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A House of Gravel

By

Andrew Whitmarsh

A Creative Writing Project
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of English and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts
at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2021

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A House of Gravel

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ABSTRACT

“A House of Gravel” is a short-story cycle exploring the relationships between a family of four and the hardships wrought by those relationships, as well as their own individual hardships. Partially, “A House of Gravel” explores a microcosm of trauma handed down through three generations, explored in highly-varying degrees: the grandparents, the parents, and the children. Importantly, this exploration takes place primarily from the perspective of the youngest generation, rendering the traumas of their parents to scraps and guesswork, and the traumas of their grandparents’ to further scraps handed down through their parents. Additionally explored is the nature of dependency as each member of the family suffers through or leans on both healthy and unhealthy coping mechanisms, ranging from substance abuse to relationships with others. The family within “A House of Gravel” is one stuck in the constant throes of miscommunication and clashes, but must nonetheless learn to live and deal with one another. Their story is told in the form of the short-story cycle, a series of works that can operate individually, but also function as a single, greater whole, each story gathering greater meaning via their connections to one another. This choice of genre reflects the status of the family unit itself as a whole comprised of individual parts. Specifically, in regards to “A House of Gravel,” the structure of the cycle is reflective of the piecing together of the family member’s histories and characters, resulting in various conclusions being reached, but just as many unknowns and threads remaining unresolved.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY	III
ABSTRACT.....	IV
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	V
NIGHTS THAT NEVER HAPPEN	1
A STEP BESIDE MYSELF	22
FLAGS	49
CANDLELIGHT	78
VANISHING POINT	102
RUM AND SMOKES	128
THE SHORT-STORY CYCLE: NOSTALGIA, FRAGMENTATION, AND UNIFICATION	155
WORKS CITED	172
BIBLIOGRAPHY	174
VITA AUCTORIS	176

NIGHTS THAT NEVER HAPPEN

I don't want to be here.

The thought popped into my mind as I pulled into that gravel driveway, my wheels cruising to stop over the rocky bits and pieces. I used to love that sound, the soft crackle from turning rubber on gravel – used to mean home.

And right now, in this moment, as I stared up at the two stories of country farmhouse I grew up in through my windshield, it still did mean home. Only in the physical sense of the word though. Only in the sense that, at one point, my body resided behind these walls.

Pocketing a pack of cigarettes and lighter, I leave my purse in the car. Jack had really let the place go since I last stopped by, just after Mom passed. Even from here, the chips in the wood siding, the splotches and patches from flaking paint seemed impossible to miss. Judging by the fact the grass only came up to my ankles and not my knees at least meant he mowed once and a while – emphasis on the while. Certainly hadn't paid attention to the garden lining the porch though, nothing but weeds there.

To call it out of character seemed an understatement. "A man proves his character through the things he makes and the care he gives them," he said once, like some two-bit wise man. I imagine he had a little pocketbook filled with phrases like that: *Surface-level Sage Advice for Clueless Fathers*, or something like that.

Even the front steps, whose installation I could still remember, had begun to rot and become loose. The threat of their collapsing and eating my leg whole with jagged, wooden teeth if I dared to step upon them seemed very genuine.

I remember the sticky heat of summer dripping down my skin. Emily had recently turned two, maybe three. Grade one sat just on the horizon, only a few weeks away – I guess that would

make me about six. Mom had made pink lemonade, extra sweet. Emily and I slurped up the sugar through straws from the porch as Jack put together the steps under the muggy Ontario sun. Mom leaned deeply into a chair, sunhat on, pointing one of those shitty, little, plastic fans towards her face. The repetitious bang of Jack's hammer rang about in my skull: iron hitting nail, over and over.

"All right, that's enough of that," Mom eventually let out, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand, "just about ready to die out here."

But I wanted to stay, wanted to watch, so I whined and pulled pointlessly against her hand gripped around my arm. And just before she finally tugged me inside, Jack wiped his brow of sweat and grinned up at me –

Leaning against my car, I traced my fingers along the branches of the cherry blossom tattoo that snaked up along my forearm, past the inside of my left elbow.

"Stop that," I told my fingers.

I rested control of my hand back from my unconscious habit. My hand shook as I held it up, but only slightly. Then, I pulled out a cigarette, lit it up, and took a long drag. When I held out my hand again, the shaking had stop.

"Let's not go reminiscing now," I mused aloud, "nothing but bad fucking juju there."

Might as well take a minute, I thought as I huffed through my cigarette. Had Jack heard me pull up? Had he heard the telltale car wheels on gravel? The windows all seem covered in dust, impossible to see through in the light. Still, I could practically feel him, judging me from behind the makeshift two-way glass.

I stomped the cig into the ground and shoved a second in my mouth.

Shit. Why did I agree to this?

“I’m worried about Dad.”

The words tumbled out of the speaker almost the instant I picked up the phone. I had just finished my shift at Trudy’s, ready to nap the rest of the day away, when I heard the ring: *Emily*.

“Hello to you too,” I responded.

“Yes, sorry, hello. But I’m serious, Sarah. I think there’s really something wrong with him.”

“Is it that he’s old and miserable? Might go a ways to explain –”

“Har, har,” a strain underlined her voice.

“I’m just saying –”

“You do know what serious means, right? Want me to look it up quickly? I’m sure I have a dictionary around here somewhere.”

“Ok, fine. What is it?”

“Last night, I called him. Could barely get a whole sentence out of him, slurring every other word.”

“So, he got drunk, fail to see how that’s cause for concern.”

“Yeah, then I called this afternoon: still blasted.”

“And you’re calling me, because?”

“Can you check on him?”

A deep sigh rattled out my mouth at the thought –

“Look, I wouldn’t be asking this unless I really needed it. I know how you feel and I’m sorry – really, I am. But I’m in this gallery in Detroit for two more days and I can’t just leave and –”

“And?”

“Sarah, please. You’re like an hour away from him. At least check on him, if not spend a night or two. Jenny and I will get there as soon as possible; two days hopefully, three tops.”

I said nothing.

“Please?”

“Yes, fine, whatever. I’ll check on him.”

Next thing I knew, I had downed an espresso from a 7/11, bought three packs of Pall Malls, and headed out towards the 401. To go back home. To see Jack.

I bit lightly at my third smoke. The taste of ash had set into my mouth, locking itself into my spit, rubbing my tongue with its stale, chalky taste. It would stay there for a while; I didn’t bring any mouthwash.

After one final drag, and with the cigarette half finished, I let it drop, extinguishing it with a stamp before burying it underneath gravel. I spit on the ground, but the taste remained.

“Well shit.”

I could already feel my fingers trailing along my tattoo. They stopped once they reached the inside of my elbow and began to tap, began to search.

Finally, I braved the steps. They creaked and yelled, but held my weight. Just barely.

“Do you want a beer?”

“I’m good. And it’s a weekday afternoon.”

Jack already had the fridge open before I finished my sentence. I sat at the kitchen table, hands clasped too tightly with one another in my lap. He led me into here after opening the door, saying nothing beyond a surprised “oh” and a “come on then,” as he began to walk away.

I couldn't stop my body from cringing as I entered the kitchen. Dishes piled high and scattered about in the sink, a crooked cupboard door loosely hanging onto its hinges, the flap of the garbage bin held slightly up by trash about to overflow, and a fridge filled with lunch meat, mustard, and beer. Not in complete disrepair, but teetering on the edge between messy in a "ha-ha" funny way and messy in a "holy shit I might be depressed" way.

I'd seen this kitchen before, or at least a variation of it, in my own apartment. Seeing it here made my stomach bubble and pop.

"Yeah, I suppose you're right," he said.

Then he reached into the fridge, grasping hold of a can of Pabst. It opened with a pathetic hiss as he walked over to the table, already chugging by the time he plopped himself down at the kitchen table. His face contorted as he sat, his lips puckered, and he let out a tired grunt. His arthritis probably.

"So, uh," he stammered as he picked at his moustache, almost fully grey and far too bushy, "Going well? Doing well?"

"It's ok. I'm working now, at a diner. Keeps me busy."

"Oh, yeah? Busy is good, keeps you, uh... busy."

"That's what I said."

"Right. Yeah. Of course."

He nodded, his mouth slightly agape as a bit of spit slopped out the side of his mouth. His fingers lazily tapped away on the table. How much had he already drunk today? I figured Emily overreacted a bit, worrying a little too much. She normally did when it came to him, treating him like some little precious Bambi ever since Mom died, visits masquerading as check-ups, one after another.

But, sitting across from him in this mess of a kitchen as he drank a beer with a shaky hand, sporting a pallid complexion and smelling slightly of what I could only describe as dusty jerky –

Well, I couldn't really find in me to disagree with her worry.

"This, uh, this is new," he said as he pointed towards his forearm, inquiring about my tattoo, "I like it."

My fingers had traced their route again, didn't even notice my wandering hands – probably what got his attention. I felt a craving rear its head once he pointed it out. I wanted another smoke. Scratch that, I needed it.

"Yeah. It's a," I trailed, "a reminder, I guess."

He grunted, took another gulp, then sat there. I clenched my hand into a fist underneath the table, the only thing I could think of to stop my wandering fingers.

"You ok, Jack? Living alone out here and all."

He blinked at me.

"Oh, that? It's, uh, you know. One day at a time, right?"

"Right."

We sat there for a while. Jack, occasionally drinking. Me, continuing to hound for a cigarette, desperate for an escape, my fist clenching tighter and tighter. Should I say something? Once a quiet like this sets in, it seems almost more awkward to break it, to acknowledge it. Maybe better to let it sit and we could pretend we're just two people comfortable in one another's silences.

The cracking of joints as he stood put an end to that possibility –

"I'm going to go watch some TV."

I blinked at him, opened my mouth, closed it.

“You can join me, if you like.”

What, I wanted to say. *You don't want to talk?* I wanted to question. Even though I didn't really want to talk either.

Then he left me in the kitchen. Within seconds, my hands had already slid down my pockets, grabbing hold of a pack and lighter. Popping a cigarette out of the pack, I massaged it between my fingers, listened carefully: floorboards creaking, a dry cough, the squeaking of that old recliner, a grunt, a short pause, then distant sounds and voices sputtering out of the television. Bingo.

My feet carried me as quickly as they could towards the window. Hooking my fingers underneath it, I lifted up – only to come to a sudden jam after a few inches.

“When's the last time he aired this place out,” I muttered, “Christ.”

Forcing it a bit more, I nudged it from side to side, jiggling up a few quarter-inches at a time until the window finally pushed up with a painful squeak. In response, my body clenched up. I inhaled and strained to listen. He probably hadn't heard. Still, the thought of him walking in on me, even if he didn't care –

I let out a shiver, exhaling in a sputtering gasp. I ran a hand through my hair: inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale. My hand shook as I brought a cig to my mouth, lit it up. The shaking began to calm with the first drag and disappeared by the third.

But I could still feel something pinching inside of me, poking at me, taunting me. A cigarette, after all, isn't what I really wanted. It's sweet enough, sure: a pleasant substitute.

What I really wanted tasted so much sweeter. So much fucking sweeter.

After my second cigarette, I'd calmed down enough to clean up the kitchen. I started with the dishes, scrubbing away food grime and stains under the hot water.

The grime on a few of the plates had sat so long they'd become tough little food-hills, practical extensions of the plates themselves. After spending five or so minutes only to half-clean one, I recalled a lesson from high school: a myth about a man pushing a rock up a hill, over and over again.

Those plates I resolved to throw away, in part because I didn't want to be like rock-man and partly because Jack didn't need so many damn plates. And maybe if he had so few of them, he'd actually clean them once and while.

"Sorry Mom," I whispered, "you probably picked these plates out."

"Yep, and they're good plates too," she'd say, "No sense in throwing them away. Just got to put in a little work Sarah, a little scrubbing wouldn't kill you."

Then she'd admonish Jack, give him a passive-aggressive pat on the head, chiding him for the mess he's made of things, tell him to take out the trash. Then she'd pull up her sleeves and set to scrubbing the plates until they sparkled. Afterwards, she'd point up at the loose cabinet door and Jack would get to work fixing it, then she'd mention how the steps out front almost killed her, so he'd get to work on those too.

