

TALES FROM THE HEART: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

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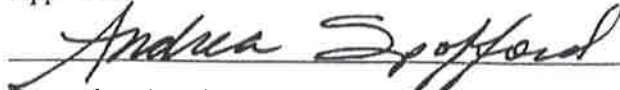
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Sarah M Williams

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This thesis is dedicated to Aunt Rachel. You paved the path for me to write. I love you and miss
you.

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ABSTRACT

This is a collection of short stories varied in both length and plot. However, they all are introspective character studies where the protagonists learn about themselves through their relationships with others. The longer pieces focus on the effect of long-term environment and experiences leading to a breakthrough to a self-revelation. “Georgia Sunshine” is a story exploring character self-discovery through rebellion. “Fucked Up Like a Soup Sandwich”, “Lost in the Details”, and “50/50” are loosely connected stories that explore character self-discovery through trials, tribulations, and camaraderie. “Eulogy of Diana” is a story that explores character self-discovery through familial ties and mourning. “Innocent Bloom” is a story that explores character self-discovery through long-term obsession. Though different in content, these stories share the burdens and freedoms, as well as the methods, associated with discovering one’s true identity.

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Georgia Sunshine

Lizzie Bell had spent the last decade ruling the fifteen acres of fields and woods that her family owned. From the time she was comfortable opening the front door, she'd roam barefoot through the fields and woods, the Georgia summer sun reflecting off her copper hair. Lizzie was all tan and dirt and toothy smile and freckles; the first of even her brothers to walk into the woods at night. Lizzie feared nothing, and she learned everything. Nature was just as much family as Mama and Pa.

On most accounts Lizzie was a good girl. She minded her studies, always had good manners, and regardless of how much time she spent outdoors, she was clean and well dressed for church every single Sunday. Lizzie couldn't remember a Sunday that her family had not been in church. As a child it was a bit exciting. She remembered when she decided to come to Jesus. Mama was so proud she'd cried. So many congratulations and the family had a big potluck the afternoon after it happened. Lizzie had expected to feel something big. She thought that being baptized meant that God came down and touched your soul while you were underwater, so when you came back up everything was different. Lizzie didn't feel anything that day when she was eight, and she didn't feel anything today when she was sixteen, hiding out in the less frequented bathrooms to avoid Sunday School class.

Mama and Lizzie were fighting a lot since a few months before the child's sixteenth birthday. She was becoming quite the opinionated teenage girl especially with as small as their little Georgia town was. Pa never weighed in on this development, but Lizzie reckoned that was because she wasn't out getting knocked up at sixteen like her older cousin. A father's nightmare was getting that news so as long as Lizzie stayed out of trouble, Pa stayed out of Lizzie's business. But Mama didn't like the way she stomped around in mud boots and overalls, shooting

deer in the woods for sport before trying to make a meal out of it. Mama wanted Lizzie to learn to quilt for her cousin's baby and cook for the shotgun wedding and wear her Sunday best to try and find a man. Lizzie had figured out not too long ago that she didn't want a man and never would. The concept of being gay was more than she understood considering how she was raised, and she had to spend time reading into it and self-evaluating. She knew the answer but refused to acknowledge because it would destroy her relationship with her family.

"When the time is right," she'd say, knowing that if she had her way she'd put it off until the day she died.

Instead, Lizzie grew to resent Mama, resent her town, resent her home. It made her bitter at sixteen, though most people assumed she was going through a teenage rebellion phase. The town gossips would speak a line or two about her in passing, but no one believed Lizzie would act like this forever. Give her a year or two. She'll find a man.

"That girl's always been hard-headed, and I reckon that ain't gonna change anytime soon." Mama would huff. Pa would give a gruff grunt in response, one that Lizzie could never tell was annoyance or agreement, never looking up from his newspaper. So when Lizzie began to hate the church, mostly because it represented what mattered to Mama but also because the teachings felt all wrong, she sought out God the only way it had ever made sense to her: in the hills, the woods, the trees. One day after a particularly loud fight over woodworking verses home economics at the local high school, Mama told her that men didn't want a wife that did woodwork, and Lizzie took off. There was a violent storm on the horizon, even at dusk Lizzie could see the dark purple clouds, the swirling wind giving her chills, the charged air giving her power. She saw God that night. She saw angels. She felt the earth. She understood.

It was a scorching and muggy Saturday afternoon, cicadas singing their screeching song as the heat formed wisps above the driveway pavement. Lizzie would never forget it because this was the day before the big church potluck. Mama handed her twenty-two course, brown potatoes, she counted as she peeled each of them, watching her brothers play football through the window.

"Mama," she was unsure how to continue, knowing that any blasphemous words could spark a stormy fight, "You think God is in nature?" She couldn't think of a better way to word her thoughts.

"Of course, Lizzie. God is everywhere." Mama didn't turn to look at her, instead focused on boiling and mashing potatoes, throwing a couple sticks of butter into the mixing bowl. Lizzie felt like she wasn't being taken seriously. She was tired of Mama acting like she was ignorant.

"Mama." She knew she was about to tread dangerous waters. She'd already gotten a heavy whipping for running out in the storm a few weeks prior. "You think God's ever made a mistake?" Lizzie was sure that she herself was a mistake. She didn't cook or sew, she hated school, she liked to fish and hunt, she didn't want to have children. She was obviously ignoring the problem at hand but at the tender age of sixteen she wasn't sure how to process that part.

"Lizzie don't be ignorant. God ain't never made a mistake. You know better, child." She didn't even sound angry, just generally annoyed. For some reason that made Lizzie's anger boil just beneath the surface.

'Keep it in, Lizzie. It ain't worth a whoopin.' She took a deep breath.

"What about ladies that can't have children? Or people that are starving? Or those gay people?" Her voice tensed a bit with her third question. Mama finally stopped what she was

doing and looked Lizzie dead in the eye. The copper-haired teen tried to read her mother in that moment but couldn't for the life of her understand.

"Sometimes God works in mysterious ways. Sometimes things happen for a reason. And sometimes," her tone darkened, "folks are just plain sinners. Does that answer your questions, Lizzie?" The last few words were pointedly staccato. Lizzie swallowed whatever else she was going to say.

"Yes ma'am." The two were silent for the rest of the meal preparation, and Lizzie went to bed that night feeling hopeless and alone.

The morning of the potluck moved in a blur for Lizzie: get up, bathe, Sunday best, do hair, grab food, Mama yelling it was time to go, squeezing in the tiny car. By the time they made it to church, she'd already decided to skip Sunday School again. She wasn't in the mood to hear about Jesus or God or any of that nonsense that made her feel more ostracized each day, so to the bathroom she went. As she sat against the wall and enjoyed the cool tiles on her arms, she thought about taking off her god-awful white sundress and become a gay woods hermit. At least then she wouldn't have to deal with people. She checked the time again, noting it was about time to go, brushed herself off and walked out. She was sure to avoid the mirror, too conflicted in her own life to want to see her reflection.

Normally Lizzie would have been in awe at the sheer amount of food spread across old wooden picnic tables in front of the small, clay brick church. Today her mind was elsewhere. She watched the children chase each other through the tall grass in the nearby field, mother's chastising their daughters about getting dirt on their nice dresses. She was so wrapped up in the scene around her that she didn't notice Mama walk up from her left side.

"Lizzie Bell!" The woman was seething, causing the copper-haired teen to jump. "Your Sunday School teacher asked me where you been? Wanna tell me why you ain't been goin to Sunday School? That's a lot of disrespect." Mama's tone threatened punishment, and Lizzie was scared but the breeze caught her hair. She remembered who she was and who she wanted to be. With tears in her eyes and a wavering voice, Lizzie face Mama.

"I don't wanna go to church no more Mama. I don't wanna worship your God." A few of the women close enough to hear the conversation gasped. She heard of chorus of "Lordy"s and "Bless her hearts"s. She didn't budge though, and she didn't break eye contact with Mama. When she saw the fire in Mama's eyes, she knew it was over. Lizzie Bell ran as fast as her nice Sunday shoes would carry her. She'd stashed a bag in the woods a few days ago, afraid this might happen. She had enough cash to get somewhere. She had enough clothes to last. However, she did not have enough courage to face her Mama after what just happened. As she wondered if she was making the wrong choice, she felt a strong breeze behind her, pushing her forward. God was with her, her God, and she was going to be just fine.

Fucked Up Like a Soup Sandwich

I was already having a terrible night. I'd just gotten back into town after a riveting weekend of meeting and getting dumped by my girlfriend, not to mention four plane rides and an 8 a.m. final exam. Rose and Shade were out of town, so we were already down two people which sucked because I was about as fucked up as a soup sandwich, whatever that meant. My coworkers said it a lot, a 'Shade-ism' that he picked up while in the Navy. Until this point, I'd never been able to fully grasp its meaning but tonight, as I dragged myself through the door and grabbed an apron, my emotional state the consistency of old hoagie dough, I could have perfectly defined it.

"Good news," Dee said as I quickly scribbled my name on this week's timecard. By the tone in her voice, I highly doubted that there was any good news to be had. "We don't have any subs tonight. However comma," another 'Shade-ism', "We're down the top oven." Shit. Like really shit. Of all the ovens that could go down, the top was one of the worst. For a bakery of our growing order, we were sorely lacking in ovens and losing one of the three large ones was going to put us at least an hour or two behind. I just wanted to go home and sleep off my problems. Instead, I allowed myself a thirty second glare at the aforementioned dysfunctional oven before washing my hands and reading over the order. Fourteen and one on hoagies, three focaccia, two ciabatta, my stuff wasn't bad but the full order of pizzas was disgusting to see. Not to mention a double run of wheat and like thirty Rosemary.

