream left in her bowl, “and wasn’t sure which of us it was. So rather than pull us both out of school, she waited for the bus.” She suddenly looked more like a hurt little girl than my mother. “Can you imagine? She knew one of us was at school, unprepared, scared – and she didn’t want to interrupt the educational process.” She swallowed then, and I could see it was a difficult task, swallowing the hurt along with her last spoonful of ice cream. “I wore my heavy winter coat all day even though it was a very warm September that year. I was afraid the wadded up toilet paper wouldn’t do the trick. I was sweaty and smelly by the time I got off the bus… It was one of the worst days of my life.” She seemed to come back to herself then, pulled from the past to the present, and she smiled apologetically.

“I should have told you all about this, Crystal. I just forget how old you are sometimes. You’ll always be my baby. So, for you? We celebrate. We don’t hide, we
don’t go to school- we celebrate!” She saluted me then with her spoon, now licked clean, and I could see my smiling face distorted inside of it.

It had been one of the best days of my life. Though it had started a little rocky, it had been one of those redeeming days; one of the days that it was okay dad was gone, and that “other” mom was a memory, a mere ghost beneath her skin. She was healthy, glowing, and we danced to her favorite records, watched old movies, and fell asleep together on the couch.

The thought of that day now, here in this cold and sterile place, my mother watching me from the end of the bed, her hands just inches from my feet, caused a lump in my throat.

I could almost forgive her in that moment. I could almost forget how I’d ended up here in the first place.

I opened my mouth to say something, anything, as the first tears started their trek.

“Honey?” It was Nurse Chipper back to collect the tray. “I thought I heard you talking in here, are you okay, hon?”

“It was just my…” but before I’d begun the sentence, I’d known my mother was gone, that she’d most likely never been there. I recovered, the space at the end of my bed just empty air. “I’m fine. This ice cream is melted… I really don’t think I can eat anyway. Could you please just take the tray? It’s making me sick.” I replaced the bowl on the tray and turned onto my side away from it, realizing I was grateful my mother hadn’t really been there, hoping that even if it meant I was joining the ranks of the
crazies, it had only been a hallucination. I needed my mother to be far from this place.

And yet, as I pulled my knees up to my chin and wrapped my arms around myself, I longed for the strawberry ice cream mother, for the one who could shine so brightly, the mom she’d been on those good days, and I drifted off to sleep, the taste of red berries on my tongue.
Again

I saved you last night.
I stood over your pale, still form
And shut out
The panic
The sirens
The footsteps
The blithering.
I placed my lips on yours and blew myself into you
Shared my air with you
Again
Again
And I pressed my hands to your heart and held and pushed.

And soon your chest thrummed,
Your eyes opened,
Your mouth moved.
And I was proud.

Proud that it was I who saved you.
More poetry would exist because of you.
And I knew it would make us closer,
And you would love all of me,
And our relationship would be on some
Different plane.
And when I woke up,
Saw you there beside me,
I was sorry that I couldn't save you,
Again
Again
As you drown in sleep and regret.
Allison Reader was a collector. She kept anything she came across, including paper clips, used staples, or candy wrappers. Allie trusted me immediately, and on the same day we met, showed me her most prized collection.

I had gone down to the rec room, was standing in the doorway, my hand resting on its frame, and I was watching the girls inside. A few had been wheeled in and didn’t seem coherent. One girl sat by the window, staring but unfocused, a thin line of drool coming from the corner of her mouth.

“Sad, isn’t it?”

I startled and turned to find a small girl who couldn’t have been more than 10 or 11 standing just behind my left shoulder. A white, raised scar ran from the middle of her throat to the other side. While I was used to seeing scars, bandages, and all manner of bruising, the placement of her scar took me off guard.

“Pardon?” I realized I was staring at her throat and quickly raised my eyes to meet hers but found myself in the reflection in her glasses, which were too large for her fragile
face. She was holding a blue spiral bound notebook to her chest, a pencil slipped into its wire rings.

"The sleepers. The way they’re awake, but they’re not awake. It makes me sad.” She watched the girls for a few seconds, and I watched her; then she turned to me and smiled. “I’m Allie, by the way.

“Welcome to The Ritz,” she said, gesturing with dramatic flourish at the quiet room. There were several girls in the TV corner watching Donahue discuss transsexuals.

“I’m –”

“Oh, I know who you are,” she said, cutting me off. “You’re the screamer.”