"This house is like a well-oiled machine," Mom had said once. A quick visit, of course, like all my visits home. Mom had just made us tea, lit a candle in the den that smelled of pumpkin pie. Jack kept his distance that day, moving around the house like a camera-shy ghost, trying his best to stay in my periphery; a habit he settled into when I came around.

It's not like I ever told him that's how I liked things, but he must've picked up a memo somewhere along the line; maybe in the way my eyes narrowed at him, or by the slight shake in my hands, or how my breath would catch and sputter.

"Your father – the second something squeaks, something feels wrong, he's already got his tools out. Just in his nature to fix things," she continued.

But Mom's dead. Jack's now a sad, old, drunk excuse for a carpenter who couldn't even keep a house in running order. And, to be honest, the last thing this house could ever be called is well-oiled, much as Mom liked to believe. Something needed fixing? Sure, Jack did that well enough once Mom clued him in. When it came to everything else outside of that though, when it came to being a Dad...

As I took the garbage out front, I found the bin outside already propped open, stinking like hell. Pushing the bag in as deep as I could, I pulled my shirt up to cover my nose and began wheeling the bin.

Flashes of *that* night swirled around in my head as its clunky wheels crunched over the gravel. Honestly, by now, what actually happened between us at his workshop seemed almost inconsequential. The coming home seemed far worse. The long, silent, night drive from Dad's workshop: the first time I felt that pinching inside of me. Truthfully, that feeling had probably built for a while: something between him and me had just never clicked, not fully. Taking me out for ice cream seemed like the only thing he really knew what to do with me. Otherwise, we shared fewer and fewer words the older I grew and when I got too old for ice cream, I became little more than a person in the same house. It's like we spent so long building up a wall made of wood and dry grass between us, then along came a match.

At the time, I wished we could drive forever, that the road would never end and that I'd never have to hear the sound of crunching gravel. But I did eventually. Mom stood on the porch, glass of wine in hand, smiling at first. Once I left the car, her eyes pinched, her mouth hung open, like I short-circuited her. I kept my head down, barreled past her and a barrage of questions: "what're you doing here," "shouldn't you be at Maggie's," and "what happened?" I scrambled up the steps, practically tripping over myself, "Sarah," she called, voice cracking. Before I could slam my door, the beginnings of an argument already rushed up the stairs, nipping at my heels.

"What happened Jack?"

"What happened, Christ, Sue –"

"Did you do something?"

"What? Did *I* do something? That fucking girl –"

I threw myself onto my bed, face first, covering my head with my pillow. I cried into my sheets to the tune of muffled voices coated in anger, only falling asleep once my body wrung itself out into painful, tearless spasms.

The next morning, I woke up, expecting a torrent of accusations, a wave of yelling. Instead, I found Jack and Mom in the kitchen, business as usual, and a plate of hot pancakes waiting at the table. Mom put down a bottle of syrup in front of me while Jack downed a mug of coffee.

So, I ate, slowly and trying my best to be quiet. When Jack stood up, I felt a flinch rush out from the pinch in my chest, spreading out to my toes and fingers. I shut my eyes and prayed that he hadn't noticed. He left and I continued to eat in silence with Mom.

After a few minutes, she came up from behind and kissed me on the back of the head, whispering that “It’ll all be ok, dear, you can talk about it when you’re ready,” I froze in her arms as she wrapped them around me. Something in my gut bubbled up. Mumbling an excuse, I tore myself from her arms, stumbled my way to the bathroom.

Then, I fell to my knees in front of the toilet as a wave of mushy pancakes, vomit, and regret splashed out from my mouth. And for a little bit, the pinch lessened.

Weeks went by and life continued on. But I couldn’t: something had lodged itself inside of me, just beneath my heart. It whined and stomped its feet, rattled against my ribs. At first, I dreamt the night over and over again: Jack’s wide eyes, his raised fist, his stomping feet. That didn’t last long, but still the rumbling didn’t stop.

Eventually I approached Jack in the kitchen making a cup of coffee. I trembled, took a deep breath, having psyched myself up for nearly an hour beforehand and let out, “I think we should talk about what happened,” in a breathless burst.

He blinked once, twice, brought the cup to his lips.

“It’s ok,” he said, “I don’t think we need to. Your Mom and I already talked it over.”

Then he left me in the kitchen, everything I had planned to say, wanted to say, dead before leaving my lips.

I wheeled the overflowing garbage bin to a stop at the side of the road, stretched my body out. Barely even got here a few hours ago and already my fingers are sore, my legs ache. And that pinch, like a sharp little pebble sitting uncomfortably close to my heart – only growing bigger.

How's that cliché go? Absence makes the heart grow fonder? Only makes sense it'd work in reverse. My fingers twitched and wandered, already demanding they be sated by another hit or two of nicotine.

As I reached for another cigarette, my hand wrapped around an empty pack that crinkled in response. Sighing, I walked to my car and rummaged through my purse. As I grabbed hold of another pack, I spied something else beside it: the envelope. I took it out with a careful touch; its edges worn, but looking fine otherwise.

For Emily stared up at me in Mom's shaky cursive. The blue ink had started to fade; I traced it softly with my fingers. Flipping it over, I tugged lightly at its flap, held down by a flimsy piece of scotch tape. It wouldn't take much to open it again, to get at the letter inside.

"Better not," I mumbled, pushing past the temptation and returning it to my purse. Shutting the door, I ripped open the pack, letting its plastic wrapping drop to the gavel. Seconds later, I took a deep drag, letting the smoke cool my insides.

Halfway through the cigarette, I called Emily.

"Sarah? Dad ok?"

I felt a twinge of guilt at the sound of her voice; pushed the thought of the letter out of my head.

"He's old, drunk, and tired. The kitchen's a mess, took me over an hour just to clean some dishes. I've barely even seen what the rest of the house looks like. Basically, yeah, you're right – something's wrong."

Silence.

"Emily?"

"You can stay, right? We can try and get there tomorrow."

“I don’t know. Being here right now, even without staying the night. It’s just, you know, a lot.”

“He’s our Dad.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“Sarah –”

“Look, I gotta go. I’ll – I’ll let you know.”

I hung up without giving her the chance to push it any further. Already figured she’d ask me that. Always Daddy’s little girl, spent all her time in his workshop. Now she’s worrying over him like some reverse helicopter-parent.

I noticed a dull orange spread across the sky, the sun beginning to set. As I smoked, I twirled my foot around in the gravel, listening to the bits tumble all over another, watching the plastic drown in an avalanche of pebbles.

I really hate that sound.

Inside, I hovered at the entrance to the den. Though the sun hadn’t fully set, the room sat in darkness, bar the light from the TV. A heavy blanket, a new addition to the room, blocked any light from seeping in from the room’s sole window.

Jack, illuminated by the light of *The Simpsons*, sat in his recliner; the only thing visible the back of his head.

“Jack?”

He said nothing.

“Jack,” I said with a raised voice.

He turned to face me with a squint.

“Oh,” he slurred, “It’s you. I thought you’d gone. Come on in, sit a while.”

Great.

I walked in and sat myself down on the couch. Jack faced the TV once more, one of his hands grasping a fifth of Morgan’s, cradled in his lap. Beside his seat sat a bin, almost filled to the brim with beer cans.

“Sorry about the mess and all. Don’t know if I said that earlier. So, sorry, I guess.”

“It’s fine.”

He blanked out at the tv for a while, laughing a little too hard at times, other times swaying back and forth with his eyes shut. Screw this, not sitting around to watch this pathetic one-man act play out –

“Look, I –”

“Why’re ya here anyway,” he exclaimed suddenly, his voice cutting through mine, “I’m not mad or anything. Just, you don’t ever come. Not since we went through Sue’s things.”

He took a hearty swig from the bottle, paused, then took another. Then he let out a stream of coughs, hacking spittle out all over the floor. Even from here I could smell his breath, stinking of rum. My fingers began to do their thing.

If his everyday involved this kind of drinking, his liver deserves a damn medal for what it’s gone through. I’m surprised it’s still chugging along.

“Just busy, I guess. You know how life gets.”

He snorted.

“Yeah, life...”

Sniffing, he wiped his nose with the back of his hand.

“You’re clean, aren’t you? You never call, never tell. Thought Em might call me up one of these days, say they found you dead in an alley, stripped naked or some shit. Worries me sick.”

I feel the pinch tighten, swallow hard in some useless attempt to relieve the pressure. The tip-tap of my fingers along my skin feels like heavy footsteps inside of me, thundering in my ears.

“Yes,” I squeaked out, “almost two years.”

He lifted the bottle with a laugh. Some rum splashed out, landing on his lap. He swallowed as much as he could in one large gulp, then let out a long, exaggerated “ah.”

“That’s my girl! Strong, like your Dad,” he let the bottle drop back down, then slumped over, his enthusiasm plummeting, “just how I raised you ...”

I grabbed my wandering hand with the other and grasped tightly, my nails digging in. My breaths sharp and shallow; the tension in the air clawed deeper into my throat with each breath in, but refused to vacate as I breathed out. I felt about ready to choke.

Jack, a drunk, old man, just about seventy, slumped over a bottle in his recliner: my father.

He let out a burp, then a cough. His limbs fidgeted this way and that, head turning over and over, unable to settle. He seemed like a baby throwing a tantrum in a crib. The bottle slipped from his grasp, spilling what little remained of its contents over his lap and onto the recliner. His hands patted around, as if in search of something, eventually grabbing hold of the arm rests. With a grunt, he pushed himself up, his knees shivering as he stood –

Before falling back down into the chair. He let out a guttural sound, halfway between a grunt and a swallowing of spit.

I felt like I'd wandered into some terribly offensive circus show. *Come on, come all; witness the disgusting half-man, half-walrus blubber and flab his body around.* A laugh bubbled in my throat, but I pushed it down.

I felt the pinch lessen a little, my breathing slow down. I let go of my hand and they both drop lazily to my side. Neither tried to make a move anymore.

Jack, meanwhile, calmed.

"Sarah, honey," he mumbled out, "can I get a little help?"

I swallowed, exhaled.

"Help?"

"Out of this chair, up into bed. Think I, uh, might've drank a bit much."

He rolled his head to face me; his eyelids fluttered, stuck in an awkward, stumbling game of tug-of-war between staying open and shut.

"Yeah," I replied, "I guess I can."

Getting him out of the chair came surprisingly easily as he grabbed hold of me to pull himself up. Once standing, the shake in his knees had disappeared. Then he leaned into my shoulder, I guess to keep himself steady.

The stairs came as the true ordeal. His feet began to drag after a single step and I had to pull him close to keep him standing, his arm draped over the back of my neck. His body felt wooden beside mine, like some comically oversized puppet with me as its puppeteer. Slowly, we shuffled our way up towards the landing, stopping to re-adjust every other step to make sure he wouldn't slip out of my grasp.

“I can’t see,” he said with a few steps to go, his voice sad and tiny, “I can’t see, Sarah. Everything’s black...”

“It’s ok. Just the rum, Jack. A few steps now, you can do it.”

On the final step, he lost his footing. All the air in my body sputtered out as his hands clamped down tightly; a wild, instinctive grab to stop himself from tumbling backwards. My legs screamed and burned as I dug in my heels. My hand slid painfully down the railing before I clawed into the wood, latching myself tight. With my other arm wrapped around him, feeling about ready to snap, I yanked him up onto the landing and he stumbled forward, stopping himself against the wall.

“Jesus Fuck Jack!”

He said nothing as I crawled up onto the landing, sitting down. The bottom of the steps seemed almost miles away from up here. Falling backwards like that, from this height? I shivered. After picking some pulp out from beneath my fingernails, I stood up –

“Come on then,” I let out, still catching my breath.

Once I opened his bedroom door, he tumbled from my arms, landing face-first in his head. My nose crinkled, the room smelling stale and sweaty, reminding me of the locker room after gym. Looking like a fish flopping about on dryland, he re-adjusted himself, pushing the covers to the end of the bed, before sinking his head into his pillow. I stepped over a pile of clothes on the floor, turning on the bedside lamp. A bin filled with beer cans sat beside the bed, alongside another empty bin with a new bag.