There's this fact that most people don't understand about small bakeries. Small bakery means small business. Small business means no corporate funding. I accepted this when filling out my application four years prior, but no one I discussed these issues with seemed to consider it. This often led to questions such as "what happens when something breaks?" or "where's your

proofing room?" The answers: we get shit done anyway and this entire bakery is the proofing room. Not only did one less oven mean less heat in the building to get the dough to rise, it also meant less space to bake bread. This meant we had to slow down the pace of product tonight so that no product over-proofed before getting to bake. Long story short: we were going to be here for-fucking-ever. At four-thirty we were already on wheat pans, which had just come out of the mixer. I assumed my position in front of the scale and began hacking away at the dough, letting the muscle memory of daily life bring me some form of comfort.

"I ordered you food," Dee told me as she came to help roll dough. "I didn't know what you wanted so I thought, 'What would help a Mara when her self-esteem is shattered? A salad.'" I appreciated the sentiment, so I gave her a weak smile. Cut the dough, 1000 grams, scrape it off, toss it to Dee, repeat. Familiarity let my mind wander, and it wandered back to her. We'd dated online for about three months before I made the plans to fly to Vermont to meet her and tour the local graduate school. That had been my cover at least. I had really gone for her.

I reached the end of the dough, the lack of things to scale jolting me from my annoying thought process just in time to hear a sappy R.E.O. Speedwagon song blaring from Dee's iPod. I gave her a "I can't tonight" look before heading to my purse and getting my headphones. I usually hated to tune out my coworkers. I found it was rude and made it hard for me to fully understand everything going on, but they needed me to work and to function I needed to not be the embodiment of 80s break-up songs. Once I got some Ninja Sex Party playing in my ears, I got my rhythm back. Next came white pans. I mouthed the words to "Peppermint Creams" as I pushed each scaled blob of dough onto the table to be rolled.

After about thirty solid minutes of silly music, I was able to rejoin the world around me, but I wasn't feeling much better. We had to stop after white pans and give the bread some time to

proof. With the top oven down, we needed to make sure that at least the basket breads had been run before the pans rose. I went outside for a quick cigarette and to pick at my salad.

"Hey, Mara. How was your trip?" I gave Kelly the worst glare I could manage while Dee jumped to my rescue.

"Don't even ask her. It's not good." I gave my boss a grateful look as I gave up on the salad. I just wasn't in the mood for food tonight. I did find a second cigarette to be a good idea and since it would be god knows how long until we could make the next dough, I had more than enough time for one. Dee took a seat across from me, taking a drag from her own cigarette.

"Things are a bit crazy, but would you like to go home? We're staffed enough, and you look like you need some sleep. Go home, chill out, push past this." It was nice to know after such a horrible weekend that I still had such caring people in my life. Usually, I'd be too stubborn to accept her offer to leave, but I was completely drained. I knew the oven would still be down on Wednesday, and I knew it would be a hot minute before I had an opportunity to process my feelings again. I went through the list of that night's tasks in my head, trying to see what all we had left.

"You sure? You guys got that other run of wheat? I know it likely won't come until after the last hoagie run."

"We got Mouse and Blade and Liam. Even Kim will jump over when she has time. I don't think it'll be an issue at all. Go home, Mara." With my mind still wrapped around bread and ovens and the meaning of my life I clocked out and went to my car. I smelled like sweat and sourdough, and my car interior was completely dusted with a layer of flour. With all the events of the weekend coming back to me I realized just how much I had missed home and that, for me, home was bread.

Lost in the Details

Rose was looking rather anxious and, though he was only trying to make her feel better, Shade was stepping on her toes. The bar was hot and smoky, but it was pouring rain outside leaving the pair soaked when they returned to the pool tables. Shade, looking a bit down on himself, flipped me some quarters to play a few Highly Suspect songs, but I'm a horrid catch so they clinked across the concrete floor. Not much later a lady and her man headed out of the bar, but the lady tripped. When the bartender asked if she was okay, she flipped him the bird for no reason. I saw Shade suddenly step up, preparing for potential beef. The bartender was his brother after all, and family disrespect is grounds for a fight.

"It's cool, Shade. Let them go." The bartender said casually with a shrug. Shade backed down and went back to pool as if the whole thing hadn't happened. It was hard to see in the dim bar light, but I could tell Shade was drunk as a motherfucker, which was fine. It was his birthday party, and he had a designated driver so he was free to go wild. Ironically, shortly after the rude ass woman left, the next song that came on was "Kill You". Shade and I made eye contact with dumb grins on our faces.

"You don't fuck with Shady. Shady will fucking kill you." Something about the expression on his face when he said it cracked me up.

"Didn't we do this like two weeks ago in the bakery while trying to scare off that dainty girl that hated rap and looked like she shopped at JC Penney?"

"Yeah man fuck that chick. I knew she wasn't going to last." We laughed a bit. I had no beef with the chick, obviously, but some people just don't make the cut. However, that's none of my business anymore, and I hated bringing up the bakery so I went back to focusing on the music while Shade went back to playing pool. Rose flicked quarters at him, trying to get his

attention. They all ended up on the ground. Irritated that Shade still wasn't paying attention, Rose picked up a small stack of quarters and pretended to chuck them at his ass. I had quite an issue with social smoking and each successive cigarette felt soft between my lips, growing moist from my chapstick.

Shade was having the time of his life, high-fiving everyone like some kind of hoodrat Jesus™. (Important Reminder-Merchandising rights for Shade) I'd spent most of the night sitting on my ass in some surprisingly comfortable flimsy plastic chairs. Our playlist had recently ended and whoever was picking music after us had terrible taste.

"Do you think they have post-modern jukebox in there?" Dee asked no one in particular.

"Do you have change for a twenty? I can go look, but I need a five first." I'd spent my last five on music as well. No such luck though. I went back to the pool table curiously touched a white cone of what appeared to be chalk. Its dust turned my hand white. Not-Bread Mom told me it was for less friction on the pool stick which was pretty neat.

As the night wore on and Shade drank more, I could tell that he was about as fucked up as the current GOP. A man finding water in the desert, Shade poured the drink into his mouth. It mostly went all over his face. It was getting time to leave and myself and the other designated driver split the people we were taking home.

"Thanks for sticking me with the drunk one," Dee whispered sarcastically as I watched Shade stumble into her car. She shot me a smile, and we all headed home.

50/50

Sedans ride much lower to the ground than SUVs do. After a year of owning her sedan, Mara still managed to run over and drag half the things she came across on the road. It's not that she didn't care. She swears that she's more than grateful for her parents' gift: a new used car. This one doesn't threaten to die every time she's on a hill. It's a nice change to accelerate without a death wish, but she kept messing up.

Why there was a railroad tie in the middle of her girlfriend's yard, Mara will never know. The why wasn't important. What was important was the fact that it was wedged under her car and no matter how her or Shade or Rose or Andy moved it, the rotting wood held firm to the underside of her car. It was happily getting acquainted with her muffler at this point, much to Mara's utter panic.

Pure meltdown. She was having a complete and utter meltdown. It wasn't just the railroad tie seemingly welded to her exhaust pipe, it was the fact that she was quickly running out of money. It was about the fact that she had no job and not much hope of finding one. She thought about her dreams and who she thought she'd be when she was just a bright-eyed little curious girl in uneven pigtails. And that was not twenty-five, unemployed, back and wrist and foot injured as she sucked down a cigarette and tried not to cry because she couldn't move her fucking car.

"Life never gets better than 50/50."

Her tire is stuck in the mud, but Shade thinks they can get this. She hits the gas again, praying to a god she's not sure if she believes in.

"You're allowed to fall. What makes you weak is when you don't get back up."

She feels the shudder of the wood being moved from under her seat. It terrifies her. How is she going to tell her dad she fucked this up?

"Will power is a hell of a thing."

The wood slides and Shade calls her out. She puts the car in park and quickly shuts it off. The six-foot stupid railroad tie sat free of her car. Shade and Andy shined their light to see the damage.

"You're good. Plates kept everything safe. Didn't even scrape the plastic."

She decided to take a look for herself. The damp gravel and gritty driveway dirt she'd traversed a hundred times stuck to her skin as she knelt on the ground. The silvery underside of her car reflected the phone flashlight, not a scratch in sight. She'd never seen the underside of her car. She doubted most people looked at the underside of their cars, but in that moment, nothing looked better than industrial automobile steel and an exhaust pipe that easily managed to hold on to its home.

Unable to hold back a sob, she continued to lay there for a few minutes. She was half eating dirt, but she didn't care anymore. Her car was fine. She was fine. Everything was going to be as unscratched as that car's guts because her car's real protectors were the friends that were now chucking the godforsaken piece of wood into the forest.

She'd never have to tell her dad, and she'll start with that small blessing.

Eulogy of Diana

I don't believe in the concept "never speak ill of the dead." I don't want someone to lie about who I was, especially if I wasn't around to call them out on it. By that logic though, I should be honest in life too. My family has always been a bit of a hot mess. We've seen our tragedies and our funerals and our fights, but as I got older, it became normalized. My aunt could be a real selfish bitch. I still loved her, but it was more than enough to get under your skin. She pushed my mom and my cousin and my grandparents around, came off as ungrateful for their help, and I hated that. My family offered different explanations over the years.

"She's just resentful because of the accident."

"Bedsore happen sometimes in paralysis."

"She wouldn't have been able to make it to the wedding. There was nowhere for her to cath."

"She's in the hospital with pneumonia, you know how the accident made her lungs weak."

"Maybe it's because she smokes a pack a day. I'm just saying that can't be helping." It irritated me. I saw it as her refusing to help herself.