“Yeah… that.”

Her face broke into another smile. “Oh, don’t worry about that. It was exciting. I decided you must be an incredibly interesting person. You know, messed-up royally and all that.” She spoke with an air of respect.

“Allie,” a voice called from down the corridor. The voice was around the corner, down another hallway, but heading this way. “Allie…” it called again.

She turned to me, “Can you keep this? I don’t feel like explaining it… could you?” She slipped the notebook between the back folds of my gown, so that its wire rings and smooth front were brushing my bare skin. I slipped my hand back to hold it, even as hers left, and we both faced the corner where the owner of the voice appeared a second later. It was a nurse, an older woman, brows twitching in irritation.
“Allie, it’s time for your session. I’ve been looking all over for you.” She eyed me a bit suspiciously before returning her attention to Allie. “C’mon hon. Let’s go.” She reached out an arm, ushering Allie alongside of her.

As they disappeared around the corner, I brought the notebook out and considered its cover. There was one word written in a childlike sprawl across its cover: *Stories*.

I let my arm fall back down to my side, the notebook still clutched and contemplated the rec room again. To stay or not to stay?

A commercial for Pine Sol sang out. It was achingly familiar. Pine Sol was home, and it was strangely out of place here.

Our home always smelled of Pine Sol when mom was “on” as she called it, when she was “cooking, rolling, feeling the beat.” She would be up before I rose, making eggs, toast, and bacon. Years later it would dawn on me that she had most likely never been to bed.

At times like that, she would smile and laugh and chase me through the house. She would help with homework and impersonate my teachers with hilarious accuracy.

The floors were mopped, toilet scrubbed, silverware drawer cleaned out, books alphabetically lined up on the bookcase, closets organized …

She was a ticking time bomb. I was sure these actions, this state, wasn’t exactly healthy, but I couldn’t help but enjoy the episodes that brought a slightly off-kilter June Cleaver into our home.
The crash was inevitable. One cheery episode ended with her drinking a fourth of a bottle of Pine Sol. There on the kitchen floor, knees close to her chest, she shook — her breath “pine fresh.”

I’d had to call the poison control center, and they told me she would probably be sick, and she should drink some milk. And while she did lie down and stay in bed for the next four days straight, she didn’t throw up; mom’s mental state seemed to command her physical, so if she thought she needed Pine Sol, her body agreed, digested it, and moved on.

During those times, those “on” times, I felt almost normal. My mother my best friend, a slightly older, outrageously energetic roommate. I’d look at her across the table from me, fussing with my salad, arranging my food, and brushing the hair from my face, and I’d feel safe. I’d push down that feeling of impending doom and let hope rise like a bubble to the surface. Maybe this time it’s for good. Maybe this time, she’ll stay funny and beautiful. And then the floor would drop out and we’d both freefall into her darkness. Somehow she’d pull me over the edge and in with her.

Standing in that doorway, I swear I could smell the Pine Sol overriding the actual bleach in the air. Not today, I decided.

I turned and headed back to my room, the notebook tucked beneath my gown.

Once back, I closed my door and sat on the bed, the notebook in my lap. To look or not to look? I didn’t even know this girl, and I’d covered for her. I considered the shiny blue cover and the black smudged letters comprising Stories and decided Ali owed
me one.

I opened the cover, exposing the first page. There was a single line in neat cursive, dead center:

*It takes a thousand voices to tell a single story.*

Huh. I opened to the next page and began reading. The title read “Tommy” and was a story told in first person, from “Tommy’s” point of view. It was the story of a man who had returned from war feeling less like a man and more like a gun. Like a literal, shining metal gun. He saw his words as bullets, his eyes and hands as triggers, and he was afraid he was going to kill someone if he had the wrong thought at the wrong time. I felt completely average, bandaged wrists and all, after “Tommy’s” story. *Tommy gun,* I thought and couldn’t suppress a sadistic chuckle.

Suddenly, I could hear Allison’s high voice coming down the hall, “Is that a new smock, Delores?” she asked, sounding more like a schmoosing car salesman than a 10-year-old mental patient.

I quickly closed her notebook and set it beside me on the bed. I looked up and stretched as she entered. “That was a quick session.” I said.

She shrugged and walked to the bed to stand in front of me. “If you consider 45 minutes quick. Did you read it?” She asked pointing to the notebook that had somehow found its way back into my lap.