“A puke bucket, huh? At least you’re prepared.”

He mumbled as I grabbed hold of the blankets, pulling them over his body. Then, I sat down on the edge of the bed.

“Guess I just tucked you in. Bit weird, if you ask me.”

On the bedside table sat a framed picture of Mom in a blue dress and sun hat on a rocky beach; I picked the photo up. She had a great big smile, no doubt aimed at Jack behind the camera. Backdropped against a setting sun, water spraying up from a wave caught in mid-splash behind her.

“Mom’s pretty young here, when’d you take this?”

Jack mumbled again, indiscernible.

“Yeah, figured.”

As I returned the picture to its spot and stood up to leave, Jack grabbed hold of my wrist with a soft, lazy grip, eyes half-shut, and mouth agape. He cleared his throat, made a noise that sounded like a toad croaking. Then –

“I’m sorry,” he said

“It’s fine, just a little sore is all.”

He shook his head, his eyelids drooping to a close.

“No, no. Not that. I – I’m sorry.”

The pinch returned. I swallowed and felt a lump settle in at the bottom of my throat.

“Sorry for what?”

His grip, limp and weak already, slackened. He began to snore. My vision blurred. My head raced, it pounded: *sorry for everything, sorry for that night, sorry for pretending it never happened. Sorry for what, sorry for what. Sorry, for what.*

I lifted his hand up off mine, exhaled, stood up, inhaled, walked out the room, exhaled, down the stairs, inhaled, let the railing guide me, exhaled, stopped at the den, inhale, turned the television off, exhaled, made my way outside, inhaled.

Once my foot hit the gravel, I let out the stale air of the house in a long, single gasp. Then I breathed in the outside, took in the too-tall grass, the distant smell of manure, and the cool, comforting night. My body shook. I wiped at my eyes, nose, and cheeks with my scratchy sleeve, wet with tears and slimy snot.

“Screw you,” I yelled out into the night, “that’s not fair. You don’t get to do that.”

As I fumbled for my pack of cigarettes, they fell to the ground, taking me with them, my knees and palms absorbing the gravel.

“You don’t just get to get blasted and apologize and make everything ok and simple. You – you –”

I slammed the sides of my fists down into the gravel.

“You ass,” I whimpered out, tears dripping out onto the gravel. As I went to wipe my eyes, I stopped; a few pieces of gravel stuck out of my hand, only hurting once I noticed them.

My hand stung as I grabbed hold of the pack. The gravel felt like tiny needles as I pushed myself to my feet my feet again. Digging out the pieces that had cut into my skin, I limped over to my car and leaned against it.

Pushing a cigarette out of the back, I grabbed hold of it with my teeth. With a shaky hand, I brought my lighter to the tip, hissing out as I applied the pressure.

I considered going in for some bandages and peroxide as I puffed. But my heart gave a ba-thump at the thought. I considered leaving, finding a motel or something, then imagined my palms gripping the wheel, feeling like a porcupine against my hands.

“God damn it, Emily. You bitch.”

At a nub, I flicked the cig to the ground, stamped it out, and grimaced as I opened the trunk of my car.

“Sorry Emily,” I muttered, “I didn’t actually mean that.”

Opening the emergency kit, I grabbed hold of a blanket. It felt scratchy and uncomfortable.

“Ok, maybe I did a little.”

Crawling into the backseat, I flinched as my palms and knees scrapped against it. Bundling up the blanket into a ball, I laid my head down, its wool itching at my scalp.

Tomorrow, Emily would – hopefully – arrive, then I could go back inside with her. I could face Jack again and we could continue to pretend. Pretend that that night all those years ago – and now, this night too – had never happened.

Always easier to pretend, ignore, and push aside. Wouldn’t want to complicate things with a painful truth.

A STEP BESIDE MYSELF

Earlier in the day, it rained. A hard, pelting rain that sounded like little bouncy balls slamming themselves against the window of Mom's hospital room with reverberating glee. It hadn't lasted long, not even half-an-hour.

I like those rains especially. Not suffering their wet wrath outside, but in the safe, dry indoors where I can hear the thunder the pellets make as they smash against walls, roofs, and panes. They're sorta like the cat in the hat: coming so suddenly, making a great big mess of things as water pours and sloshes every which way, then –

Poof, gone as quickly as it began, the mess down the drain.

Mom, on the other hand, she doesn't like the rain. She doesn't like much of anything these days though, judging from the random grimaces she makes, her deep long sighs, getting wheeled around everywhere, the sad few minutes she spends on her feet with a walker.

“Shut the shades, Sarah, hunnie. And turn up the TV,” she said, her voice soft and crumply.

Sarah complied with a smile, shutting out the rain with the clanking of plastic and Jerry Springer. Then, she sat back down beside Mom, caressed her arm and asked if she could get her anything in a sing-song tone: a water, a juice maybe, a fluff of the pillow, another blanket.

Mom shook her head, thanked her, then leaned back into her two pillows, letting them swallow her head.

I, meanwhile, leaned against the wall near the door: the other daughter. I would've liked to sit down, my body sagged, my feet like cinderblocks, consequence of my smoking so much. Two choices presented themselves; a shitty little plastic chair, and an armchair Dad had

commandeered as his bed. But both sat beside Mom's bed and sitting in either meant talking to her or a very awkward silence. Or at least a more awkward silence.

My foot tapped impatiently at the floor; my fingers bounced against my waist. With Dad here as a stop-gap, I could manage. But he left to get some Harvey's after a rare craving hit Mom. We all knew that she wouldn't actually eat the burger he'd bring back – she'd take a bite, maybe two, before turning up her lips – but he had to go anyway. This is how this shit goes: the dying get what they want, even an absurd Harvey's craving.

Once the rain stopped, Sarah stood up –

“I'm going out for a smoke,” she said.

“Be back soon,” Mom responded softly, her eyelids fluttering.

As Sarah walked out the room, I followed: my exit needed no declaration. I wondered if Mom would even notice my absence. Probably not.

The sun shone brightly outside, as it did after a rain, catching and reflecting off all the moisture in the air and the puddles on the ground. That thought sounded artsy and pretty, but I hadn't a clue if, scientifically, that's how any of it actually worked.

A light rainbow hung in the sky. I didn't even want to try to think about the science behind that shit.

I followed Sarah a good few metres away from the hospital entrance, around a corner, away from all the non-smoking signs. Lighting up a cigarette, she took a long drag and puffed out the smoke, waving the smoke away from her face with her free hand.

“You're not fooling anyone,” she said.

I tilted my head, raised my brows –

“Not trying to.”

“I’m not talking about Mom, you make that plenty clear,” she snorted, “you smell like a skunk went skinny dipping in perfume.”

I pulled at my shirt, brought it to my nose, inhaled. I could smell the perfume, some cheap plastic-rose smelling thing that I picked up at Shoppers for \$7.98 on clearance. The weed, I couldn’t smell. The possibility of nose-blindness hadn’t escaped me; I had done more than my fair share of the stuff since getting to the U.

“I don’t smell it.”

“Yeah, well,” she dragged, “I do, and I’m sure Dad does. And if Mom’s senses weren’t completely shot, she would too.”

I could feel the wet ground taunting me; I would love to lean against the concrete of the wall and slide on down till I sat. The prospect of a soaked bum however, stops me. Maybe if I had a change of clothes, but –

“Are you listening?” Sarah snapped out, “you could show enough respect to not visit our dying mother stoned, you know. Not like I’m just noticing now by the way – pretty clear the last two days.”

I felt my body cringe, tighten up, my heels dig into asphalt.

Sarah wore two, long sleeved sweatshirts, giving her a slightly puffy appearance – I could see the collar of the second poking out around her neck.

It’s that liminal period between summer and fall, the kind of weather where you waffle between pants, shorts, or maybe even a skirt or a dress to capture that last dying vestige of a warm day as the leaves start to turn orange. It’s a little too cold in the morning, a little too warm at midday, so you also have to consider maybe starting off the day with a sweatshirt or a hoodie,

but you have to carry it around or sweat like a pig once the heat creeps up. Either which-way, you're left looking like a dumb-ass.

But two sweatshirts? It's way too warm for that right now, no matter what time of day.

"And who do you think you're fooling, huh? I thought you were supposed to be clean. You look like a twig underneath all that. And your face, like the dark side of the God damn moon underneath those lids. At least use some concealer. And all this smoking? Need some kind of fix?"

A wave of embarrassment and disappointment welled up inside me, ready to smother me. Yet I was a step beside myself, out of sync, like being live on the radio or the tv with a delay in case anything unwarranted happens: "You think Mom and Dad are disappointed in me? The fuck you think they think of you." But the delay's too short and the producers can't cut me off before my colourful language reaches the sensitive ears of the children and the morally outraged.

Then there's the wave, washing over me and pulling me down into the murky depths of my head. Like my brain has clued in that I've done something stupid and the only response it can think of is to shove all the rest of my stupid into my face with a smug smirk and a "lol, look at this shit."

I slide down the wall, stop just short of the wet ground in a squat. The memories pop into my head at random, like the time I farted real loud in class in the fifth grade and the snickers that followed. Or the numerous times I've waved at a stranger waving at someone just behind me, their muffled laughter as I passed. Or when I tripped over myself walking up the steps in the lecture hall, in full view of at least a hundred other students.

Can't forget when I kissed Denise in the bathroom during the ninth grade, how that jerk peeping from a stall tattled, and the face that Mom made at me later as she hissed at me between

gripped teeth. ‘It isn’t right’, ‘not my daughter’, ‘I expect better’, and her shaking hand as she popped two whole gravols into her mouth. Or all the other girls I’ve kissed, or tried to. The one’s that Mom didn’t know about, the ones I messed up all on my own. Like Abigail, my first University crush, who kissed me after too much tequila because ‘maybe Katy Perry is on to something’ or Farrah, who had a too-nice personality and pushed me away as I leaned in during a study sess paired with a bit of wine.

Sarah continued to smoke, drag after drag after drag. After a spit, she stamped her cig into the ground, letting out a sigh –

“You should use Febreze, at least. Or any kind of air freshener really; it’ll kill the smell. That perfume just mingles with it.”

She left, but I sat a moment more. A cloud up above shifted, and a sudden slice of light bounded off a puddle, driving itself into my vision.

It’s a neat image. My fingers rub together, antsy for a brush: a puddle reflecting off the world up above it, a muddied reflection. I wonder how far I could take something like that. Maybe it’s a bit clichéd, still, I like it.

Rubbing the spots out of my eyes, I stood up with a stretch and turned the corner.

The hospital entrance taunted me: I imagined a cackling laugh as the automated revolving door went ’round and ’round, daring me to enter. Going back up meant dealing with Mom. And now Sarah. I kicked at a rock and it skittered across the ground, landing in a patch of weeds jutting out between the cracks of the sidewalk.

Then I turned around, pulling out my phone. I left a text for Dad first: *not feeling hot, heading home*. A simple excuse.

After calling a cab, I paced back and forth down the sidewalk, reading through Jenny's messages. Five of them since this morning. *I'm here to talk if you need me, always, I'd love to hear your voice*, one says, *a little pick-me up*, reads another, followed by a picture of Charlie stretched out on her back, caught in mid-yawn. Then, an hour after that, *an extra little pick-me up ;)*: my face heated up as I see the accompanying photo and I jammed the phone back into my pocket.

The thought of calling her caused a guilty dread to rise in my throat. Mostly because I knew I couldn't hold off against the biting need to get high. She'd know from my voice, right away and I knew she wouldn't mind, but –

“You could show enough respect to not visit our dying mother stoned,” Sarah's words echoed in my ears. I slotted them into Jenny's mouth, hurt at the thought of her saying something similar, even though I knew she never would.

“You fucking idiot,” I muttered under my breath, “you burnout, you stoner, you piece of shit.”

“It's a new development. Well, more new-ish, at this point.”

“I don't understand what that means,” Dad's voice cracks up at me from my phone.