The accident happened when I was twelve, and it began a long string of familiar struggles. She embarked on a business endeavor. I remember my grandmama making snide comments about it under her breath.

"I don't know why on Earth Diana thinks opening a club," Grandmama made a mockery of the word, "in downtown Nashville is going to go well. Lord, have mercy. I thought she knew better than this." I wasn't sure what exactly a club was. I knew it was a place for adults, but that was it.

I still remember the day of 'the accident' as my momma called it. It was 7 A.M. on a Saturday morning, too early for a sixth grader to be stumbling out of bed. Shoes on, heading to the car, the early morning chill of February couldn't permeate my droopy eyes. The car ride wasn't long, and my parents were talking in whispers. Momma was crying.

"Hospital."

"Diana."

"Accident."

A car accident? I wasn't processing it. No one I knew has ever been in a serious car accident. Maybe it isn't that bad. A broken leg? Cuts and bruises? What other kind of accident is there? Twenty-nine-year-old me with twenty-twenty hindsight wonders if more information and transparency from my parents would have better prepared me. Then again, what were they told on that frantic phone call? Were they told 'an accident' too?

Did you know you have to be fourteen or older to visit someone in the ICU? Something about emotional response and the serious nature of an ICU waiting room clashed with naive and curious children. There was a sign next to the elevator that clarified that rule. I pointed it out to my momma, but she wasn't paying attention. The shuffle of a family getting called to the ICU is like being a tourist at the Tower of Babel. No one knows what's going on, you're all talking over each other, no one is making any sense, and everyone has anxiety. By the time the elevator dinged on the sixth floor, I was awake enough to process information. The doctor met us in the hallway, not even sending us to a family room first. When the doctor is in that much of a rush, it's not a good sign. Doctors and nurses in trauma situations don't pull any punches. They're straight to the point before moving on to other families. Maybe that helps keep them from emotional exhaustion.

"She's got a five percent chance of survival. If she does pull through, she'll never walk again."

I heard someone scream. It wasn't until my grandmama shouted "Get her out of here!" that I realized the scream was mine.

*

I just made it back in town after the memorial service. I was exhausted, but my boss and fiancé made me make a therapy appointment. My therapist apologized, that generic 'sorry for your loss' tone that I was so tired of hearing.

"I printed you out a sheet explaining the stages of grief. They don't always go in this order, but it may help you to understand what you're feeling." I folded the paper into an uneven rectangle and shoved it in my purse.

"Thanks." But it didn't prepare me.

*

The ten o'clock news released the story that night.

"Diana Brown is in critical condition at Vanderbilt ICU."

I've never heard my momma curse as much as she did when she called the news station. The hospital had to put her under a fake name after that.

'The accident', as it turned out, was not much of an accident at all. At the end of the day, my aunt was shot for less than five grand. The only reason she didn't die on scene was because her neighbors performed CPR. My aunt's only daughter, Lisa, was in college studying sociology at Belmont. She had a full scholarship. Lisa witnessed the shooting. She called 911. I had been invited to stay the night with them. I always wondered if my presence would have made a difference. Would she have come home earlier? Would the shooter have tried again a different

night? Or would I have been like Lisa, screaming in the night as Diana's blood stained the condo parking lot? Asphalt is porous and lightens with wear and age. My momma said the stain lingered for months. They made sure I never saw it.

The next ten months were a blur of the new normal. Lisa dropped out of college, but she couldn't bear to be in the ICU. She passed out both times she went. My momma visited Diana every day. I measured the time that passed by the thickness of her pile of hospital parking passes.

"I think I'll make them into a collage when she gets out. I've kept all the notes and cards people sent, too."

I imagined a collage of white keycards with little directional arrows and timestamps all lined up on some poster board. It sounded as empty and sterile as the hospital felt. Momma never made the collage, but I'd bet anything that the sandwich bag of parking passes still lives buried in my momma's house.

*

"Anna," she said last month while we were on the phone, "Anna, I'm sorry. I was a bad mom that year. I was never home and always at the hospital, and you didn't have anyone to rely on."

"You did the right thing, Momma. You took care of your baby sister." I said it because I knew Momma needed to hear it.

*

There had been so many times where Diana "wasn't going to make it." First the shooting and then infections, complications, pneumonia. This went on for years, and as it did, she grew stronger, and we all began to heal. Each scare was waiting for bad news but praying for good. I still can't remember at what point my prayers dried up. It had been fourteen years, and my aunt

in a wheelchair was completely normal now. Sometimes when I was telling my friends about things, she said that made me mad I even forgot to give them context. 'My aunt is paralyzed from an armed robbery' was something my subconscious figured everyone was aware of.

*

It was my first day back at work since her death. After fighting with HR over bereavement, apparently aunts were not considered immediate family, I broke down less an hour into my shift. My supervisor Tomi pulled me into a private room, handing me the box of tissues and waiting for my hysterics to taper off.

"Grief never goes away, you just learn how to cope with it. I ain't stepped foot in church since my daddy's funeral eight years ago because me and God still got some issues we need to work out." Tomi's words have never left me.

*

'Hell on Wheels' is what Lisa started calling her, and Diana knew it too. She was a firecracker, the kind that sparkles on the street but leaves marks on the road until the city fines you. The kind that sparks a little too early and burns the piss out of your hand. I can't think of a single topic in the world that my aunt didn't have a strong opinion about. Sometimes I swear she argued just to elicit a reaction. Either that or her filter was no bigger than my pinky toe. I was hard-headed, self-righteous millennial. Like a hungry fish that cared more about its stomach than its life lessons, I fell for the bait every time.

We got into it one Christmas about taxes, something about Obama and tax returns and where the money was going. I tried to weigh in, and she nearly bit my head off.

"Well, your opinion is irrelevant. You barely pay taxes anyway."

Eyes closed, teeth clenched, mind racing, I thought of every hurtful response I could. All the ammo and frustration I'd ever had came to the forefront.

'What do you know about money anyway? My dad pays half your bills. You failed physics in college. You're mean to the whole family. You demand from my parents until my momma is nearly in tears.' I could've said a hundred things, could've ruined Christmas and started the family war of the century. I didn't. I couldn't. I went to the empty den and cried, trying to make sure my sobs didn't echo off the hardwood floors. The last thing I remember about that day is my grandmama chewing Diana out.

*

I went to the doctor on Tuesday since it was my day off. My throat had been killing me, and I know strep had been going around at work so better safe than sorry. At that point, I hadn't slept. It was 8am, and I was tired, drained, empty. The nurse swabbed my throat. I choked a bit and let it go, resting my eyes on the now crinkled paper of the examination table while I waited for the doctor to come in.

"Let me check your lungs. Deep breath, in and out."

I closed my eyes and breathed. An image of the ventilator forcefully inflating lungs flashed through my mind. The strep test was negative.

*

If you've stayed with me this long, you must think I hate my aunt. We fought, she was mean, she was demanding, I didn't understand a lot of what she did. Being so young when this familial disaster began jaded my view of just how serious the situation was. My parents wanted to shield me, too. I knew there was a trial, that people did this to her on purpose, that she was a target because of some person she refused to give in to. This wasn't just a robbery; it was some

assholes sick version of revenge. I didn't think about all of that growing up. It was too much for my mind to comprehend. I was distracted by the dynamic in front of me. Diana loved me, we just had so many similarities that it was inevitable that we'd butt heads. I wish I knew why I was so angry, so jealous. I wish I could go back in time and tell myself none of that mattered, but I was how I was. She was how she was. She protected me though, in her own way. She'd never let anyone hurt me if she could help it.

I had just ended a seven-year engagement. I usually found myself at Diana and Lisa's apartment after a breakup. They had lots of alcohol and were good at trashing men. I was sitting on her couch, furniture that had at one point lived in her club, contemplating the fact that I had wasted seven years of my life. The T.V. was on one of those music-only channels, and that stupid Taylor Swift song came on. It could've been any Taylor Swift song, but I can still tell you exactly which one it was. As I started to tear up, Diana rolled from the kitchen into the living room, arm muscles bulging as the sound of the rubber wheel squeaking on linoleum moved to the silence of carpet.

"What's wrong, little miss Anna?"

"This song is..." Snot was running down my face at this point. What an embarrassment. Diana didn't miss a beat. She grabbed the remote and muted the T.V. immediately.

"Shut up, Taylor! Don't worry about Taylor Swift; she's a bitch anyway."

It was the first time I'd laughed in over a week.

"Look, Anna. The best way to get over a man is to get under another one." Diana was dead serious. I didn't even know how to respond to that.

"Momma, please!" Lisa groaned, but we all laughed anyway.

*

I was home alone on the couch binge-watching Hulu. I'd gotten through most of the season already, shuffling restlessly under the microfiber blanket as I gaped at the TV. Robert Stack's voice echoes through the room.



"Next on Unsolved Mysteries, the story of a man who was brain dead and miraculously woke up, making a full recovery."

I've never hit the power button faster than I did in that moment.

*

October 6, 2018 was my bridal shower. Lisa brought her present to me as well as her mother's gift. The shower was baking themed. All guests were to give the host a recipe for me. Diana emailed hers and sent me a text instead of making it to the party. I was a bit grateful because I wasn't sure if her chair would've fit through my friend's front door frame.

"Hey Anna it's aunt Diana I thought you would call me after I sent the recipe to Jessica but maybe you did not get it. I am not going to be able to come to your shower today but I hope you have a wonderful time. I can't wait to see you in your beautiful dress at your wedding. I love

you  call me tonight and let me know if you liked my gift.  !!"