“No,” I said, quickly handing it to her.
"It’s cool if you did. I guess I’d think it a little weird if you didn’t. Curiosity killed the… and you know, I never said you couldn’t."

"Right, no. I mean, yeah." A beat of silence followed, then I said, "What is it, exactly?"

She smiled and joined me on the bed. This was the question she’d been waiting for. "They’re stories," she said as though this weren’t perfectly obvious.

"Did you write them?"

"No, no. I mean, I technically wrote them, but they’re not my words."

*Great.* And she had seemed like such a good candidate for normal.

"I mean I write down other people’s stories. Girls here in the hospital. You know, the reason they’re here. I ask them why they’re here, or just, you know, ask them about their life, which usually includes how they ended up in the ward." She paused, reading my face. "I collect their stories."

"Why?"

"Because I don’t know why I’m here. Like this quote, on the first page," she flipped back the cover and held it up, "It’s an old Indian saying. It feels true, doesn’t it? Maybe their stories are part of my story. Does that make sense?"

It did. I definitely felt connected to the girls on the floor. It was comforting to know I wasn’t the only one who had tried to take my life, and on the outside, I was certain the isolation would be pretty thick; here, the bandages and vacant eyes were a salve. We were connected.
I nodded my assent, then stopped, my brows creasing. “What do you mean you don’t know why you’re here?” I asked.

“I don’t.” she shrugged. “I don’t remember anything before waking up here. I mean, I remember my family — my mom and dad, my brother Roger — he’s amazing. You’d like Roger,” she added, a giddiness in her voice I hadn’t heard before.

“Sure,” I said. After all, I had already decided I liked his sister. She was the first girl to approach me, and her honesty was something I’d missed in the grown-ups. Adults just don’t lay it out like another kid will. “So… Tommy. Wow.”

She looked at me with a sadness I hadn’t expected, not joining in my grin. “Yeah. Well, I changed their names. Tommy’s gone now.” She was looking out the window, and I wondered if she meant that he’d been discharged or something darker.

I stood and walked over to the window where she still looked. It seemed odd that I hadn’t noticed the graveyard. My room was on the backside of the building. I had been here several weeks and hadn’t bothered to look out the window. For one, it depressed me — its metal bars made me feel trapped. The cemetery below wasn’t helping. “He died?” I asked.

“Maybe.” She shrugged. “Tommy was a girl. On the ward. She wanted me to change her name, her gender. She was very paranoid. She was afraid someone was going to figure out she was a gun and use her…” she shook her head. “She wasn’t very happy here.”

It was a funny statement to make. I wasn’t very happy here either, though I
suppose the stability of the place had its appeal. “That’s crazy…” I said before I could stop myself. I started to giggle, my voice having a mind of its own, and she began to do the same. The giggles turned to laughter, and I let myself go. It felt so good to be laughing like that. Those muscles hadn’t moved in a while.

Soon, the laughs were quieter, less frequent. “We’d better stop,” I said. “I mean, we sound completely nuts…” I choked.

She stood to leave with a contented smile, her notebook under her arm. “I’ll see you around …”

I realized I hadn’t given her my name and supplied it, “Crystal. I’m Crystal. Yeah, see you around, Allie.”

As she left, she passed a nurse with a cart piled high with covered dishes. “Hey Grace,” she called once in the hall. “What’s for dinner?”

“Chicken, peas, and mashed potatoes, and you’re going to eat every single bite, right?” Grace answered.

I hadn’t realized it was so late in the day — suppertime already. The nurse smiled as she set the tray on the table next to me. “It’s nice to hear Allie laughing like that,” she said. “She’s had such a rough time of it.”

“Yeah… she misses her brother.” I said instinctively, reaching for my fork and lifting the lid off my plate.

“She does. She told you ‘bout him?” She asked, surprised.

“Yeah. Roger, right?”
“Well, good.” She busied herself getting my napkin and drink from beneath the trays. “From what I hear on the floor, she hasn’t been able to talk ‘bout him. I mean, you can’t blame her, can you? You kill your own brother, you’re not going to want to think about it.”

I stopped, frozen, my fork halfway to my mouth. “What?” I said.

“Oh no. Don’t you mind me. I’m talkin’ gossip. I’m not even the usual one here on Wednesdays — I’m a stand in... it may not even be true, but you said she’d said... please don’t say nothin’ to no one. It was entirely unprofessional of me. It’s just, I really like that little girl. The times I’ve been on the floor, she’s always so nice... remembers my name.” There was a distinct pleading quality to her voice.