I'm in Jenny's apartment bedroom, a place that exudes cool, fresh-out-of-university-girl energy with its assortment of empty coffee cups dominating her bedside table and clothes haphazardly all over the floor. Atop her dresser in the corner sits a practical forest of flowers and cacti, large and small: each nestled in a unique pot, positioned to catch the most of the morning sun's rays. In another corner stands a cat tower, well-worn by her calico Charlie, whose flab juts

slightly off the perch she's curled up in. A strip of RGB lights, set to red, sits above the bed frame illuminating the room in a bloody hue.

Jenny herself sits on the bed, cross-legged and in her underwear, her eyes following my own half-naked body as I pace around her room.

"You know, like, new, but not new-new. Like new enough that I haven't told you yet, but also not so new that it's starting to feel like the norm."

Jenny giggles at my rambling nonsense, mouthing something at me. I can't make out the shape of her lips underneath the dark red light, but I shush her all the same and mouth back *you, stop*.

"Now I really don't get it. Can you do a favour for your old man and translate a little? She your girlfriend?"

Jenny tilts her head, purses her lips in a sad pout, and places her hand to her breasts in mock offense. She mouths, with ample exaggeration, *me, stop*, she shakes her head, *never*.

"You're not *that* old."

"Oh, I am that old. Believe me."

She bites her lip at me, starts to lower the left shoulder-strap of her bra, intent on giving me a show –

"Uh, one sec."

I flip her off (she laughs), grab a bath robe to cover up my own body, slide my feet into some slippers, then walk out onto her apartment balcony. A warm breeze snakes by me, tapering off into a slight chill: one of summer's last gasps.

"Sorry about that," I say as I lean on the railing.

"So..."

I hear sirens in the distant, catch the blinking lights of a plane passing overhead.

“Yeah, she’s my girlfriend. But like I said –”

“It’s still new – yeah, I caught that much. She make ya happy?”

“Happiest I’ve felt in years,” I pause, “Does saying that make me a cliché?”

“Does being happy make ya a cliché?” He counters.

“In this generation? Yeah. But I guess that doesn’t matter.”

Then, he lets out a deep sigh. It’s not like I didn’t see this coming, why else would he call so late, practically midnight. Still, I couldn’t help but run with the “how’re ya doing” he gave me when I picked up. It felt far better to talk about nice, happy things and how well I’m doing and about Jenny and not about –

“It’s your Mom,” he finally says, “She had a fall. So, we got some tests done, some scans... I think it’s about time for you to come down, stay a bit.”

Not talk about her. I tap at the balcony railing. Deep breath in, deep breath out.

“Ok. I’ll see about catching a train. Tomorrow maybe, or the next day.”

Dad continued to say words. All stuff that likely mattered. But my mind had already latched onto the joint in my purse and forgetting myself in Jenny’s arms.

I feigned sleeping-in the day after, a way to avoid catching a ride with Sarah to the hospital. She lazily knocked on my door a few times and sent some texts before giving up. Taking her advice however, I smoked up, rummaged around the house until I found some Febreze, sprayed down, and tossed it in my purse for later.

I go to the hospital at about noon. Chillier than the day before, but no call for rain – still, I brought a hoodie.

Inside the room, Mom slept as *Wheel of Fortune* droned on in the background. Sarah flipped absently through some magazine, whose cover made mention of some illicit love affair involving the royals. She opened her mouth as if to say something, but then just returned to her book, lifting it up in an exaggerated motion to cover her face. Just above the edge of the magazine, her brows tilted downwards, her forehead crunched up.

She's smiling, must be. I felt stupid for even feeling bad to begin with. *You piece of shit. You dumbass.* She's got skin like iron after all. But still. *God Damn it.*

Dad, meanwhile, stood up to hug me with a smile.

"Feeling ok, Em?"

I opened my mouth, think to say *why wouldn't I be*, and question his question, but something in my head catches me. The text. I sent Dad a text. A tinge of guilt pinged in my head and followed throughout my body after a delay.

"Yeah, I'm good," I sputtered out, "just had a headache yesterday is all."

A snort from Sarah, an exaggerated crinkling as she turned a page. Dad didn't seem to notice.

"You good for a walk?" He asked.

I tilted my head a little to peek by him: Mom's eyes opened, set squarely on the T.V.

"Sure."

We wandered a bit around the hallways of the hospital, not talking much, passing nurses on duty, and people with strained, anxious looks. Everything smelt of sanitizer and stainless steel, even the donuts from the second floor Tim Hortons – tasted like it too. We ended up outside, on a path that circled the hospital property: a breezy little walk across a dirt-and-tile path, aisled between trees and gardens populated by shrub bushes, decorative rocks, and peonies.

Just off the path, a little ways down it, is the hideaway corner I've sneaked away to a few times to smoke. Dad took his time with an apple fritter, taking teeny bites. I scarfed down my long john, mostly to fill my stomach. A bumblebee buzzed past my head in its floaty, drunken way before landing on a flower. The cold would stop them from doing their bee-things soon enough, or doing anything at all for that matter. I recalled a YouTube video I had watched on them once, a short little documentary, twelve or so minutes long. In the winter, only the queen survives, hiding herself away to hibernate while the rest of the bees drop dead from A) starvation or B) cold.

That's one way to go, freezing to death. You get so cold that eventually it loops back around and makes everything fuzzy and warm and nice again. In reality, it's probably a misery: first you're way, way too cold, like your whole body is ice and every move you make feels like you're cracking apart a little more, then you're way, way, way too hot, like little red ants are marching all up and down you making liberal use of their pincers. I wonder if that's what it feels like for Mom, if she's just freezing up more and more and –

“I'm thinking about hospice,” Dad said.

“Hm?”

Dad sat down on a bench. I followed.

“Like getting a hospice worker to come to the house. She has... time still. This is just a bad stretch right now, but they reckon she'll pull out of it. But, I just, I can't anymore, she's getting too weak, I'm getting too old.”

“Oh.”

“You, uh. You haven't said much at all to her. Four days now.”

“Not like she's scrambled to say much to me.”

Dad let out a cough, a grunt.

“You’re leaving the day after tomorrow, yeah?”

“Got to. Midterms and all. I’ll be back come Christmas.”

“Right, Christmas...”

Dad’s fingers plucked away at his knees, over and over: tap, tap, tap, and tap. Had he always done that? Did I have tics like that? Was I tapping away at my knees right then? No. No I was not. I must do something though, everybody has *something*. That stupid thing that you do when your nervous or bored or don’t know what else to do and, God, I hoped nobody had ever noticed mine before, whatever it is. Hell, I was probably doing it right then, but what was *it*?

Dad heaved himself up off the bench.

“Have you told her about Jenny?” the words tumbled out of my mouth.

His back squared up, his shoulders raised. His blocky fingers scratched at the back of his head before landing on his neck, which he pinched at.

“Yeah, ya know,” he stammered, “I just thought, what with the stress and everything else, I thought it might be best. A lot of stuff at once, right? And it’s not like I don’t want to tell her or anything, but –”

“It’s ok, Dad,” I muttered, “I understand. I don’t need, like, a long explanation or anything.”

“Oh, that’s good,” but his back didn’t loosen, his shoulders didn’t slacken, “I’m going to go back up. You –”

“I’ll be along shortly,” I cut in with a slight crack.

“Right, yeah,” he said as he walked away in a strange lockstep movement.

I wondered if he noticed that he hadn't even said that he hadn't told her. That he had only talked around it, had formed excuses pre-emptively.

Another bumblebee floated by and, for one brief second, its wings seemed to give out. It dropped sharply, but quickly caught air again, launching itself towards another flower. A breeze pushed past and I inhaled through my nose. The air smelt dry, on the edge of change; I felt a slight pinch in my cheeks, the wind meeting my damp face. I wiped at the tears, little droplets that I hadn't noticed crawling down my face. Not like waterworks or anything, just a tiny little leakage.

“Oh.”

When I stood up, my legs felt a little too sure of themselves, a little too quick to obey. I let them march me forward down the path and after a bit of walking I slunk off between two large bushes, to that hideaway corner.

Afterwards, the rest of that day slid by me. I returned to Mom's hospital room, my legs rubbery. I dragged a chair out from the hallway as I entered, which I plopped down in beside the door. I felt all three sets of eyes land on me before they shot towards the other empty chair beside Mom's bed.

We sat there, us four, with only Sarah and Dad filling the space with words, always directed towards Mom.

“Can I get you anything?” Sarah would ask.

“You need anything?” Dad would ask not ten minutes later.

Mostly, Mom would mutter “no,” sometimes ask for water. At one point, she asked for a fluffed pillow and they both stood at the same time, their arms frozen inches away from grabbing the pillow, stuck in some weirdly pathetic stand-off.

“Jack, dear,” Mom eventually croaked out with an annoyed emphasis, putting an end to it. Sarah had flipped open her magazine again in response, crinkling the pages as Jack massaged the pillow.

Occasionally, Mom asked to have the channel changed so the tv flickered between game shows, sitcoms, and trashy talk shows. Practically every half-hour, Sarah would go off and smoke.

At times, Mom would slack her head in my direction, blink a few times, then return to her shows, as if communicating in some jank morse code: why, stop, are, stop, you, stop, here. Or something to that effect. To her, I was a potted plant in the corner of a room. I thought of myself as a Hibiscus. Mom probably thought of me as a Cactus.

But I remembered, a week prior, lying in Jenny’s bed, working off some morning sex with a croissant as Jenny watered her cacti and plants, naked. I supposed life as a cactus couldn’t be all that bad – under the right circumstances.

By the time the sky had begun to tint orange, Sarah and I found ourselves on the road back home, my high beginning to wear off, a hunger in my belly. A car populated a too-loud radio and my thumping foot against the floor.

“I’m sorry,” I got out eventually.

She let that sit in the air a moment, probably even savoured it a little.

“I’ve been clean about a month now. Don’t tell Jack. I know it’s supposed to, y’know, have been a year. But, all this, it just got to me,” she paused, “Yes, I’m still pretty skinny, lost a lot, fast – I’m getting the weight back. Honestly though, I’ve just been cold all the time, like random shakes and shivers. Can’t sleep much either. Withdrawal, probably. Shit takes a while.”

“Well shit,” I said, “I’m an asshole.”

“Yes, yes you are.”

Taking a pack of cigs from her cupholder, she poked one up from the bottom of the pack, clutching it between her lips with a too-comfortable precision.

“You were bang on about the smoking though.”

She lowered the window then lit up the cig with a torch lighter.

“Thought so.”

“Look, I won’t judge you or anything. Pot, kettle, and all that. Just... You know.”

I did know. But I didn’t say anything.

Jenny’s upside-down face fills my vision, mostly her chin. I re-adjust my head, shimmy away from her lap a little down towards her legs to get a better look. Her nose looks big from down here, but she probably wouldn’t appreciate that; from the front, it has a thin slope, trailing off into a tiny, rounded point. From below, it’s all nostrils. Funny what perspective can do. Her thin lips part into a yawn: the upper row of her teeth have a few crooks and turns, but appear mostly straight. When she shuts her mouth, her eyes downcast towards me, the ember-brown of her irises nibbling away at the black of her pupils as they dilate ever so slightly, popping against the red highlights in her hair –

“What’s on your mind,” Jenny asks, brushing a bit of hair out of my eyes.

We’re on the couch in her living room, chilling out in pyjamas. Some random Netflix trash murmurs from the television.

“I’m awkwardly staring, aren’t I?”

“Like Charlie at a can of tuna.” Charlie’s curled up at my feet. She rustles at the sound of her name.

I've never had sex with a woman until, well, just a few hours ago. I had always imagined meeting another girl in the program, a cute hipster in glasses and a beanie with dyed hair, ideally a little taller than me, preferring expressionism to my realism. We'd hit it off in class, become friends, start going out for drinks, maybe smoke a bit if that's her thing, then by the time midterms rolled around we'd spend rotating nights in one another's room, endless coffee after coffee as we study. It would start small: I'd brush my hand against hers flipping pages occasionally, hers against mine other times, eyes lingering a little too long, hugs a tad tight. We'd get by midterms without incident, but a tension would set in between us, taunting us every late night we spent together and by the time finals sneaked up, it would be too much and we'd hug before I leave her room for the night, but we wouldn't let go and she'd lean in and –

“Earth to Emily. Yo.”