I never called her. Hell, I never saved her in my contacts. I always knew it was her though, considering her phone number was only one digit different than mine. She always introduced herself, too, which was weird. She had a very distinct voice, especially after the accident. It was a bit gravelly and strain. She often had to pause to get an extra breath in, too. She left me a voicemail after she sent the text that night. Months into the future I still don't have the nerve to listen to it. As ass-backwards as it sounds, I finally added her to my contacts though I knew I'd never hear from her again. Guilt seeped in.

"It doesn't look good, Anna." My momma's voice cracked. She'd been crying,

I left work to spend a night in the ICU with my cousin, so she'd have some company. It was early November, and on my drive into Nashville I watched flurries flutter past my

windshield, refracting the light from the streetlamps on I-24. I turned my music up, trying to make up for the fact that I couldn't see a thing, even with my glasses on. I went to see my parents first. The hospital wasn't far from them. Things had gone awry the night before, but for some reason, my mom had waited a day to tearfully call me. She managed to work up my anxiety quite a bit.

"It's not nearly that bad. Your mom is just tired." Dad handed me the steaming coffee mug while I raided their cabinets. I snagged a bag of German cookies.

"She said they were 'calling in the family'. Now I feel sort of bad for leaving with work when they were so busy." I hadn't wanted to work my shift anyway, but if things were bad then taking an absence at least seemed justified. Momma had a tendency to blow things out of proportion, though. Perhaps dropping everything while having limited information wasn't a smart idea.

I 'slept' in the ICU waiting room. Lisa was knocked out; she'd barely slept the night before. I couldn't get comfortable, even with the florescent lights dimmed. Instead, I stared at the ceiling and managed to dozed off once for about an hour. Animal Planet was on, but they were playing three shows on loop. At least I learned all about giraffe taming and how to do surgery on a blind tiger. Lisa snored on occasion. She'd fallen asleep with her glasses on. Things felt oddly normal, like a dream where you're in your house and everything is perfect, but the couch is on the opposite wall. Hospitals weren't foreign. Diana in the ICU wasn't foreign. There was just a feeling I couldn't place.

We got up around six the next morning while the nurses changed shifts because Lisa wanted the report from overnight. Everything looked good. Diana's fever went down, blood-pressure was stabilizing, and even the fluid in her lungs was mostly gone. The doctor said to give

it a day or two, and they would wean off anesthesia to do some breathing tests. She'd be home by the end of the week. Momma came up to the hospital to take my place around seven. I told her to call me with updates and headed back home to resume normal life.

It was Wednesday at 8:15pm when I got this bad feeling. I only had fifteen minutes left of lunch, but I hadn't heard anything from Momma that day. Hoping it was just the heebies or perhaps lack of sleep, I gave her a quick call.

"I just got off the phone with Lisa less than a minute ago." She was winded with that crack in her voice that she only had when she'd been crying. "They tried lowering the anesthesia earlier, and Diana was unresponsive. They're going to run tests tomorrow, but it's not looking good."

'It's not looking good'. The doctors always said that, and they were always wrong. I was uneasy but decided to head back to my desk. I gave Momma my supervisor's cell number since, for security reasons, my phone had to be off when I was clocked in. Tomi said that if she got a text from my mom, she'd pull me off the floor. That was the plan, and the night progressed. I was thirty minutes from my shift when another supervisor pulled me. Once again, I called my mom. Once again, the answers weren't definite.

"So, the doctor is saying that the EEG showed brain damage, but it didn't show how much?" I was trying not to raise my voice, but it was a losing battle.

"Yes. He said it wasn't good, but they are going to run more extensive tests tomorrow."

"Do these doctors even know what the hell they're talking about? Jesus Christ, it's bad then better then bad with no rhyme or reason. It's bullshit!" I bit my lip and clenched my fist as I paced the hallways in front of empty conference rooms. I was still trying to keep my voice at a reasonable volume, but my nerves were shot, and I was so angry though I wasn't sure at what. I

calmed myself long enough to finish the phone call, but not long after, I let myself cry. It was still possible for things to be okay. At least, that's what I told myself. The overnight supervisor got me stabilized, and I left for the night.

Thursday permeates my memory in flashes. I'm working three roadside cases, furiously notating each one before moving to the next. I wanted to prove that, despite my recent absences, I was a diligent worker. Tomi rounded the corner and makes eye contact with me. The rest was a puzzle of nonsensical time passage: calling my momma, anger, nausea, desperation to blame someone. Anyone. I managed to get off the phone before this pained wail ripped through me. It didn't sound like me which was fine because I didn't feel like me. I was standing in the middle of the hallway, sobbing grossly as coworkers passed, asked questions, hugged, but none of it felt real. Even recalling it now is like watching a movie of someone else's life. As Tomi hurried to get everything in order for me to leave early, and barely let me out of her sight, something changed. Suddenly, I was fine. It felt like my insides were vibrating and the lights were way brighter. When I spoke, my words felt echoed and distant. I wasn't upset. I didn't want to cry. I laughed at someone's joke about customers being the devil. I called a supervisor in my department Krispy Chicken instead of Kris. I was level.

"I'll be fine to drive, Tomi. I promise. I'm in a good place right now. I... I think I'm in shock." I didn't even feel like I was the one talking.

"You're definitely in shock, my Quiet Mouse. I just want you to get somewhere safe before that shock wears off." That made sense. Momma had told me not to come to their house tonight, so I planned on just going home. My fiancé was going to ride with me and keep an eye on me as well. I was in a daze most of the evening, playing games and joking online as normal

but still feeling removed from myself. I tried not to think too much about since I knew when I went back to Nashville, I would have no choice but to deal with it.

The call came in early Friday morning. I hadn't planned on leaving until around noon. Momma told me to come now.

"Lisa's been talking to Grandmama and Granddaddy. They're going to go ahead and take her off the vent." Mom's voice was strained; I could tell she'd been crying. Instead of sad, I felt nauseous.

"Today?" I sounded ridiculous, but I was still waking up, still reliving the last few days until my brain caught up with what was going on. When I sleep, I push everything down. The moment I wake up, my emotions and memories pop up like a trauma jack-in-the box. I sort through it all and remind myself that Diana was brain-dead. She was brain-dead, which meant she was dead.

"Yes. Today." She seemed exasperated. She was likely just as tired as I was.

"Let me get dressed, and I'll head that way."

*

The locket with Diana's ashes came in the morning of my wedding. It was a beautiful silver heart with a thick chain. I'd considered wearing a dainty necklace, something that wouldn't become a centerpiece of my neck.

The locket was heavier than I expected it to be. Lisa caught up to me as I was getting ready. She handed me a pair of silver earring, perfect matches to my new locket.

"They were Momma's. You should wear them today."

Despite the circumstances, despite the wounds of her death being so fresh, Diana walked me down the aisle in her own way.

*

It's strange to say goodbye to someone who is already brain-dead. You can hug them, kiss their cheek, hold their hand, and they're still warm, still flushed with color. It's hard to believe at that point they're just as dead as when they stop breathing.

"I said my goodbyes. I ain't going back in there. Diana is already gone." My grandmamma was stubborn and refused to make a fuss. She was a true Southern lady. My granddaddy seemed dazed, somewhat joking and conversing but also staring into nothing. No parent should ever outlive their child.

I didn't cry. I didn't cry in front of Momma, not in front of Grandmama and Granddaddy either. I definitely didn't cry in front of Lisa. I felt like I didn't have the right. It was my job to be strong for the family. I'd deal with it later when I had more time.

The first time it hit me was when I was walking to the elevators at the hospital. Everyone had left except Lisa's close friends. I just called them 'the bridesmaids' because the wedding was when I met most of them, and as nice as they were, I never interacted with most of them again. Lisa had gone to the parking garage to start her car while the bridesmaids and I gathered Diana's remaining belongings. As I rounded the corner, the doors to the ICU were open. There was a stretcher in front of Diana's room and two paramedics. It hit me then: she wasn't going to wake up. She wasn't going to come off the ventilator, open her eyes, and chew us out. This was it. The end. Trying to comprehend that someone is gone is the hardest thing I've ever done. I felt small, weak, lonely. Thus began a vicious cycle of craziness.

I spent the weekend with Lisa. We did what anyone would do in this situation: we drank and chain-smoked and even 'rolled a blunt for Diana'. It *is* what she would've wanted. After all it was pot from her purse. We told stories and laughed about the good times and the stupid times

and all the other times too. Lisa set up a little shrine on the kitchen table: at least fifteen framed photos of her mom surrounding the “Organ Donor” medallion. The guilt festered and churned in my heart.

“Do you think,” I murmured, drunk as I was, “you think she knew I loved her? Even though I didn’t come around much anymore? Even though we fought?”

“Yes, Anna. She knew. I promise you, and she loved you so much and was so proud of you.” Lisa was a little drunk, too. It had been a long night and, despite her statement, I still couldn’t find peace.

The most difficult part was the anger. I was so irrationally angry but had no outlet. No one was at fault for Diana’s death, not the doctors or the hospital or the family. Not even God. Instead, I took my anger out on everyone else. I drove recklessly, blew off my friends, yelled at other drivers, fought with my husband. It was the kind of frustration that just seeps deep into you, makes you want to scream and fight and destroy. It festered and festered until there was nothing else to do with it all and then... depression. Suddenly I missed the anger. I did nothing, felt nothing. I quit my job. I sat at home on the couch for hours at a time, sleeping, staring at the TV, ignoring texts.

We sat in a circle in Lisa’s living room after the memorial service. Lisa had Diana’s book, her master’s thesis, sitting in her lap. She was thumbing through pages and reading excerpts. I learned a lot about my aunt that day. I learned she stared the man who shot her in the face and called him out in the courtroom. I learned she was brave but so incredibly worried about being a burden. I learned she had felt trapped, and it made me wonder if now she had some sense of freedom. The guilt returned tenfold. All those times I had called her ungrateful she had been struggling with feeling like a tumor to the family.