“No, no.” I said, and I realized my fork was still raised above the plate, mashed potatoes clinging to its tines. I set the fork down. Why was I surprised? Of course that didn’t explain the mark on her neck. Had he been trying to kill her? Was she only defending herself?

The nurse was backing out with the trays and said, “I’ll deny we had this conversation, and I think you’d better too. K, honey? Here’s an extra tapioca, from me to you.”

The last thing I wanted was more food, but I was too numb to stop her. How could Allie be a killer?

I decided I wasn’t the one to judge her. I was a killer of sorts myself, or an attempted one, at least. I’d tried to end my own life, which was every bit as messed up.
And I wasn’t prepared to believe it anyway. That orderly was a gossipy old windbag. To tell me such a thing in the first place! And it wasn’t like nurses or docs would show files to just anyone... was it?

Over the next few weeks, I pushed the questions down and spent time with Allie whenever I could. She sought me out as often as I did her, and she never mentioned Roger. We ate lunch together in the common room and watched TV. We sketched bowls of fruit and designed macaroni houses, and life was starting to feel okay.

Until one night, I was in my room after hours, lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, waiting for sleep. It was raining outside, and one of the nurses had opened my window earlier in the day. I couldn’t shut it, it required a long, thin tool that reached through the bars to hook the window and pull up. But I didn’t mind the slight chill or the cadence of the rain on the sill.

I felt her before I saw her, Allie’s shadow fell across my bed, and I turned to the doorway, where she stood, shivering. Her eyes were wide, as though she were surprised at something, and it wasn’t until she entered my room that I noticed the dripping. My first thought was that she was bleeding, from everywhere, the gray light not lending color to the puddles on the floor, but soon I realized she was just wet.

“Allie, how did you... Did you get outside?”

She nodded. “I know secrets, remember? I know a way out,” she looked down then, her expression sad, but still surprised. “Not out-out. There’s a fence. But I know a way out.”
“Allie, we get out once a day for recreation. And it’s raining, why did you… what’s going on, Allie? You’re scaring me.”

“No. Not the courtyard, the pasture beyond, the cemetery. I know a way.” She stepped forward, and her face was illuminated by the moonlight, her features sharper. I could see she wasn’t just sad or shocked, she was desperate. “Come with me,” she whispered.

“How did you even get here, looking like that? How did you miss the nurses’ station?”

“I know things. They take breaks, they look down to type,” she shrugged, and her face began to clear. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. Just. Would you do something for me?”

“Of course, Allie.”

She nodded, satisfied when I didn’t hesitate. “Come outside with me. Become my blood sister.”

“Um…” I was doing well here. I was finding out about myself, my mama – the staff here loved me. But this was Allie. “You mean, prick our fingers, and all of that? Can’t we get one of your paper clips and do that here?”

“No. I mean, yes, we could. But. Come outside with me,” she smiled, and the expression had never seemed more out of place. “Come outside, break free and feel the rain, when’s the last time you were outside when it rained? No outdoor rec time when it rains.”
“Well, Allie. I pretty much avoid the rain whether I’m in the looney bin or on the outside.”

She said nothing, but her expression was pleading, and that awful smile was still there.

“Fine,” I sighed. What was the worst they could to me. This place wasn’t medieval torture time, and the staff was really cool, worst scenario, we’d lose rec time, and well, I had enough macramé to last me a lifetime as it was. I pushed the covers back and stood. “Now what,” I asked.

She took my hand in hers, and pulled, crouching at the door. I followed suit. We played the crouching, tip-toeing game around the nurses’ station, as Shirl busily typed away, then down the hall, past patients’ rooms, and finally we reached the door at the end of the hallway. It was white, a push-bar across its middle stating “FOR EMERGENCY USE ONLY, DO NOT OPEN. ALARMS WILL SOUND.”

“Uh, Allie. I thought you said you knew secrets.”

“I do. I know that the alarm is broken or something because I came out here earlier today, and nothing happened,” she stated. She turned looking at me, that same desperate look in her eyes. “Do you want to go back?” She asked.