“Shit, sorry.”

“You ok? You were about to start drooling.”

Jenny only meets a few checkmarks from my fantasy: taller than me, hipster girl, and dyed hair. She came as a surprise, a fluke, a practical hurricane; a fresh out-of-school law student edging by as a barista with a sarcastic bite and cynical tongue. ‘Friends’ had barely even settled into our vocabulary before swapping spit. No awkward tension, no slow-boiling romance; years of imagining an elaborate, perfect romance reduced to sudden cinders. The dreams I spent night after night moulding underneath covers, just down the hallway from my parents’ bedroom; fantasies that kept me pushing through Mom’s every glance, every syllable. Jenny came along and smashed those dreams into bits –

“You’re my first, you know. I didn’t want to say, in case I scared you off or something.”

“Why would that scare me?”

I shut my eyes tightly, a wave of embarrassment beginning to build, what a stupid, *stupid* thing to assume, to say – Jenny squashes it with a laugh.

“Honestly, it’s no worry. Turns me on a little. I had a hunch anyway, you know, you’re just a little, just a tad – just a bit – inexperienced.”

I cringe, turning my face towards the television.

“Ugh. How bad was I?”

“Well, you weren’t the worst I’ve had ...”

“Ah.”

She laughs again, running her hands through my hair.

“It’s ok, I’ll teach you all my tricks. Besides, I can’t have my girlfriend being a pillow princess.”

The word rolls glibly off her tongue, like she had just asked me whether or not I wanted cream in my coffee or butter on my toast. It came out not even as an offer, or a question, more a statement. I felt her body tense up.

“Girlfriend?” I question.

“You know, if you want, of course. I’m sorry, I didn’t really mean to, like, frame it that way or anything, I really wanted to slide it in somewhere and that seemed like a good place and I definitely meant it as more like a question, so if we could just rewind a little back and you can just let me rephrase –”

The promise of a rephrasing slips from her tongue to mine as I smother her ramblings. I don’t say yes, I don’t need to – if she’s decided it’s a foregone conclusion, so have I. We spend a while like that, in one another’s arms; kissing leads to wandering hands, fingers pulling lightly at

straps, teasing time away. Just when it looks like I'm about to have my first bout of couch sex, my phone rings up at me from the table.

It sounds so distant, near-miles away. I grab hold of Jenny's face as she peels away to have a look; *ignore it*, my lips say, *focus on me*, my tongue begs. When the phone finally shuts up, my fingers are already –

Then the phone starts up again. Jenny pulls away, “maybe you should look,” she says between huffs. The clock above us says its almost midnight. I groan as I sit up, my sweaty palms grasping hold of the phone.

“Who is it?” Jenny asks.

The caller I.D blinks up at me. Calling with this kind of urgency? At this time of night? A pit snakes itself through my stomach, curls up into a tight little ball.

“My Dad,” I mutter.

Before we left for the hospital again, I spend a few minutes at the windowsill of my old room, joint in hand. Sarah waited downstairs. I texted Jenny, having forgotten to the night before. Short little “I'm A-OK” messages, and an apology for my lack of communication.

Her reply came instantly, the beep of my phone laced with worry.

It's ok, I understand. I'm here when you're ready. Another beep right after. But I expect extra-attention when I see you again. And breakfast in bed.

I bit at my lip, smothered the roach, and tossed it out the window.

It's cold outside – it's supposed to stay cold for the rest of the day, according to my phone. Outside, a few orange leaves twirled about, carried away from their tree by a sudden gust. I shut the window, then exchanged the shorts I had thrown on for pants.

As I sprayed down, a haze washed over me.

When I go downstairs, I found Sarah out front, cigarette in hand. She took a subtle whiff of the air, a small crinkle of her nose that she probably thought I didn't notice.

"Last day, huh?"

Her voice simple, her face monotone. Not even a hint of judgement or disappointment.

"Last day," I returned.

On the ride there, Sarah fiddled with the radio a bit, rolled down the window to smoke. We talked about the weather: "it's getting colder," "snow can't be too far away now," and "I hate this time of year." After we pulled into a parking spot at the hospital, she turned towards me –

"You should really talk to her."

"That's what I keep hearing."

"I'm serious. This might be your last chance."

I nodded. As we walked towards the entrance, she broke off, undoubtedly for another quick smoke – her third in the span of an hour. *Pot, Kettle, and all that*, I recalled her words last evening.

When I got to the room, I sat myself down at its edge, prepared for my final day as background noise. Sarah left frequently, always coming back smelling of smoke. Dad left sparingly, only really leaving for snacks and coffee; whenever he did, I noticed Sarah's shoulders would slack and she'd fall back into her chair a little more. Then she'd let out a long breath, stretch out her arms and legs. A small detail, probably meaningless, but the small jolts in her body, her sudden stiffening spine once he'd returned, seemed to hint otherwise. Mom just kind of lay there, mostly in silence, which I couldn't really blame her for. Eventually, Dad asked for another walk.

We trolled the same path. Already the garden seemed less vibrant: more leaves had changed, flowers had begun to shrivel, and no bumblebees floated by. I wondered if, perhaps, the ones I had seen the day previous had already died, if their little corpses sat legs-up somewhere, awaiting a burial of brown, crumbling leaves.

Dad with a coffee, me with a hot chocolate. He eventually mumbled something about his legs and guided us to a bench.

“How’s Jenny?” he asked as he sat down.

“She’s good.”

He nodded. A bird hopped between the branches above, chirping with each jump. A mating call? Or maybe a bird just doing stupid bird things.

“If you want to tell your Mom about her, she’d probably listen.”

“And what would she say after she listened?”

Dad flipped the tab of his coffee cup shut, began tapping out tiny hollow tones.

“I’m just saying, if there’s anything – absolutely anything – you want her to know, or her to tell you –”

“Now’s the time,” I finished for him.

“Yeah,” he said. Then he stood up, tossing his cup into a bin. It landed with a final, hollow pat.

Back in the room, things settled back into the pattern we four had hammered out over the past week. Sarah and Jack did their awkward little jig, Mom wheezed and sat, and I twiddled my thumbs. At one point, Mom waved Dad in closer –

“I’m feeling Burger King,” she cracked out. Minutes later, Dad had left. A few minutes more and Sarah stood up with a stretch.

“Going for a smoke.”

I stood up to follow, but a croaking voice stopped me –

“Emily,” Mom called out.

I swallowed. Then swallowed again, to no avail; too much spit in my mouth. It felt like if I dared to even open it, a whole waterfall would come spilling out. At the same time, I also felt like I could go for one long chug of water.

“Come, sit,” she gestured to Sarah’s empty chair.

I nodded and obeyed. She took my hand and I let it go slack, then she turned her attention towards the T.V. It seemed almost too much, the potentiality of a death bed confessional, an apology, a realization.

A few years younger, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, maybe even nineteen, and this moment would’ve made me giddy – made my mind race and my face numb and my feet tingle and my head light. I used to wish for this. Mom sitting me down with a soft smile and a nervousness in her movements; she’d tiddle, then ‘I was wrong’. ‘I’m sorry for all the things I did, everything I said’, she’d continue. She wouldn’t need to say what exactly, all those tiny details. I’d know them already anyway, their effects long-since chiselled into me, but it hurts more to be reminded.

Details like how much she insisted on getting me dates with her friend’s sons, the downcast face she took to regarding me with, the sharp and quick way of speaking we settled into where I tried to keep things to ‘yes’ and ‘no’. The anxiety I had for even daring to mention another girl in her presence, whatever the context, brought on by how she’d size up any new friends I brought over with narrowed eyes, as if she could spot the gay, always segueing to asking about boys.

No point bringing up all that, so I'd just smile back and say 'I forgive you' and she'd return with an 'I love you' and I'd counter with an 'I love you too'. A near-decade of hate, resentment, and disappointment wrapped up in a neat little bow.

I remember when that dream shattered, when I finally paved it over. A phone call between Mom and me, during my second year. We managed to squeak out a few conversations now and again, mostly about school. Simple, straightforward façades where I could pretend to be a daughter and her a mother, and my love life – or rather, lack thereof – didn't have to come up; don't ask, don't tell. Just as I went to hang up, Mom let out a long sigh –

“I hope you're not dyking it up too much up there.”

“I'm not,” I managed to get out, before hanging up.

It hurt, but it felt as though the farce had finally begun to lift. Like I could finally stop pretending and just *live*.

“You're leaving soon?”

Her croak snapped me out of my haze.

“Yeah. I got Midterms coming up.”

She hummed a quiet *hmm*, but didn't press. Something seemed about to crest. I had convinced myself I didn't want the tidy little bow. But I did. I wanted to be her daughter again. I waited for her to continue, to say something more. Then, I waited some more.

Silence.

Silence with my hand in hers. When Sarah returned, Mom softly squeezed my hand one last time –

“Good luck, Emily. You'll do great.”

Then she let go.

I feel the breath leave my lungs as I step out the side door into the alley. The air warm and humid against my skin. Relief. Within seconds, a joint's between my lips and lit. Seconds later, I realize the mistake of my haste. A woman leans against the wall opposite a few feet away, cigarette in hand. She lifts up her cigarette in a toast –

“That’s illegal, you know,” she says.

She’s cute, that’s undeniable; a nice, rounded face, tiny nose, and amber eyes. About my age probably, a little taller than me and wearing a black low-cut shirt, her hair cut short and dyed a deep red, lips stained a light blue. Her shorts barely peek out from underneath a sweater tied around her waist; them’s some long fucking legs.

“Uh.”

“Just messing with you,” she laughs.

“Oh.”

“Still, bit of a risk, no? Whole shitload of people in there.”

“Yeah. That’s why, because of that shitload.”

“Is it medical? For, what, anxiety?”

“Yeah, self-prescribed.”

She smiles and takes a long drag.

“Cute.”

I let the joint fall to my wayside. I’ve only taken a puff or two, but something about her tells me not to take anymore. Like I might miss out on something if I’m a little too incoherent.

“What about you?”

“This?” She holds up the cig, before letting it drop to the ground, “It helps with the stress as much as it causes it. I’m trying to quit. Still, that siren call...”

“Hard to kick.”

“Yeah.”

She nods towards the door –

“You in the gallery?”

“Just a little painting tucked away in the corner,” a cynical sarcasm sets in my voice, “the *upcoming talent* section.”

The woman lightly launches herself off her wall, sauntering over to lean beside me. I feel my pulse quicken, my breath catch. She smells like lavender, her fingers brush the air around mine.

“Most of those will burn out within a year out of school,” she says.

“Really got your finger on the pulse, eh?”

My mouth’s on auto-pilot, on a rogue mission from my brain. I’m never this smooth, never this quick.

“Oh yeah, I know everything there is to know about burning out.”

I clamp up. Did I hit a nerve? I can’t tell, she flicks her lighter open and shut again. Click. Clack. Click. Clack. I’ve probably messed up in some way, said something wrong, done something stupid. Should’ve known, should’ve reined in my mouth, let my brain do what it’s meant to and stay quiet –

“Can I?” she asks with a gesture towards my joint.

I hand it over. She gives it a sniff –

“That’s the thing about burning out though. You can always pull yourself out of it,” she takes a long drag then returns it, “All about perspective.”

Then she pushes herself off the wall, making her way to the door. Come on, damn it. Say something, say anything, just make some kind of move. Her hand grabs the handle: she walks through that door and you’ll probably never see her again –

“What’s your name?” the words bubble out of my mouth; I’m not sure how I managed to get them out.

“I’m Jenny. You?”

“Emily.”

No more words come. The fact that I managed that single sentence seems a miracle. I expect a ‘goodbye’, a ‘see you around’, or maybe a ‘have a nice night’ to follow. Now’s the time that she walks through that door and doesn’t give me a second thought. I’m nothing more than the weed girl she met outside a gallery. A funny anecdote to tell her friends, her boyfriend.