“I’m sorry Aunt Diana,” I thought to myself, and as foolish as it sounds, I swore I heard her voice in my ear.

“It’s okay, Anna. I love you. I know you love me. Now quit your crying and go to school.”

Finally, peace.

Innocent Bloom

"Adam, did I ever tell you I'm the devil himself?" It's been twenty years since Kyle uttered those words to me. We were fifteen, and I was more concerned with the fear of being caught than his off-hand comment. I rolled off of him, the make-out mood completely ruined. Kyle liked to say cryptic things, but this felt different. He wouldn't meet my eye and his expression became troubled. There was a weight to his question, as if it was something he'd thought about for years or, in retrospect, something he'd been told for most of his life. Kyle was a lot of things that I could admit. He lacked sympathy and did not respond to human emotion properly; he was curious to a point that was harmful to himself and sometimes others. He liked the feeling of power and control. I didn't feel that he was evil, definitely not the devil. If I had to describe him in any way it'd be more like a reclusive mad scientist. The devil wanted more from people than Kyle did.

"You're not the devil. I don't even think the devil is real."

He laughed, a cold and sharp chuckle. His eyes were tired, his far off look hollow. I could still taste his lips on mine, but I suddenly felt as though I didn't know him at all.

"You're naive."

*

Kyle Venin and I met on the first day of kindergarten. My mom and dad, ever present and encouraging, kissed me on the cheek and sent me into the world of dinosaur backpacks, crayons, and Fruit Rollups. I was an ambitious little boy, always focused on observing and imitating those around me. My teacher thought I was charming, and the kids liked my magic tricks. The other kids would always let me pick snack first so I got the best one, and I got more Valentine's Day candy than any other kindergartener in the school. It worked well for me because I was a stage-

center kind of child. My dad was an entertainer and often did magic shows for all sorts of events. I was given the job to be the magician's assistant from the time I was old enough to walk, and even at the age of five I knew I wanted to be like my dad. The way the audience applauded and laughed filled me with a joy I found unrivaled.

Kyle was the only child in my class who didn't flock to me. He played alone or, in lieu of playing at all, simply watched our interactions from a distance and smiled. Most of us smiled a lot. The world hadn't given anyone a reason not to, but Kyle's smile was off-putting though. His brows would crease, and he'd purposefully show too many teeth, as if he was trying to purposefully look maniacal. It unnerved many of my classmates, but something drew me to Kyle. It was the distance, the fact he didn't act like any kid I'd ever met before. More than that, it was the fact that he rarely spoke at all.

It didn't take me long to realize he lived down the street from me, not in our neighborhood but in a large, Victorian house a few blocks away. I rarely saw his dad, but rumor had it they were insanely rich; his father owned some sort of biochemical research facility a few towns over. I never knew much about it, and didn't really care, so I never asked anyone to elaborate on what a biochemist even was. All I was told was that Kyle's dad was a very busy and important man. In my simple mind, that meant Kyle was lonely, and my dad taught me that everyone deserved a friend. Mom and Dad both raised me to bring smiles to the world through entertaining and friendship. It sounds corny now, but when I was young it was my life goal. When I saw that Kyle spent his time alone at school, I invited him to come play at my house one day. It was nearing summer, and we were almost done with kindergarten year. We played in the backyard with trucks and action figures. I sat in the sandbox, paint chipped off my red dump truck toy as I made a construction site. Kyle sat on the edge of the sandbox, avoiding both the

ground and the sand to the best of his ability. His nose would scrunch up whenever he came in contact with sand or dirt, and I frequently saw him flicking it off his finger as if it were some sort of deadly chemical. When he focused on playing, I noticed all his construction trucks were lined up in a perfect line. I went to move one, tried to be playful, but he smacked my hand out of the way. I left his trucks alone after that, scared he may get mad again. When things were going well with limited dirt and perfect order, Kyle was fun to be around.

*

I wasn't the only one who picked up on Kyle's oddities. There was a day in first grade on the playground where Kyle sat stiffly on the wooden bench as the nearby kids played a rough game of kickball. It had rained all week, and I was relieved that our class was able to go outside. My team kicked the ball out of bounds, causing it to splash through a murky puddle and roll, clumped with mud, to a stop at Kyle's pristine white tennis shoes.

"Over here!" Jack, one of the rougher kids in our class, yelled expectantly.

Kyle gave the ball a look of pure disgust before turning a similar expression on Jack, who cracked his knuckles.

"What are you some kind of sissy girl? Pass me the ball." I watched the scene unfold in slow motion. The playground grew silent, all eyes on Kyle or Jack. Kyle was on his feet instantaneously, his eyes narrowed, and his jaw clenched. He was careful not to step in the mud, and he definitely didn't reach for the ball. My heart pounded. Jack was taunting Kyle and not in a playful way. He goaded the smaller boy to try something. Most kids would have cried or maybe even tried to have a fistfight. But Kyle, with full force, used his body to slam Jack into the muddy grass. Suddenly, he didn't seem concerned with dirt or pain or fear. I was shocked that such a small kid could be so powerful, considering Jack was at least five inches taller and fifteen

pounds heavier than Kyle. The teacher pulled a growling Kyle off of Jack, who was crying because Kyle had taken a nice chunk of skin off Jack's forearm. As one of the teachers rushed Jack to the nurse's office, I watched Kyle lick the blood off his teeth and spit it out.

Looking back I probably should have seen that entire incident as a red flag, but I was young and saw the world in a hopeful light of a child. In my mind, Kyle only acted out because Jack provoked him. That made sense. I didn't think about the fact that Jack had needed stitches or that Kyle nearly got suspended. Instead, I put the event out of my mind and continued life as if nothing had changed. I do remember that Kyle was suspended for a week and showed up the following Monday bruised and no longer smiling.

*

Kyle had his first sleepover at my house over winter break in the second grade. We tried to get him to come over earlier in the year, but his father was wary. I recall hushed whispers between my parents in the kitchen before they knew I was awake.

"Something seems off. He wants a month of notice." It must have been a performer thing, but my dad rarely whispered softly.

"Hush. You're being too loud." I had to strain to hear my mother.

The rest of the conversation was too quiet to make out, but I picked up the words "Kyle," "over-protective," and "difficult case."

Three months and four long parental phone conversations later, Kyle was at my front door with a plain purple duffle bag and a playful grin.

"Adam."

It was odd to me the way he'd say my name. As young as we were, he'd enunciate and hold each syllable in a silky and sing-song voice. When I was eight, I found it creepy. When I was older it made me feel very different.

My parents took over from there, introducing themselves and offering to take his bag. He smiled politely at my mom, his eyes tinged with a hint of sadness I had never seen in him. By the time I looked back at him, the sadness was gone. To this day I still wonder if I imagined it in the first place. For all the trouble his father had caused over the sleepover, he wasn't there to drop Kyle off. Kyle also seemed to avoid my dad. It wasn't obvious, but Kyle wouldn't move within six feet of him. He did, however, warm up to my mom. He was polite and respectful, organizing the food on his plate before he ate it slowly as if every bite should be remembered. Dad and I exchanged a look and shrugged it off.

That night, my dad decided to show us his newest magic trick. Of course, I knew how it worked; I was the magician's assistant after all. I wanted Kyle to have an unforgettable first sleepover, and he'd never seen one of my dad's tricks before. Kyle was hesitant but agreed to watch.

Dad always started his routines with a classic trick; that night it, was the coin behind the ear. When he reached to pull a quarter from behind Kyle's ear, Kyle's posture stiffened. He bit his lip and flinched away the outstretched hand. I could tell my dad noticed Kyle's reaction, and he took a few steps back before Mom intervened.

"Kyle, honey, are you okay?"

"Just tired."

Kyle went to the front room to retrieve his bag and insisted on carrying it up to my bedroom. I followed him, carrying a spare pillow and blanket, which I slung onto my double bed,

wrinkling the formerly straight quilt. Kyle, on the other hand, meticulously set his bag next to the head of the bed, folded the strap, and pulled out what I assumed were pajamas. They were folded perfectly and sealed in a Ziploc bag.

"Why do you keep those in there?"

"Messiness is the root of chaos." He said it without even thinking. It was quite odd, and in retrospect I wonder if that was something his father had taught him.

As he went about his nightly routine, which was very strict, I threw on a wrinkled pair of pajamas and climbed into bed. Mom came upstairs to say goodnight while Kyle was still intensely brushing his teeth. Dad stayed downstairs. Mom had a sad expression, but she didn't say anything to explain why.

"Goodnight, Adam. Goodnight, Kyle." She made sure to say it loud enough that he would hear from the bathroom before she returned downstairs.

I was having a dream about dragons when I was suddenly jolted awake. Kyle was sitting straight up in bed shaking and sobbing. I got the impression he wasn't actually awake though.

"Kyle? Hey, Kyle, what's wrong?"

"Stop," he whispered, his voice pleading with a whine. I was worried and confused, so I reached out to try and shake him awake. It all happened so fast. I remember touching his arm and he screamed, not loud or high pitched: almost like a battle cry. The next thing I knew, he'd knocked me off the bed and onto the stiff carpet. I tried to yell but his hands were wrapped so tightly around my neck that I was certain he'd kill me. My parents rushed into the room, Mom pulled Kyle off of me and Dad made sure I was okay. Kyle's green eyes were wide as he kicked and screamed against my mother's hold, but my mom held tight, muttering comforting phrases

and stroking his hair. Dad was looking at my neck, touching the area where Kyle's hands had been to check for any potential bruising.