I was here. I wasn’t turning back. I placed my hand on the bar and waited as she placed hers on mine. “1, 2, 3!” We pushed, and an impossibly loud alarm sounded immediately. For one second we stood staring at each other, eyes wide, mouths open, then I grabbed her hand and ran through, pulling her running behind me.
“What the heck, Allie? You said there was no alarm!”

“There wasn’t before, I swear! Maybe they don’t turn them on until later in the day,” she huffed, trying to keep up.

“You’re insane!” I screamed, and she began to laugh. When Allie laughed, I couldn’t help but be pulled in by it. I laughed with her as we ran into the side yard, the rain hitting us in big, fat splashes. It wasn’t long before I soaked through, my feet slipping on the grass. I didn’t know where I was going, where I was taking her, so I slowed. I could hear voices behind us, but we’d entered a wooded part of the yard.

“What now?” I whispered, catching my breath.

“This way,” she answered moving to the left, and I followed. Minutes later, pushing through brush and stinging my feet on the pine needles beneath, we reached the graveyard.

“Creepy.” I said, hanging back, as she entered lightly. It was only sprinkling now. “Okay, what now, Allie? They’ll be here in a matter of minutes.”

She lifted a thumb tack she’d concealed in her hand. “We become blood sisters,” she answered, then immediately pushed the pin into her pointer finger with a gasp. When she pulled it back, a perfect bead of dark liquid was in its place. “Give me your hand, Crystal,” she whispered.

I did. I was here, wet, feeling more alive than I had in months, and for that, she could have her little ritual. She pushed in, and I gasped, “Geez, Al, deep enough?” She smiled at the nickname and lifted her finger. I knew the drill. I pressed mine to hers and
rubbed.

“We’re sisters now,” she said. She wasn’t whispering now, she was speaking, brave and still panting from our run. As she spoke, the rain picked up again and a new torrent fell, and I grabbed her wrists, laughing and pulling her in a circle with me. We moved in that circle, running, faster and faster, until I was sure we would both pass out.

They found us like that, laughing and spinning, our heads thrown back and mouths open to taste the rain. I’d never had a sister. Allie was my first, my only.

Allie was different after that night. She stayed close, but she was quieter. She enjoyed a guilty pride in our matching band-aids, palpable when we sat near each other and made hand puppets from paper bags or watched The Price is Right in the rec room. I had never told her what had landed me here, so I didn’t feel I had the right to ask her the same question. And to be honest, I wasn’t curious. This place had sapped my curiosity. Seeing the other girls, their eyes proclaiming “This girl not in use” made me content knowing nothing.

I began to believe that some of them might have worse stories to tell. Realizing that brought on an epiphany; I might just be the most self-centered person who had ever lived. The very thing I’d always accused my mother of, I had become. And hey, she had bipolar disorder to explain her self-preoccupation — what was my excuse?

So I kept my head down and my nose clean, and I didn’t ask Allie what was turning her eyes from bright to dull, her smile from felt to forced. She seemed content just being around me, and I felt needed for the first time since I’d left my mother in our
bathtub. Since I’d saved her.

And I wondered if I could save Allie. If maybe, just maybe I could fly in, my bathrobe a cape, my friendship a superpower that could make everything better.
Crystal’s Dream: What Manner of Love is This?

I was tired of breathing.
Of standing up straight,
Catching you always before you fell –
When I saw them
Lying at perverse angles,
Arms and legs crooked from the fall
Eyes closed in peace,
Lips sealed with a smile.
The dead and forgotten.

I decided to join them.

I didn’t think about you;
Didn’t consider what you would feel
For once.
I only chose the way out
The way up,
Eventually down
To rest among the crooked
Complacent, Peaceful.

I climbed the stairs to the roof.
I stood on its alabaster edge
Euphoric, I trembled
Tottering, until I let the tension go
Released my grasping toes
And fell.

But at the first moment of falling,
My eyes turned aside, dilated with surprise
To see you
Hear you
Feel you
Rustling, falling, beside me–
And you said you couldn’t let me fall alone
Without ever parting your lips.
And we fell, as I floundered
Wanting to save you
Until we hit–
Cold cement—

...And death did not come.
You stood to your feet and pulled me to mine
And I knew

That you would fall with me
Again and again and again,
If that was what I needed,
Until I got it right.
One for Her, One for Me

Crystal, age 14

Today’s the day I die.

The thought wakes me up, a comforting mantra. Don’t think I’m stupid or reckless, dying because some acne-laden 16-year-old broke my heart – it took me a while to get here. I didn’t just open my eyes one day and decide to die; this was a journey.