But she’s still standing there, at the door, fingers tapping away at the handle. Did she just bite her lip?

“I’m going to go to the burnout section and see your little painting, Emily.”

“Ok,” I squeak.

“And, after, I’m going to stick around a bit. Before I head out. You can join me if you like. For beer. Or coffee. Whatever’s your thing.”

“Uh. Both are my things. But how about coffee for now?”

I tighten up. *For now?* What do I mean *for now?* I’m getting way ahead of things. Now I’m just imposing on her, now I seem like I want it too much, now –

“I’d like that,” she says.

“See you,” I manage out.

Then she’s gone. And I’m all alone with a half-lit joint, blued at its end. I press my licked finger lightly against the end and return it to the baggie in my purse before going back in.

Saving it for another time.

I stumbled down the hospital hallways, ending up in a bathroom: I slunk into a stall and sat. The sounds of chatter, feet shuffling, faucets running, and air blowing wandered through the cracks in the stall.

Yet it all sounded so distant, like a planet away.

“Stupid,” I muttered, “stupid, stupid, stupid. I’m a fucking idiot.”

My hand clenched into a fist and I brought it towards the wall. It skidded to a halt with seconds to spare, then drifted forward for a light tap.

“All worked up for nothing. You should know by now – you should know better. She won’t change. Ever. Never, ever.”

My palms pressed into my eyes: dry as a bone. Then, I held up the hand Mom held. I itched at its palm before turning it over, appraising it like some object apart from my body.

I recall that clichéd joke that I’ve seen in so many comedies or sitcoms. By some circumstance, some horny boy ends up holding the hand of his crush, or she gives it a kiss, or some silly shit. “I’m never washing this again,” he declares, almost heroically, like he’s peaked in life.

... I wonder what bleach can do to skin. Probably shouldn’t wash with it.

The last time she held my hand like that, I had sprained my ankle pretty bad jumping off a swing. I laid in a bed in this very hospital, writhed and moaned as we waited to hear what the X-Ray's would reveal; barely a year after that shit with Denise went down.

Mom had spent so long pushing me away, making me hate myself. But she sat beside me all the same. She grabbed my hand and massaged it gently. Dad sat on my other side, hand on my shoulder.

“It’s all going be ok,” she told me, “just have to wait on the doctor.”

She wiped at my tears with tissues and repeated herself over and over, reminding me that this wouldn’t take long, that the pain would pass. For hours, we sat like that: a mother reassuring her daughter

Then the doctor came, “a sprain,” he said, “a boot’ll be all you need.” Dad let out a sigh of relief. Mom squeezed me hand then let go.

Her worry had dissipated by time we got home. She got out the car quick as she could while Dad helped me. And for the next few weeks, she’d ask how my ankle felt now and again, a genuine worry in her voice, then turn away as soon as I answered. Once the boot came off, the fog lifted, and she settled back into our pattern.

Mom was still Mom. And she would always be Mom. Death won’t change a thing.

I pushed myself up off the toilet seat, held my ear to the door, figured it’d be nice to be alone. Silence.

At the sink, I washed my hands, taking care to scrub vigorously, splashed water into my face. I’d left my purse back in the room, my joints, my lighter. That’s ok: I could just slip in and slip out. Not like I’d be noticed.

FLAGS

When Jack first hung them up, he didn't know exactly why. Partially out of instinct? Some strange need to memorialize and remind? The likeliest answer is that he enjoyed the aesthetic they brought, the touch of personality needed to make his workshop truly feel like *his* workshop.

During his hauling of what remained of his father's belongings – a scant two boxes – to his new shop for storage, freshly leased and in the process of being readied, one of them slipped from his grasp. Jack cringed at the shattering sound that followed, not because he cared about keeping the boxes contents safe, but because it entailed an obligation to look inside it, to check and make sure.

Much like the hanging of the two flags, Jack's keeping of his Dad's stuff also carried a meaning lost to him. He had no trouble cleaning out his old Michigan home of all the rest of his Dad's garbage after his death, giving his few stainless clothes to some unlucky thrift shop, only at the suggestion of Sue, before resigning everything else – furniture and all – to the junkyard.

The two boxes that remained however, were left by his Dad on the neighbour's porch on his last night, accompanied by a napkin covered with drunken scrawl for him to pass along –

Dear Jack,

This stuff is yours. Take care of it. Don't throw it away like you will the rest of me.

Please.

No sorry, no apology, no ask of forgiveness of any sort, yet the please had done Jack in all the same, so he'd kept the boxes.

“Throw it away,” Sue commented as Jack furrowed his brow between his Dad's note and the two boxes, “I'd do the same to my father.”

“But he’s not your father,” he said, “he’s mine,” leaving her nothing to do but scowl as the boxes made it into the back of their car.

At first, the boxes ended up underneath their bed. This arrangement lasted a little under a month: they exuded an uneasiness that kept Jack up some nights, unable to drift off, as if their very presence had infested the mattress, the pillow, the sheets.

Next, he shoved them into the back of their closet, burying them beneath old clothes and blankets. After a few months, the memory of his father had seeped out from beneath its burial mound, slipping between the cracks of the door to bear their weight onto Jack once more. He slept easier, sure, yet he eventually found his dreams smelling of whiskey and hounded by a dark silhouette with thundering footsteps. The boxes needed to go somewhere farther away, Jack decided.

With a sense of finality, he squirrelled them away in the basement’s storage room, at the back of a pile of boxes carrying clothes, photo albums, old appliances, souvenirs and knick-knacks: soft, happy, and warm memories that had accumulated over the years. There, the two sat undisturbed, with only the dust and spiders to keep them company, and Jack slept soundly, until —

“Look what we found Daddy!” Emily exclaimed as she ran into the den, Sue’s old sun hat atop her head.

“My, my,” Jack said as he lifted her up to his lap, “where’d you get that hat, cat?”

“In the boxes downstairs, there’s so many Daddy.”

Jack swallowed. Emily felt clammy in his hands. He placed her down and she took off giggling as she called for Mom. He sat still a moment, let his beating heart calm.

In the storage room, Jack found Sarah sitting in front of a box, peering over an old photo album. His father's stuff remained untouched, far away in the back of the piled boxes, a barrier of happy memories. Still, the moment served as a reminder that they were there: a slap across the face with a meaty, calloused hand.

He tore the album out of Sarah's hands, causing her to jump, leaned in closed enough that she could smell his breath –

“You don't ever come down here by yourself. Ever. It's not safe. Do you understand?”

She paused, eyes wide and startled, before nodding slowly.

Once he got the shop, it seemed right to move the boxes out of his house, away from Emily and Sarah. Away from potential discovery and questions.

Still, stubborn Jack had never once opened either of them. Until that day he heard that siren's call of shattering glass.

Jack found the culprit immediately: a whiskey tumbler split into shards. He recognized it too, having seen it in the grip of his Father's grubby hands far too many times. The fact it had gone unbroken until now seemed a sick miracle, though his Dad always placed it down gently, no matter how drunk, how brash, how loud, or how violent.

Jack cracked a smile; funny that his Dad had thought he might want his whiskey glass. And fitting that he had neglected to wrap this memorabilia to childhood abuse in any kind of protection, letting it jostle around until fate finally achieved what Jack once both feared and dreamed of doing.

Just as Jack aimed to close up the box for good, a bit of cloth interrupted him. That old fluttering of the red, white, and blue, wrapped taut around something flat and square. Brushing aside the glass, Jack took out the flag, running his hand along the stars. Worn and sporting a few

small holes dotted about, yet not in such a bad condition that it had begun to tear, Jack figured it a few decades his senior.

Unwrapping the flag, he found the framed copy of the flag raising at Iwo Jima that used to sit above the mantle. He remembered how, when his Dad got drunk enough, he'd lean back in his recliner, sometimes raising a glass to the flag raisers with a "God bless," other times just gauging it with a slacked jaw.

"I was there, you know," he'd trail off, on the few occasions there were visitors, drinking buddies from the legion and bars, to brag to. Then he'd settle into a pause, just long enough that any new listeners would be about to ask him all about it, before continuing in a jealous tone, "not in the photo, of course. But watching. American heroes, every one of them."

He never clarified further beyond that, always leaving any hapless visitors wondering, curious as to whether this strange drunk was selling them a crock of shit or not. Even Jack himself never found out.

Returning the photo to the box, Jack pinched the fabric of the flag between his fingers then stood up, spreading it open. Truthfully, his father's brand of patriotism had soured Jack on American pride. He had run away from Michigan and crossed the border to Ontario when he finally grew some balls; hadn't even seen his father, let alone stepped a foot back in the States, until that early-morning call. And yet –

He had to hang it, above his wood-working bench. Even though ratty flag belonged to his father. Scouring his mind, Jack couldn't even remember where the flag had once hung in the house, or if it had even hung at all; it seemed detached from his father, separate from Jack's memory of him and his old house.

Still, it needed a partner, a lone American flag wouldn't look right up north. A quick trip to Canadian Tire to pick up some red and white solved that problem.

A week after the two flags went up, Emily and Sarah went to Jack's new workshop for the first time, Grandpa David's stuff safely in the closet. A simple enough place, just under 900 square footage, slotted in the back lot of a shopping plaza and once used as a storage area for a defunct department store. Jack had populated it with a new arsenal of tools, though still waited on the delivery of a new tool-wall to slot them onto, and had even sprung a couple thousand for a bigger bandsaw, as well as an expensive new workbench, specially made from oak.

He had gotten quite the deal on the bench, only spending a few thousand to one of the top craftsmen out in Toronto: he simply didn't have the time to commit to building his own bench again.

"Honestly Jack," Sue said when he brought up the idea one morning at the kitchen table, "you work from home well enough, bring in plenty. Plus, at your age? This is all a bit silly."

Typically, Jack listened to his wife: he found that Sue normally had a penchant for being right. And on one hand, he did agree with her, finding it impossible to not after having poured years into his garage. He found a pleasant comfort in waking up, brewing a pot, and dawdling along to work, mug in hand, before lazily leaning over his hand-crafted maple bench as he sorted through measurements and plans.

In his garage, time puffed forward one cloud of saw-dust at a time as the whirl of blades filled his ears and the wood felt like putty in his hands, slowly moulded and hardened into shape. And while his specialty undoubtedly presented itself in the form of dining sets with their long,

sturdy tables and stable, yet comfy accompanying chairs, given time enough and money, he could make lumber sing any kind of song.

Yet, over time, his bench suffered bruises and chips, losing the sheen he applied years ago. His bandsaw began to sputter and catch, its motor, guts, and bolts basking in their sunset years. Many of his tools too, once top-of-the-line, took on a weary dullness, showing a nervous anxiety at tasks they once dutifully saw through without effort with hand saws jittering along as they cut and hammers needing an extra few swings.

Space too, presented itself as a problem: Jack's client base had rocketed in the past year, word-of-mouth finally paying its dividends, but the orders outpaced him. Some days he could barely even work, maneuvering around completed tables, chairs, and dressers drying out their final stain, suffering stubbed toe after stubbed toe.

Simply put, Jack finally had enough.

"It's an investment. More space, better tools equals more clients, more money. There's a new millennium, right on the horizon; I want to make changes. And I'm only 45. I am *not* old."

A small snort flared out of Sue's nose as she sipped at her tea with raised, judgmental brows. For as long as she could remember, Jack let himself be driven by his whims.

Though it's part of what endeared her to him, their own getting together a result of his deciding to ask her, a total stranger, out on a date as he rung up her items in a grocery store. Sue had declined, but curious at his audacity, began to return to the store for the littlest of items, purposefully going to his lane for chats. Within a few weeks, Sue made her own offer of a date, which he accepted with a large, toothy grin.

Eventually, his whims led them to a beaten-up country house in Southern Ontario a half-hour away from the nearest town. Within a year, he practically doubled the house's value

through his sweat and tools. That got the attention of their closest neighbour, who asked Jack if he worked with wood for a living, admiring the wrap-around porch Jack had spent the past weeks working away at. That conversation led to word-of-mouth, one order after another and, most importantly: no more hours at the grocery store.