Kyle didn't come over again for a long time, but I continued to spend time with him at school. There were a few times I lied to my parents about going down the road to play with the neighborhood kids. Instead, Kyle and I would meet in the woods between our houses. It meant a lot to me because I knew Kyle hated the woods, too many bugs and chaotic vines, but he always met me there, never late and usually smiling.

"Adam."

*

Over the next few months, the two of us became dangerously close. Even with the large amount of time we spent together, I couldn't fully understand his actions, ambitions, or desires. I was obsessed with trying to understand him. It was difficult not to get lost in the exploration of each other. Sometimes when I would get ready for bed, I'd mimic his meticulous bedtime ritual that I observed the one night he'd stayed over. I wanted to understand how he thought, what it was like to view the world through Kyle's eyes. When my parents became concerned with my newfound routine, I toned it down a bit. They probably realized then that I was still spending time with him, but they never confronted me about it. Kyle and I were officially allowed to play together again by the end of the fourth grade.

*

At twelve, he started growing plants in his family's greenhouse. His father was strictly against visitors, but I remember going once to see them. He was excited because his plants were just starting to sprout. His dad was out of town, and he easily coerced the nanny to look the other way as he pulled me into the large glass building behind his house. Sunlight streamed through

the ceiling and sparkled against the white tile floor as Kyle pulled me into the back left corner. There was a small group of plants there, and, without any explanation, he began to water them and checked the leaves and stems for any tears. Kyle cared for those plants with a gentleness I didn't think he possessed, one he had definitely never used with a human being. Perhaps, I thought, Kyle was as passionate about gardening as I was about acting. The excitement in his eyes was palpable as it started to spread to me.

"What are they?" I tried to keep the fascination out of my voice.

"Foxglove, nightshade, hemlock," he paused and smiled, making me suddenly uncomfortable, "Bloodroot. Most of them are deadly."

The way he said it gave me chills, not from just fear, it was also a strange sense of excitement. My curiosity only grew.

*

I got my first part in the school play when I was in ninth grade. I was proud of it because it was rare for freshmen to get lead roles, and I was the deuteragonist. The play was odd, written by a local college student about the beauty of nature and the life cycle. I didn't really care as long as I could be on the stage.

I spent a lot of time reading my lines outside. Kyle sat with me one warm spring afternoon on a picnic blanket in the field not far from my house. The tall, yellowed grass swayed gently in the breeze, and the sky was the richest blue I'd ever seen. I was starting to understand the true beauty of nature, and it was exciting that I could relate to my new acting role. This particular afternoon I'd noticed the beautiful sunset-orange monarchs fluttering between the grasses and landing occasionally on the wild daisies and sunflowers that surrounded us.

"Butterflies have always fascinated me."

My statement seemed to stir something in Kyle. He put down his botany book and stood suddenly before disappearing into the grass jungle. Less than five minutes later he reemerged with a small pale blue butterfly, its left wing pinned between his thin fingers. To this day I have no clue how he managed to catch it. He joined me again on the blanket, the trapped insect trembling and struggling against his grip. I started to protest his treatment of it, but I was too eager to see what he'd do next.

"You want to study it, yes?" His question sounded innocent enough, and I nodded. Before I could stop him, he ripped off the right wing, still grasping onto the left. The powdery blue wing floated into the breeze as I stared at him wide-eyed.

"Kyle! Why-" But he ignored me and sat the injured butterfly on our blanket, nudging it toward me. It continued its struggle, desperately trying to regain its balance to escape. I was horrified, but somewhere under my fear I felt a surge of power. I fought it down.

"Are you scared of it?" He scoffed. I didn't know if he was referring to the insect or the dark desire for power rising in my chest.

"No, it's just cruel, Kyle. Look how scared it is. It can't even find its balance and-"

"Then tear its other wing off and balance it out."

"No." My protest was weak, and he knew it.

"Why do you fight your desires? Are you scared?" He repeated the question again, this time his tone mocking. I didn't want him to see my weakness. Though my head tried to convince me I was above this cruelty, I met Kyle's eye as I carelessly ripped off the other wing. The now flightless creature curled a bit, quivering.

I felt good.

I felt strong.

Kyle smiled at me.

*

He had never purposefully hurt me, but I could tell he'd thought about it. There would be a gleam in his eyes sometimes when he watched me move, a smile spreading across his lips. It was as if he wanted to take me apart and try to put me back together again. It was predatory and made my skin crawl, but also flattering in a way I can't explain. I used these observations to attempt to pull myself away from him, but because he never actually pounced I couldn't see myself as prey. I was a careless child, foolish. Looking back, my foolishness could have been what saved him.

After my success in the nature play, I was invited to join our high school's drama club. It was a dream come true, a way to start forming the necessary connections of show business. Though the club only met twice a week, I found myself spending more and more time with the members. We'd have fundraisers for the school's annual play, participate in community acting events, and sometimes just hang out and talk about our goals. I wanted to be on Broadway, but I had absolutely no talent with singing. I made a good friend with a girl who had the exact opposite problem. Anna had the voice of an angel, and she was beautiful too. Golden blond hair and soft hazel eyes that had the whole club entranced. She wanted to bring smiles to the world just like I did, and I had never found somebody who shared that level of passion with me. We became fast friends.

For a while, I avoided Kyle. He was displeased with me because of my sudden lack of free time, and he made it well known every time we spoke. It became annoying after the first few times, and I found myself avoiding his locker area and sitting away from him in our classes. He noticed that, too.

It was a month or two after Kyle and I had more or less stopped talking that I noticed he wasn't in school one day. The first two days of absences didn't concern me. He wasn't my best friend anymore, and I convinced myself I didn't care where he had gone. After a week of absences, I became frantic. I looked over at Kyle's empty desk constantly as worry ate away at me. The worry became so palpable that I started losing my appetite and went a few days without speaking to the drama club. I couldn't shake the feeling that whatever happened to Kyle had been my fault.

After I got home from school that week, I went straight to my room. I knew my parents were concerned about me. It had been a gorgeous few days, the spring weather not too hot but still warming the earth as the plants began to bud and the creatures emerged from their winter sleep. I normally loved this time of year. Something about the thought of replenishing and restarting was encouraging to me. Right then, all I could think about was Kyle. His cell phone was off, and I'd left him seven voicemails over the past three days. By Saturday morning, I couldn't take it anymore. I got dressed, skipped breakfast, and walked the few blocks to his house. In the past, the house had fascinated me. It had ornate architecture with a black and white color scheme that looked fresh out of *The Sound of Music* or something, and, of course, it was huge. That day, it seemed foreboding instead, as if the darkness of the house had overcome the vibrant white paint. My mind begged me to go home, leave this be; Kyle was fine, and it was none of my business. My feet carried me toward the door. It looked like all the lights were off inside as I rang the doorbell, and it echoed through the foyer. I remember thinking that no one was home before the door was flung open by a man I'd never seen before. He, like Kyle, had bright green eyes, but his were filled with barely contained rage. I took a step back trying to find my voice.

"Is... Kyle home?"

The man stepped aside, still watching me with disdain. Kyle was standing behind him. Just knowing he was alive filled me with relief, but Kyle wouldn't look me in the eye. He looked ill, pale and thin, but mostly scared.

"Now is not a good time, Adam. Please go home." Kyle's voice was feeble and so quiet it took me a moment to process what he said.

Before I could get another word in, the door was slammed in my face. It took me less than an hour to confirm that the callous man was Kyle's father.

Kyle came back to school the next week, wearing some rather warm clothes for the weather. It took a few days for us to strike up conversation again, but I vowed to myself I would do a better job of balancing the people in my life this time. I shoved the thought of his dad's fierce expression into the back of my mind.

In the weeks that followed I paid closer attention to Kyle, which seemed to boost his mood. I cautiously sought the reasons behind some of his recent actions: the absences, the extra layers of clothing, the less attentive personality. In retrospect, he likely used this extra attention to his full advantage, but I didn't mind. For the first time, I suspected that he might be legitimately hurting, and my desire to discover the truth behind that suspicion brought us that much closer as friends.

*

The expansion of our relationship really started around that time. It was usually fairly mild, we were so young, but hormones and curiosity were an intoxicating combination. I noticed a few things early on about Kyle's idea of intimacy. Everything he did was to push boundaries and observe the reaction. I often ended up confined in some manner, and there was always some

form of mild pain. I found that he really enjoyed biting. Considering what happened in first grade, I shouldn't have been too surprised, but he was always a bit cautious with me. He held back, his teeth never drew blood. Perhaps he was scared that I would push him away again.

With the sorts of activities we did together, I saw Kyle half clothed at least once a week. I never asked him about his scars. They were ethereal in nature, they blended into his skin so well. We spent so much time together that I could usually spot the new ones. I remember a lot of bruises, but glowering green eyes mixed with hungry lips swallowed the questions before I could ask them.

*

Anna, Kyle, and I shared the same class schedule in tenth grade. At the time it was a dream come true. Now I could spend my days with both of them, no making Kyle jealous or Anna confused. In her defense, Anna tried to be friends with Kyle. She would joke with him like she did with me, but he often ignored her. He didn't even attempt to cover up his disdain with the things she did and said, but Anna was determined to be a good friend.

In English class, Anna sat to my right and Kyle to my left. He had become increasingly distant, often zoning out during every class. Kyle was smart, though, and his grades stayed the highest in the class, so the teachers let his lack of attention slide. Anna was convinced she could help him by making him laugh. We were two months into the school year and were studying American literature. Mrs. Francesca was discussing the imagery in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge."

"Kyle, can you tell us what happened in this story?"

By the way he slightly jumped, he hadn't been paying attention at all.

"No." He shrugged.