I suppose it began with mom, long before I was born, when the very first seeds of her illness slipped into her bloodstream and swam their way through her heart and brain, flushing out traditional reason and empathy and replacing them with little green Martians and her all-consuming self. Bipolar is a very self-centered disease; it removes focus from all but the self – at least that’s been my experience – whether it was the very high highs, where she was unconcerned (unaware?) of what her actions were doing to others, or the lows, which made anyone else’s pain a mere shadow to her own. Of course, then there were the low lows… those were the days I kept her bedroom door shut and hid all sharp objects. I had learned that lesson upon coming home from school one day to find that
she’d carved my father’s name into the kitchen wall just under the phone, the same phone that had delivered the news of his death several years before.

Even those are not reasons to end my life. You see, the thing is, I get my mother. That action, while I know it’s irrational, made sense to me on some level. I understand her anger, the need to create a sense of my father’s permanence beneath the very place he slipped away. And the day she drank the Pine-Sol – well, it cleaned every other surface, why not her? I did not believe these were random acts of the insane, and the day I realized that was the day I knew something had to be done. If she was starting to make sense to me, I was in trouble. And while I tried several other options before arriving at such a drastic one, ultimately the sleeping pills, crying jags, and even the writing were enough to convince me that I would one day not only understand why she drank the Pine-Sol, but join her in a toast to its Christmas-tree scent as it traveled down both of our throats.

I could see us dying together. I, the one who had been her lifeline, saving her from countless mishaps, would become her noose.

And though that understanding came to me several months ago, I haven’t been able to pull the trigger. Because my mother has days of clarity in between, places I think of as plateaus amid the deep valleys and peaking mountains of her psyche – places where she is free and, more importantly, aware of reality and the world around her – aware of me. Her momentary lucidity is powerful because it overwhelms all else, and every single time I think, What if it’s over? What if she’s finally free? Every. Single. Time. I can’t
stop those thoughts anymore than I can stop the steady pulse in my veins – and I began to see the two things related, my pulse and that belief. The only way to turn off the one is to stop the other.

That’s why today is the perfect day. She’s not on a plateau, she’s nowhere near one. She’s in super-mom mode, the mountain top precariously high, and I have decided I will not be around when she falls this time. I am completely aware of the fact that I am the self-centered one today, that I will leave her shattered; but I don’t know, I have this fantasy of the ambulance arriving for me – after it’s over – and she’ll be doing something crazy: writing in my blood on the walls or repeatedly knocking her head against the kitchen counter, and they’ll have to save her. My death could actually give her the chance she refuses to make for herself.

Of course, she could also end up in an institution, living her final days amid the yowling of the completely insane – no valleys, mountains, or plateaus there, just the black hole of insanity enveloping her, a fine line of spittle leaving the corner of her mouth and wetting her dress as she stares straight ahead…

I won’t go there. I can’t. I love my mother. At least, I love her more than I hate her. Surely, they will give her something. A pill, counseling. something…

Today’s the day. I take a deep breath and walk to the kitchen. She’s gone, a note on the counter. She’s already left for work at the diner, using the carefully marked schedule I’ve made for her on the calendar by the door. This is many jobs down the line, but the owner is a nice guy. I think she may make it at this one.
She won’t be home until 3, which gives me the day to myself. Of course, I’m not
going to school, not on my last day on earth. Ridiculous. Instead I start the water for a
hot bath, and consider that this will be the last room I see. The tiles and walls and
fixtures are all white. Even the mirror is white until I step in front of it, reflecting what it
sees. The only splashes of color are the toothbrushes (hers pink, mine green) and the
Crest toothpaste, neatly rolled up, the cap on. I can’t wait to enter the bath, soak in the
water — which seems odd. What does it matter?

I tell myself that it’s fine to want to be comfortable. Leaving this world doesn’t
have to be painful and dramatic, like Richie Gomez who leapt from Hill Street Church’s
steeple (How did he get up there? I wonder how cold it was up that high...) landing in a
crunch of bones that did not end his life right away, though it had the desired affect some
hours later, after he’d spent some time seeing his loved ones cry, knowing he’d broken
their hearts as surely as he’d broken his neck.

Idiot. A person doesn’t kill herself without a failsafe. My idea is to be doubly
sure. I am going to kill myself twice.