“That’s new,” Sue said as she led the children in with a nod towards the flags. The two floated side-by-side above the workbench. One, newly purchased, a majestic piece of cloth. The other, well-worn and looking it, but hardly tatters.

“Making changes, I guess,” Jack shrugged.

He didn’t mention how it took him an hour or so to hang them up perfectly, the amount of measuring he undertook. Didn’t say how they overlooked the bench from a height of 17.6 inches exactly, how he had laid them as flat as he could to leave no ripples, nailed in each corner tight, making sure that an exact 4.2 inches separated the two and that they each sat at equal distance away from the opposite ends of the bench at 3.6 inches.

Had he told Sue any of this, she would have begun pestering him with weary, worrisome eyes, and asking him if there’s ‘anything that you need to get off your chest’.

“They look... homey.”

“That they do.”

Jack knew that Sue wouldn’t realize the symmetry of the flags, their pristine lines: she didn’t have that sort of exacting eye. Her eye had a different sort of exacting nature, a knack for reading underneath and between the lines. And judging by the whisper of a sigh Sue let out then, Jack realized that she probably knew exactly where the tattered old flag came from.

“I like it, it looks pretty,” Emily blurted out, running over to the bench, her eyes barely peering above it. From behind, Jack picked her up to give her a better view as he wondered if she could see the work he had put in.

Sarah, meanwhile, stood back a little ways, regarded the flags and her sister with a titled head and muted face, then turned her attention to the rest of the workshop. She ended up in front of the bandsaw, began swirling dust on the ground with her foot.

“Don’t touch that, dear,” said Sue.

“I know, Mom,” stated Sarah, “I’m bored, can we go?”

“Soon, give your sister a bit.”

“Emily always needs a bit,” Sarah let out with a whine, earning a slight frown from her mother.

“Why’d you leave America Daddy?”

Placing Emily down on the bench, Jack ruffled her hair. Such a tiny question to a child, but Jack’s reasoning would far exceed the answer she’d expect. There’s a lot he would say, wanted to say, one day, but children love simple, one-line answers with a touch of humour –

“I liked the cold up here.”

– even if they’re a lie.

He had used the line on Sarah before. He and Sue had agreed upon what he should say, with Sue saying, “They’re naïve enough to believe that somebody would uproot their life because they enjoy a little winter.”

Emily ate up the lie for the first time with a laugh. As he placed her back on the ground however, he found that something had changed in his oldest, that she didn’t smile the way she used to at that perfectly rehearsed, simple, easy lie.

Instead, she rubbed at her nose with her sleeve, gave an inquisitive tilt, and a pursed lip, as if she realized that something about his answer didn't quite smell right. Not quite a full understanding, but a realization, and if she could put it into words, she'd probably tell him *I'm onto you, but I'm not quite sure with what.*

That's ok though, Jack thought, that's the way things go. It's the job of children, he figured, to see through the bullshit that their parents fed them.

Later that night, with the kids put to bed, Emily a full-hour after her bedtime, Jack and Sue lay side-by-side in the dark, Sue finally asked, turning on her side to face him –

“The flag? Was it *his*?” her voice queired from the dark.

Jack let her words simmer as they caused the air to pop and fizzle. Talking about *him* had long become faux pas between the two of them, especially with the kids around. It seemed appropriate then, that they only talk about *him* now, nestled away in the secrecy of the late night.

“Yes,” Jack cleared his throat, “I looked in one of the boxes after I dropped it and heard something shatter. Found it in there.”

“Do you think it's appropriate for the girls? Having reminders of him...”

“Why not?”

Jack felt the sheets pull towards her side of the bed and heard a rustling as Sue turned her body away from him. As he reached out to place a hand on her shoulder, he felt another sharp tug in the sheets towards her side. *No*, the blankets told him, *don't touch me*, almost as if she could feel the air pressure of his coming hand.

Jack turned to face away from her in kind, but didn't pull the sheets back towards his side. For the rest of the night, he felt trapped in cold breeze, unable to fully cover himself.

Once the tool-wall had come in and Jack organized his new arsenal, he officially considered himself settled in. Soon after he started making calls to his clients, let them know he'd be working in town now. Even took out a few advertisements in the papers after a few frustratingly long phone-calls, filled with endless negotiations of print size, the space of ads, needling about prices.

Within a month, he had projects booked two months in advance. Within three, his books filled up for five months. Now however, he had the room to work as he pleased, and more than enough projects to keep busy.

He had built up his reputation and, now more local, more convenient, he could reap the benefits. Jack himself even felt quite a bit of surprise at just how many more were willing to drop by and order now that they didn't have to spend an hour on country roads. Alongside his building workload, a half-ritual settled in for his daughters.

After school days, he would bring them to the shop instead of their taking the bus back, at least until Sue swung around. Sue herself had proposed the idea, saying "I always have something or other to do in town anyhow. And it might be nice to spend more time with them."

Even without a job, Sue never found herself wanting for time: from groceries, to taxes, to finances, she ran the meat and potatoes of the household, always making sure one day lead into another, that no bill or payment skated by.

Emily warmed up the workshop immediately, not only spending her time drawing, but also wandering a little too close to the working Jack. After telling her to stay back more times than he could count, he gave up, giving her a pair of too-big goggles to wear while making a mental note to always look over his shoulder while working.

For Sarah, the visits became a clear and tedious bore, often times blocking out the noise with her Walkman and doing her homework without a word to Jack. Still, she'd always perk up whenever he made the mention of ice cream; always from the same place, a little mom-and-pop place just a short walk away.

So, Jack bought a sofa for the shop – a plush, blue 3-seater that sat snugly in the corner, far away from the bandsaw – and, begrudgingly, a coffee table for the girls to use for any homework, making a mental note to build his own once he had the time.

It gave his clients a place to sit as well as he went over specifics and prices. Soon enough, a binder masquerading as a shoddy catalog made its home on the table, filled with estimated prices, rough sketches, and pictures of finished products.

“You’re American, huh? Didn’t know that,” a customer would comment now and again, their gaze having drifted towards the workbench.

And Jack always gave a little shrug in response, “Never had a reason to say.”

As the girls grew older, Jack grew rougher, his hair thinner and greyer, his hands calloused. The flags overlooked his accidents and near misses, the time he shredded the top bit of his pinky off or the nasty gash he got on the palm of his hand working the saw. They witnessed the precise marking of wood, checking twice, the cutting, the assembling, the staining, the waiting, the staining, the waiting. On some evenings, he'd lie down on the couch and drift off into something halfway between a nap and a restless sleep before he'd awake suddenly in a sweat, confused.

Sarah's Walkman become an iPod, in the rare moments she stopped by, as she grew older and the offers of ice cream lost their tantalizing appeal; her hair grew longer, her body taller, and she began to shed her childishness, often expressing herself in ways that brought about grumbles

from Jack. First came the pink hair, which gave Jack a raised brow, then the constant cycling of fake tattoos before, worst of all, the short-shorts, leading to Jack complaining about the hernia that girl would undoubtedly give him. Only after a talk – or three – from Sue did he dejectedly allow her to wear what she wanted, though as Sue kindly reminded him again and again, “She doesn’t exactly need your permission to begin with.”

Emily, graduated from crayons to pens and pencils and, to Jack’s surprise, began asking about his work as she grew more and more into her goggles. She didn’t ask about the cutting and the assembling however, but the marking, the planning, the plotting, and the rough sketches.

“Why do you want to know?” he eventually asked.

Emily shrugged, “I don’t know, just something about it, I guess? The way you use lines, plan things out. It’s... neat?” Her answer the best, most committal response Jack could expect from a pre-teen.

Sue would stop by occasionally, most often to drop off a lunch, a toasted homemade sandwich – different every time – that Jack greedily gulped down, or to break down the finances for the month. On rare occasions, as evening approached and with the girls old enough to stay home, they’d lock the doors and close the blinds, spending an hour or two tangled up in one another on the couch. Yet every time Sue entered, she’d always take a moment in the doorway, gaze fixated above the workbench. Then, she’d let out a sigh, as if disappointed that the ratty flag still hung there – even though she knew it undoubtedly would – before rubbing at her temples, easing the annoyance away, and moving on.

“You should get a new one, can’t be too hard to find,” she said once, speaking to the stars and stripes.

“Why? I already have this one. Might be a little over the hill, but she’s got some gas in ’er still,” Jack replied.

“That’s not what I meant and you know it –”

“It’s just a flag, don’t matter where it came from. An object is an object, ain’t got no meaning.”

A scowl creased Sue’s face, but she said nothing more. In one respect, he couldn’t begrudge her for feeling the way she did, given where the flag came from. Still, he thought, it’s just a ratty piece of cloth, nothing more.

On his late days, as the sun began to set and night crept up, he would end up sitting on the couch, just to rest a little while. Yet the flag would consistently fill his vision, and his mind. Where had his father kept the flag? Why hadn’t Jack ever seen it around the house?

And such wonderings would lead to those hectic, half-naps infested with raised fists, whiskey-soured breath, and furious, blood-shot eyes. Jack couldn’t really remember the pain, at least not the pain his father’s fists caused directly. He’d remember the doubling-over from a swift jab to the gut, the air feeling like needles in his throat as he inhaled, and the scraping of his knees on the wooden floor. But the hit itself, the impact of his father’s knuckles against his soft flesh? Those memories stayed locked away, like his father’s boxes in the closet.

This lack of remembering seemed a more terrifying thing to him than the pain itself, as if he had lost an awareness of something that had made him him. He had spent so long ignoring the memories that they now disobeyed him: they were dusty and moth-balled like an old suit nestled away in the back of a closet, forgotten.

Except unlike the suit, which could easily be tossed, his memories could not. They sat half-constructed in his head, uncomfortable in their being. Jack wanted to try to remember – to truly remember.

This led to a bottle of Captain Morgan's becoming a mainstay in the workshop, hidden away in the supply closet alongside the boxes. Once in a blue moon, Jack would claim he had a heavy workload to Sue (most times he did), that he aimed to work late and might not be home, then he'd spend a night on the couch, the radio turned on, his attention split between the flag, the bottle, and the memories.

The mornings after always presented themselves as difficult. Beset by either a churning in his stomach or a bell in his head – or, sometimes, both – Jack trudged away the nights before with two Advil, some coffee, and a greasy breakfast from a nearby diner.

Despite the discomfort, feeling like a pebble in his head and boulder in his gut, he always felt a little clearer those mornings. Things took on a different colour, seemed easier to understand, even if he had forgotten half the night before.

A week before Emily's 13th birthday, Jack and Sue decided to get her an easel, paints, and brushes which they slotted away in the shop's closet. Arthritis began its gnawing on Jack's joints for the first time, the plush blue of the sofa faded with age, its skin starting to tear, and the same coffee table still sat in front of it – Jack never could find the time to build one.

His Nokia rang, the latest model that the girls got for him last Christmas; his fingers were stiff and he had to fumble through some pain to answer it.

“Hello?”

No response bar the strained breaths of his wife.

“Sue?”

“It’s Emily,” her voice sounded choked with sawdust, “the school called. She did ... something.”

Jack’s body clenched at first, his muscles spasmed.

“What did she do? Is she OK?” he sputtered out.

He listened to Sue relay to him what had happened in short, concise sentences, practically able to hear her teeth grinding together: Emily had kissed someone in the bathroom, a girl. Sue had never held back on that sort of stuff, having had it come out shortly after their engagement, when Jack brought up meeting her father over dinner –

“The last I saw him, I barely turned fifteen. He was – still is, maybe – a doctor. A few days before, a nurse walked in on him with ... a male patient. Word spread quickly, small town and all.”

At the time, Jack listened wordlessly as Sue recounted her story in a stale tone, without a hint of tears, her voice steady. She swirled the wine around in her glass, took a sip, then another.