"Are you paying attention?"

"Why should I? This story is primitive and honestly far below my reading level."

He'd never acted out this blatantly before. Anna was about to make one of her playful comments. I tried to warn her, I really did.

"Well, *someone* didn't get cake on their birthday." She looked so proud of herself though it wasn't much of a comeback. A few of the kids chuckled before everyone settled down again. Kyle was fuming, his intense stare locked on Anna. The rage in his eyes reminded me of his father.

Kyle hadn't stuck around after school that day, so I hung out with Anna. She was unaware of the weight of her previous comment and, not wanting to ruin her day, I didn't bring it up again. When I went to bed that night, a thought came to me. I'd never seen Kyle celebrate his birthday.

*

A few days later, I walked with Anna to her locker. Something felt off, but I couldn't put my finger on what. The closer we got to her locker, the more I noticed an odd smell. We gave each other a look and shrugged. Without thinking about it, she opened her locker as if it were any other day.

The rabbit was hanging by its right foot, the rope attached to the locker's wall hook. It was a small rabbit, white fur dyed with dried blood and entrails poking out of the slice in its stomach. 'Happy birthday' was scrawled inside her locker door in what I wanted to hope was red paint.

Anna screamed, tears running down her face as she ran to the nearest trashcan and threw up. The entire hallway fell silent as a few of the teachers ran to see the issue. I sat with her in the

principal's office until her mom came to pick her up. I knew exactly who had done this, but I had no evidence, so I didn't speak out. That was what I told myself at the time. The honest reason I never indicated Kyle was that I couldn't bring myself to throw him under the bus like that. No one knew him like I did, and any person I told would likely make his life more difficult. Our relationship became rather rocky after that.

*

It was a few tense months after the incident that Kyle and I actually started talking again. I never confronted him about the rabbit, and he never confessed or apologized. I wondered if things were getting rough for him at home since then because he'd been spending a large amount of time at my place lately. We were both on the edge of seventeen and, despite a number of rather tense phone calls between him and his father, Kyle had stayed at my house for about a month.

Dr. Venin received an opportunity to expand upon his research. It was a two-month project, and though Kyle hadn't gotten express permission to stay with us, his father reluctantly allowed it. At least that meant Kyle was not left unsupervised to his own devices.

I tried not to notice that, while Dr. Venin was away, no new scars or bruises appeared on his skin because I was still angry with him. I never told him that, but I hoped he could somehow sense my distaste for his father when I interacted with him. Those interactions began to wane as well, despite his new living arrangement. I'd spent most of my time with Anna instead. It wasn't long before I developed feelings for her. She made me feel fuzzy and happy, and at sixteen I had never had a crush before. This was all new and exciting and most importantly distracted me from sharing my house with Kyle. I guess I was just at a point in my life where I needed to be close to

someone that wasn't him, someone who was safe. Someone who brought out the positive side of me that I wanted to see.

"God, have you seen Anna smile? It's like she's brighter than the stars." I was lying on my bed pretending that homework didn't exist.

Kyle tensed on the beanbag, a botany book in hand. "She probably has less brain cells than my hydrangeas."

It was something about the way he said it without even looking up from the page. All of the anger and avoidance I had swallowed boiled to the surface and threatened to escape. I'm not sure if I was standing up for Anna or standing up to Kyle. My hands started to shake as I jumped out of bed and knocked the book out of his hand. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Kyle looked a little surprised at my actions, which made me pause for a moment. He was rarely surprised. This was the first time I'd confronted him about anything as well as the first time I'd raised my voice. There was a flicker of fear in those bright green eyes before his entire expression changed to one of complete apathy. I should have known that it was a ruse, but I was stupid and young and seething.

I noticed a little vial had rolled out of his bag, and I angrily snatched it up. The liquid was mostly clear, and there was no label on it.

"And what is *this*?" My tone was still barely below a yell, and his defenses set in.

"Nightshade," he said coolly. "Thought I could test it on your girlfriend."

He was goading me, but at the time I was just so furious. I punched him square in the nose, and he looked at me, shocked as blood poured into his hands. The way he recoiled when I went to hit him, and the look of pure betrayal on his face should have stopped me, but it was too late. That was the only time I ever saw Kyle nearly cry.

"Don't you ever show your face to me again."

He was gone within the hour.

*

I cut contact with Kyle after that. His presence at school was spotty at best, and when he was there, he never approached me. He'd been absent for a week. I was eating breakfast before some of my finals while Mom had the news on in the next room.

"Kyle Venin, adopted son of noted biochemist Leo Venin, was arrested today on charges of first-degree murder. Leo Venin was found dead on Monday in his home. An autopsy showed the cause of death was poisoning. Upon interrogation for the crime, Kyle confessed. The defense is claiming temporary insanity, considering an open investigation of child abuse and neglect. Reports indicate that the abuse had allegedly been ongoing for at least fifteen years."

II

I'd like to say my life had ultimately improved in Kyle's absence, that I was married with a happy family and stable job. Life has a way of being cruel to those that try too hard. While Anna and I both got accepted into New York University, she was blessed with luck that I was not. By the end of our four years, she got her first Broadway gig, and I got a teaching certification. I kept trying for a while, audition after audition, but after two years of no callbacks, it seemed pointless to continue. Eventually I got desperate, doing plays at the local library, participating in street performances in hopes some producer would happen to pass by, even auditioning for minor roles like 'third man in the crowd.' The library stopped inviting me after budget cuts, street performances became illegal with the passing of an anti-panhandling law, and I couldn't even manage to get a role as a member of a crowd. I spent hours staring in the cracked mirror, which the landlord refused to fix, counting the stress wrinkles and covering the storm-colored bags under my eyes. Was it my face? My smile? Would dental work help? Plastic surgery. God knows I couldn't afford something like that. Meanwhile, I couldn't so much as walk to the local diner without seeing Anna's bright face on a billboard. Her smile lit up her sky hazel eyes, which her high cheek bones accented perfectly. I thought about defacing them more than once.

Another side effect with our large gap in status and fame between Anna and me was the eventual demise of our friendship. Not only did she gradually quit calling, there were less and less lunch dates, less updates on roles and showtimes through excited late-night texts. I can't tell if it was my bitterness or her success that pushed us apart, but at this point, I hadn't heard from her in fifteen years.

My New York City apartment smelled like mildew, and the pipes screamed when I use hot water. Teaching doesn't pay nearly enough, and on my income alone, I could barely afford even this dump.

It had been raining for three days, and maintenance still hadn't responded to my four requests to fix the roof and window leaks, so I jumped when my phone rang and answered on the first ring. Unfortunately, cheap prepaid phones were all I could afford, and they worked about as well as my roof. I heard some static and a few distorted words before the call disconnected. The next time it rang, I just let it go to voicemail. At least then I'd be able to figure out who the caller was. In the meantime, I emptied two of the buckets for the third time in two days. At least the floors were dry.

After about five minutes of menial chores, I decided to go ahead and check the voicemail. It crackled for a moment before clearing up to a voice I easily recognized as my boss's.

"Mr. Bell, this is Principal Pattel with New York East High School. You've been an amazing teacher with so much enthusiasm and passion for your field. The students adore you. However, I must inform you of some changes to the budget. We have recently lost a great deal of funding, and I'm afraid theater is the first subject to go. I would be more than happy to give you a glowing letter of recommendation to any future application, but that's unfortunately all I can offer. I'm sorry, Mr. Bell. You are welcome to come meet with me if you have any questions."

I wish I could say the students' disappointment was my top concern, but I was upset for myself. I did everything right. I worked so hard. Why couldn't I succeed? Was it some ancestral curse? In a moment of rage, I frisbeed my phone straight at the cement wall. The rain, the leaks, the shitty landlord, the miserable job that I never wanted to begin with, and now my phone was

cracked. I told myself none of that was my fault. The world wasn't ready for me. Someone was out to get me. I wasn't the problem. Instead of calling the school back, I spent the night cleaning out my liquor cabinet and cutting up pictures of Anna until I finally blacked out.

It took over a week for me to call my mom. The worst walk of shame is moving back in with your parents after an unsuccessful career. Telling her that I failed made it real. It meant I couldn't tell myself it was some nightmare or pretend I was watching someone else's life. I hate admitting I'm wrong, even to this day, and I had to tell the two most supportive people in my life that I was wrong.

My life amounted to two large boxes and a duffle bag. I left as much as I could. I didn't want to keep reminders of my failure. I got home by dinnertime. My parents were quiet with gentle words and encouraging phrases. "This happens sometimes." "You'll get back on your feet." "We're still proud of you."

They meant well, but they were making it worse. They treated me like some traumatized child, and I didn't want to discuss it. They recommended therapy. They mentioned local job openings over breakfast. My dad rented me a small furnished apartment.

It had been about two months since my return home. My dad came home one night with a huge grin on his face, looking at me and nodding to encourage me to ask what good news he was holding in. Apparently, he had a friend that owned a local bank that was willing to give me a desk job. I couldn't bear to disappoint my parents any further. It wasn't their fault that the universe was determined to ruin my life. I took the job, no questions asked.

The next six months went by in a blur. I trudged through the monotony of an entry-level job by throwing back energy drinks in the morning and shots at night. The one stable thing theater school offered me was how to fake smile. It was the perfect lesson for customer service. I never realized that working in a bank was so grueling, but days began to blend together. Nights weren't much better. Any sleep I did get was filled with anxiety. Dreams about being late for work, dreams about getting rejections from auditions, dreams about my parents' disappointment. I was exhausted every morning, and it didn't matter whether or not I got sleep.