And it is time.

I stand in front of the mirror in our bathroom, having stripped from the door to the
to here, all the way down to nothing, a trail of clothes in my wake.

I contemplate the face and it contemplates me back. I close my eyes and breathe
a moment. Then I open them, watching my pupils dilate then disappear as I swing the
mirror forward, exposing the contents behind it. I consider my mother’s pills. She has a
few for her “nervous” days, as she calls them, from a script written years ago. She metes these out with precision and care. I open the bottle and pour ten out into my hand. They are small pills, so I add five more for good measure. I toss the handful into my mouth and crunch them, then almost gag. The powder is so dry, I’ll never swallow without water, the way they do in the movies, so I race to the kitchen, fling open the refrigerator door and grab out a Coke. Wincing at the awful taste in my mouth, I flip the tab, then lift and drink.

Relief. I have to drink half the bottle to completely eradicate the pills and their offensive, chalky feel from my tongue.

I return to the bathroom, knowing things will get fuzzy fast, so there is no time to waste. I turn on the tub’s faucet and take the razor blades from their hiding place, taped to the top of the toilet’s tank lid.

I stand in front of the mirror one last second and wonder if this can be it. It’s all very quiet and normal. Anticlimactic. I don’t have the luxury to think on this for long, however. I take one blade in my right hand and start at my left wrist, dragging it up to my elbow. I didn’t go deeply enough, there’s not any blood, just a red dotting along the line I’ve scratched. I take a deep breath and put the blade in at my wrist, really push it in and feel the tension of my skin pop, then I pull with everything I’ve got, yelling as I rip the blade up my arm until it reaches the inner crook of my elbow. I stop and see that I’m crying. And why shouldn’t I be? I let the floodgates go and sob for myself, my arms, my ocean mama. I switch the blade to my now weakened right hand, the arm screaming as
the muscles inside try to contract and hold the blade. I begin at the left wrist, this time not wanting to do it twice I push deeply enough and am satisfied with the slightly jagged line of red that results.

I glance into the mirror to see myself one last time and see my father instead. He is there, in the mirror, as surely as the cold tile under my feet and the drops of blood in the sink. I know he is disappointed. I reach up a hand to comfort him, but find my own reaching back. I must be farther gone than I thought.

I turn and force my way to the tub, just two feet away but feeling more like twenty, and I throw myself in. Water sloshes over the sides, and for a second I worry about the mess. Then I begin to laugh, even as the tears are still making their way down my face. My chest is hurting, hurting from the inside in a way I’ve never felt before, and I think This is what it feels like to die. Your heart literally breaks first.

Then I see her. She’s at the door, watching. She does not scream. Her mouth is set in a thin, angry line, her eyes furrowed. Instantly, her face clears, now unconcerned, and as I watch, she steps into the bathroom, though she is not supposed to be home for several hours.

She snatches the bloodied razor on the sink, climbs into the tub with me, her skirt floating to the top and says, "I hope you’re happy," then quickly slits both of her wrists. She has the look of someone who is late to the party and trying to catch up on the festivities.
After staring at her a few seconds, blinking, I scream, no real words forming, only thoughts — *oh God, dear God* — *I've killed her after all.*

She seems honestly confused at my horror. "Oh, I see," she says in perfect mother tones, "It's all well and good for you —"

I am somehow out of the bathtub before she can finish, blood streaking down my arms. A clarity has seized me, her act bringing the world back into startling focus. I grab a towel and wrap up my left arm with my right then throw a towel to her instructing her to do the same.

I run to the living room, feeling weaker, realizing I've lost enough blood to have turned the bath water pink — *Mom's uniform will be ruined* — I am trapped in the hallways of my mind, groping for the concrete I know exists outside of it, finally finding the phone and yelling — it is a loud speaker, and I just need to yell into it, let my voice reach the window, the world outside, the people on the other side of all of this.

I manage to punch 911 and scream in the general direction of the receiver, "We need ambulances, we're dying!"

I fall to my knees then and picture twin ambulances speeding side-by-side, racing each other to reach us. *Who will they save first? One for her, one for me,* "She's in the bathtub, dying..." I whisper.

I fall forward, my cheek flattening the brown shag of our front room, and my eyes settle on the shoes she wore to work this morning, empty in front of the door.

As darkness comes, I hear the sirens coming, and I think, *I've finally saved her.*