I was on my lunch break. It was a Tuesday, shortly after one o'clock, mid-September. I've made sure to burn it into my memory. I'd had too much to drink the night before, and my normal two energy drinks weren't doing the trick. It would've taken too long to get to my normal gas station, so I stopped at the nearest I could find. I heard his voice before anything else. He sounded far more docile than I remembered. I'd painted him in my mind as some evil scientist to help me disassociate from our time together, but Kyle was, in essence, a normal human being. He was also the cashier. He looked different, softer. His face was more relaxed, his smile more genuine than maniacal. He'd grown his hair out too. Long reddish-brown strands waved down his shoulders into pink tips. No more rigid, button-up shirts that were ironed for too long or plain brown buzz cuts that never framed his face. Kyle looked like a caring, mature, happy human being.

I hated it. A man that murdered his own father was somehow more at peace than me? The anger felt palpable, a high-pitched buzzing in my ear that I couldn't shake no matter where in the store I stood. Energy drinks be damned, I was getting the hell out of there.

I sat in my car for a full five minutes before I was able to breathe evenly. The more familiar emptiness and lack of purpose took its place, and I swore to never stop at that station again.

The next week at the bank dragged on even worse than before. Things always slowed down mid-month, and we went hours without anyone even using the drive thru. At my dad's insistence, I was drafting a list of places in my field to apply. I wanted to tell him to shove it, that 'places in my field' obviously didn't want me but arguing with him was exhausting. His overly optimistic attitude that had helped me through rough patches in childhood really grated on my nerves in the lack of success. He was exhausting, looking at jobs was exhausting, constantly refining my resume was exhausting. I was at a point where I just wanted to wallow in the misery of my shitty life and be left alone. Looking back, my sour attitude was a leading cause to my lack of success, but you know what they say about hindsight. What's done is done. By the time I crashed back into the reality of sitting in an empty bank, I realized I'd been absentmindedly doodling on my potential job notepad. The page was now filled with different fonts and designs of a single name: Kyle.

I'm familiar with silly schoolgirl crushes and puppydog love. I know what it feels like to have my heart flutter when a special someone brushes past me. My newfound fascination with Kyle was not about love. Just like our experimentation in high school, it was about discovery, power, and the fight for control. Kyle hadn't seen me that day at the gas station. I can guarantee on the list of things he thought about, I hadn't been a priority for years. I, however, couldn't get Kyle out of my head. I was convinced that if he couldn't be some demon that I could comparatively be an angel to, then he would be some key to unlocking any sort of excitement in my dull and empty life. For the first time in years, I thought about the butterfly, of the helpless

flutter of a single wing as it was ground, of the fact that it was mine and Kyle's actions that grounded it. In that moment when I had no control over my own life, I wanted to feel power over someone else.

A good friend once told me that people that craved control and power often went into management instead of turning to crime, but I don't regret my decisions. I'm sorry I hurt people in the process, but I'll never be sorry for the excitement it gave me.

A little over a week after the gas station encounter, I started stalking Kyle. I didn't intend for it to lead to stalking. It started with me going to the gas station, parking a way away to not raise suspicion. I was trying to build up the courage to go inside, strike up a conversation, ask how he'd been, but I always talked myself out of it. At first, I'd go on my days off, hang around for maybe an hour, lose my nerve and head home. Then I started to get a feel for his schedule. I notated the days he worked, when he got off each evening. I changed my schedule at the bank to match Kyle's schedule. Every day that he worked, I was there. I watched him clock in, eat some soggy excuse for a sandwich halfway through his shift, take the trash to the dumpster at night, turn off the lights, lock the doors. There was a fairly busy strip mall across the street that I watched from, and my generic black sedan blended into the sea of shoppers and diners. I was as invisible as I'd become in my actual life.

The Kyle I remembered was sharp and strategic. He would observe his environment, gauge the reactions of people around him before acting accordingly. That was the main reason he was able to elicit such a strong reaction from people like Anna. He studied her until he knew what the precise amount of trauma would be needed to get his point across. The dead rabbit had been a message: I won't stop here. No one that intelligent could be unaware of my presence.

Kyle knew I was there. He let me keep watching because that's what he wanted. This was a game of chess that he didn't intend to lose.

Kyle had this beat-up old Volvo. It was dark blue or, if you included the rust, a patriotic red and blue. There were at least three evenings where the car wouldn't start at all. On those nights, he'd walk half a mile to the bus stop. I thought about getting his car towed, forcing him into a fit of anger, forcing him to confront me, but I had to remember the game. Being hasty in chess often led to a loss.

The consequences of my game with Kyle bled into every aspect of my life. I drank less, which was a positive, but I also garnered a number of tardies at work. My sleeping schedule was completely out of whack, and even when I tried to sleep, I thought about nothing but Kyle and my next move in the game.

Kyle's normal shifts were Sunday through Thursday from 2 to 10:30 P.M. He always arrived at 1:30 and took his lunch at precisely 5:45. I worked at 7 A.M. and, after starting the game with Kyle, was unable to consistently make it to work before 7:30. I didn't care much if I was honest.

Sunday, November 5 at 10:45 P.M. was the first night I followed Kyle home. I remember because the streets were nearly empty. There was a presidential election the next day, and every yard had at least one sign. I never paid attention to that stuff. Didn't really care, but I found myself wondering if Kyle did. Would he vote the next day before his shift started? Who would he vote for? I drove under the speed limit to make sure it wasn't obvious I was following him. I wondered what his home looked like. An apartment? A rented house? Did he have roommates or live alone? I could've asked, but this was far more exhilarating. I felt like a predator studying his prey. Every time I learned a new fact about Kyle, I felt nothing but euphoria.

Kyle eventually pulled up to what looked like a brick hut. It couldn't have been any more than 650 square feet, and it was in a relatively secluded neighborhood. I noticed that there were no porch decorations, no political signs, no indication that anyone even lived here. There was no garden. I became irrationally angry. Who took botany from Kyle? Who took his greatest joy? No wonder he was so normal looking. Someone sucked all his individuality out and turned him into some kind of robot. Work, eat, sleep, stay under the radar. Kyle deserved better. He deserved freedom, and I wouldn't fail him like I had before. Once he was safely in the house and the neighborhood became silent, I turned around and headed home.

The next day when I called to take some time off from work, my boss fired me. I had become "unreliable", accumulated too many absences, showed up late too many times, whatever. I tried to be angry, but I hung up on him instead. I had better things to do than waste away at a desk anyway. If the universe was determined to deal me crappy hands time and time again, then it was time for me to take things into my own hands. I put what little I had in storage. Thankfully, my apartment was furnished, so I didn't even need a moving truck. I mailed the office my thirty-day notice. I put necessities in my car. I withdrew every bit of cash from my bank account. On the afternoon of November 15th, I threw my cellphone down a storm drain and parked across the street from the gas station. I watched and waited. Like clockwork, the sign flipped to closed at 10:30. Floors mopped by 10:45. He counts his drawer, walks out the door with two bags of garbage. Lights off, doors locked. Time to make my move. I drove over while he made his way to the dumpster, turned my headlights off, and parked next to his car. He jumped when he turned around and saw me sitting on the hood until he squinted, and recognition flashed over his face.

"Adam?"

I swung the tire iron into the back of his head. Not too much force, but enough. I managed to catch him before he hit the ground. By the time I laid him on the sidewalk, panic set in. I began to question myself. What the hell was I doing? This wasn't like me. This wasn't the person I strived to be, but what could I do? Wait for him to wake up and apologize for hitting him with a blunt object? Tell him it was just a joke? No. I was committed now, and I needed to move as quickly as possible. My trunk was already open. In went Kyle and the tire iron. I looked him over again. He looked so peaceful, and my resolve to save him overtook me again. Before pulling out of the parking lot, I slashed one of his tires so his coworkers would think he walked home.

After I started the car, panic set in again. Where the hell was I going to take him? I'd given up my apartment, and the walls were far too thin there anyway. His house was the first place people would check for him, so that wouldn't work either. I needed somewhere private, somewhere that nobody dared to get near. I turned a few roads, driving in random directions until I found myself driving down his old road. The house had been abandoned since the murder. The town viewed it as cursed or haunted or something evil. As overgrown as the surrounding vegetation was and as distant as all the neighbors were, this place would be perfect. I found a place in the brush to hide my car. It was scraped up, but it wasn't important anymore. I found a window where the boards were loose and used my trusty tire iron to pry them off. My duffle bag had a roll of duct tape. I should've used it at the gas station, but I was in panic mode. When I finally popped the trunk, I gripped the tire iron. I expected him to pop up like a jack-in-the-box, try to fight me off. I had to be prepared, but Kyle was still unconscious. At first, I was afraid I might have killed him, but a check of his pulse and the slow movement of his chest confirmed he

was okay. One, two, three, four, five times I wrapped the duct tape around his wrists and ankles before I slung him over my shoulder and climbed in the window.

For being abandoned for ten years, the inside of the house didn't look half bad. Initially, the darkness was so pitch black that I could barely see a foot in front of me, so I pulled out a crappy flashlight from my bag to look around. It was still furnished, though most of the furniture was covered in plastic. The integrity of the furniture after so many years of neglect was questionable at best, but I laid Kyle on the plastic-covered love seat. It may have been white at some point, but it seemingly got overtaken by settled dust. I accidentally kicked a nail across the floor as I move to get a smaller chair. The heavy metallic skittering across stripped wooden floors made me jump. My heart was racing. I had never been so on-edge in my life. Every little sound startled me; every distant light was someone coming to interrupt my plans. Despite my fears, no one ever arrived. Instead, I sat a few feet away from Kyle and watched him sleep. I had no idea where to go from here, but I'd never felt happier or more at peace than this moment staring at Kyle in a moment of peaceful vulnerability.