“Those few days were terrible, the house felt like death. Then, some kids came along and painted the word fag on the garage door. Guess that finally gave Mom the push she needed – packed us up then drove us to her parents that night. Still remember pulling away as the garage shut. ‘FAG’, in big red letters, all capitals. Looked like blood –”

And though Sue had never directly voiced her thoughts on either of the girls being gay, Jack knew it weighed heavily all the same. He remembered how bright her eyes lit up when Sarah told them she had a date a few months back – with a boy, of course. Jack even had to step in and tell Sue to let up a little as she began to excitedly suggest outfits and make-up to their embarrassed daughter.

“Just go pick her up please. I need to take a Gravol and lie down. I’ll – I’ll talk with her later.”

Jack let out a deep sigh after hanging up and rubbed his eyes. He had no problems with that sort of stuff, never really did, even if he didn’t understand it. Yet, over the years, as the girls grew, it had become a silent hope of his that neither would turn out like that, only so that Sue wouldn’t have to deal with the prospect.

Then he got up and left to get his daughter.

On the car ride back to the shop, Jack put on a country station, the volume cranked, as Emily sat in the backseat. When they got there, Emily walked in and sat down on the couch, pulling her legs up and resting her head on her knees. Jack, stood in the doorway a moment before getting back to work, deciding that she would talk if she wanted to.

As Jack prepped to cut some new measurements, she finally spoke up –

“Mom sounded mad when the school called her. Like, really mad. I could hear her while she talked to the principal. Couldn’t make anything out though.”

With a deep breath, Jack turned away from the bandsaw then sat down beside her, putting his arm around her.

“Well, it’s just that ... your Mom, you see,” for a moment, Jack blanked, letting the words settle in-between them, “Well, she believes in a certain way of things, I guess.”

I guess, the words rang through Jack’s head, *what a crock of shit*.

“We were just playing. Just practicing for. For the real thing,” her voice lowered, began to quiver, “a kiss, it doesn’t have to mean anything. I mean, it didn’t. Why would it – it’s *just* a girl.”

Emily buried her head between her legs, Jack squeezed her tightly. Sue would probably buy that, for a time, he thought. Not because Emily could act it out well, but because that's what Sue would want to believe. She'd probably start over-compensating, say, 'a daughter should be a daughter', just like how her father should've been her father.

Jack gave Emily's shoulder another squeeze.

"What's her name?"

Emily raised her head, wiped her snotty nose with her hand.

"Denise."

"That's a pretty name."

She snorted, cracked a smile, rubbed into her eyes with her sleeve –

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess."

Later that night, Sue launched into the lecture Jack expected, a stream of words and opinions all aimed to convince Emily that she had made a mistake, nothing more. She took it quietly, sunken in the kitchen chair like she wanted to blip out of existence, until Sue snapped "look at me." Emily spoke only once Sue herself had finished, regurgitating the same thing she said to Jack, tears and all.

Sarah, meanwhile, found herself forced to sit in the den and watch TV, shoved away from the debacle. Yet when Jack got up from the table to get some water, he spied a shadow around the corner of the den, lit up by the dancing light of the television. No doubt Sarah had heard each word.

That night, before he went to bed, he stopped by Emily's room, just before midnight, certain she'd be up. With the dim light of her lamp, she lay on her bed, facing the wall opposite

the door. Wordlessly, Jack sat down and rested his hand on her shoulder; she reached up and grabbed hold of it tightly.

“Goodnight sweetie,” he finally said after a few minutes, before leaving. He returned to his bedroom to find his wife already in bed scheming, scratching at a notepad with a pen, a cherry blossom candle lit on the bedside table – a pleasant smell to help her think.

“Charlotte has a son, you know. Bright boy, just a year older. I guess Rebecca has two though, around her age as well. I should ask around, what do you think?”

Jack said nothing, slipping under the sheets beside her and turning off the light, leaving only the flicker of the candle.

“Jack?”

“Dear?” she whimpered out. The candle popped and crackled.

“Goodnight,” he said as he turned to face away from her.

Already, a plan formed in Jack’s head.

On the day of her birthday, Emily arrived at the shop to find an easel and new set of brushes in the last free corner in the shop. Before she could even say thanks, Jack handed her an envelope with an extra key to the workshop inside.

“This place is ours to share now,” he said, “father and daughter. Our little place away from home.”

Over the next year, Emily spent more time in the workshop, sometimes lazing about on the couch or doing school work, but most often fixated on her easel and paints. Sue continued bringing up sons of friends and Emily took to mumbling in response. Jack continued working

long nights here and there, sometimes driving Emily back home only to come straight back or, sometimes, Sarah, freshly-licensed, would pick up Emily herself.

When Sarah did, she stood by the door as Emily gathered her things, barely waiting a minute or two before commenting that “I don’t have all day” and that “it’s not like I want to be here.” Jack meanwhile, only ever got a scarce “hello,” or a simple smile. Once, when he brought up the possibility of ice cream, Sarah didn’t even miss a beat with her “I can’t, going out later.”

He loved working beside his daughter, sharing a space. Yet he needed those moments he had had before: the long nights on the couch, the Morgan’s, the flags.

“Do you think you’re spending too much time there?” Sue finally asked on one of his early nights as they watched tv in the den. A candle smelling of fresh cut grass sputtered on beside her as she swirled her tea with a spoon.

“Lots of work to get done.”

“Yeah, I suppose. Still, it’d be nice to have you home a bit more,” then her voice lowered, “And listen, this thing with Emily –”

“It’s fine,” he cut in.

She took her spoon out of tea, tapping it against the edge, bit at her lip: “I didn’t finish.”

With a deep exhale, Jack put on an overly cheerful grin with shades of Cheshire, “Oh, I’m sorry, was there more that needed saying? You made your stance more than clear.”

After a long sip, Sue gently placed her tea down, “Please, I’m already aware I’ve done plenty to make her hate me. Still, I hope one day she’ll thank-me. I’d like to at least talk to you about it, but forget it.”

With a grunt, Jack stood up, making his way towards the kitchen to get a drink –

“And Jack, dear.”

“Hm?”

“I know I haven’t made things easy, but don’t ever fucking smile like that at me again. It’s not too much to ask my husband to listen to me sincerely without him putting on some shit-eating grin.”

“Yeah, sorry. Just... give me time,” he promised in a tired voice.

During one of his long nights, Jack realized where his father had kept the flag. With the bottle near empty, he got up to relieve himself and noticed Emily’s Easel covered in a white sheet. Curious, he wobbled over, nearly tripping over himself.

Peeking would be no different than dropping off some laundry in her empty room. This is what Jack told himself, yet he still felt a pang of guilt as he gripped hold of the sheet. He gently slid the sheet off, letting it crumple to the floor—

Only to greeted by his own back in watercolour, hunched over the bench, hard at work. The perspective looked a little wonky, his body a little too large and the bench too small: Emily herself had done more than her fair share of complaining about it.

“Nothing I paint looks right. It always just looks a little wrong, like one-half of the painting is blown-up,” she said as she showed him a painting of a lopsided bench in a park.

“Well, you know, the vanishing —”

“Yeah, I know about the vanishing point,” she cut in a little too quickly, her hands coming down in emphasis, “I know it, I understand it, I try to think about it and —”

Jack couldn’t help but chuckle at her frustration, one he himself went through with his own sketching.

“Time and practice. S’all ya need.”

“Yeah, I know,” she frowned —

Still, the details he found surprised him: the slight rippling of his shirt, the beams of light cutting through the dusty air, the minute details of the tools scattered on his bench. A white, unfinished space surrounded his back and the edges of the painting, unfinished, but the quality for a girl of her age couldn't be argued against.

And above the bench, overlooking the painted workshop, the two flags. One key difference stuck out to Jack: she hadn't captured the American one in its current state. No little holes dotted its surface, no fading colours. It looked new, it looked pristine.

Just like how it used to look, the thought entered Jack's head suddenly at that moment, a thread that dared him to tug just a little more, to follow it down to where it leads.

"Oh. So, that's where it--"

Up in his father's closet, folded snugly into a triangle on the upper shelf. Jack had sneaked into his father's room while he went to the corner store, really only wanting to explore. Jack had to use a chair to try and reach the flag. Just as his hands closed in, his dad returned, yelled at Jack, and approached with a raised fist. Jack fell off the chair then, raised his arms up to shield himself before his father ripped him off the ground and hit him square in the gut.

Jack couldn't remember how old he was then. Young, certainly, maybe six, or five. Was that the first time, he wondered, *not that it really matters*.

Leaning down to pick up the sheet, Jack felt a dull pain jolt through his back, lingering as he covered up the easel once more. Then, he checked his watch, threw on his jacket, and left the workshop. He figured if he hurried, he could get another bottle from the LCBO before closing time

Emily never did show him the painting: she spent most of the rest of next day continuing to work on it, but eventually, in a sudden huff, had taken the canvas off the easel and thrown it in the dumpster along the side of the shop before collapsing face-first on the couch.

“What’s wrong,” Jack had asked.

“It’s just no good – the perspective,” her muffled voice returned, “I just can’t get it. I don’t get it.”

“That’s ok, you’ll get it with –”

“Time and practice. I know.”

Jack had suspected that the finished canvas would have been a gift to him. He couldn’t deny his relief at not having to deal with the possibility, happy that Emily would not be intently studying his face as she handed it over. He didn’t want to hurt her with the involuntary cringe that would come on every time looked at that perfect flag.

It began with a simple request. After Jack had asked Emily to come out to dinner and bugged Sarah for the same, the two sisters found themselves waiting on the couch for Jack to finish chatting with a customer outside. Sarah bit at her lip, running her hand along the crackling blue skin of the sofa –

“Can I ask you for a favour? If you promise not to tell Mom or Dad,” Sarah spoke up.

“Favour?” Emily returned with a tinge of doubt, lounging into the couch.

“I’ll give you twenty bucks.”

“I’m listening,” Emily spurted out as she shot up straight.

“Can you lend me your key to the shop on their anniversary?”

By that point, plans had already been laid out for the date: both Sarah and Emily were set to stay over at a friend's house for the night.

“Why?”

“Maggie scored a premium joint,” she returned, not missing a beat, “we need somewhere to smoke it. We sure as hell can't do it at her house, not with her parents there.”

Emily mulled over the request –

“Seems like trouble,” Emily said.

“Thirty,” Sarah countered.

“Fine. Just make sure you don't leave the place stinking.”

When the day came, Sarah made her way into the shop with her borrowed key. In tow, a lanky boy named Steve, donning a Minor Threat shirt with long, greasy hair, patchy stubble, and a single plastic piercing above his left eye.

“So, yeah,” Sarah said as she sat down on the couch, “it's my parents' anniversary, so my Dad isn't going to come anywhere near this place.”

The boy nodded, walking around an overturned dining table in the middle of the shop, left overnight to dry its stain. With each step, a cloud of dust kicked up into his face and he let out a dry cough –

“Shit's dusty,” he said

“I mean, he does work with wood. A bit of sawdust is a gimme.”

Tapping at the leg of the overturned table, Steve turned towards the workbench and picked up a piece of drafting paper with a half-finished sketch.

“Still, wouldn't kill him to dust a little,” he said as he let the paper drop to the bench, “Sweep the place up a little, you know.”

“It’s not exactly the ritz,” she continued, “And he’s a bit busy with, y’know, the working.”

Steve grunted, then hoisted himself up onto the bench, poking his finger in a hole in the red, white, and blue. Sarah meanwhile, said nothing, absently checking over her nails.

“This one’s old as hell. Where’d he get it?”

“Is some shitty old flag what you’re really interested in?”

“Not at all,” he said as he jumped down from his perch, “just curious.”

“I can help, uh,” Sarah gulped, “with that curiosity.”

“Oh?”

Once he plopped himself down on the couch, she made the first move, her lips smashing into his. Within minutes, they’re entangled up in one another, lips locked, clothes still on, groping wildly about like fishes on dry land. Eventually, he broke free to take a breath –

“I brought something fun,” he said suddenly.

Sarah shook her head, “Weed makes me sleepy. I don’t want to feel sleepy right now –”

“Not weed.”

He pulled out a baggy filled with white powder and placed it on the table.

“I’ve tried it before, a few times, my brother got it for me. It really gets you going.”

Sarah remembered Maggie had done it once, had told Sarah how it felt like fireworks going off inside her; *it felt fucking amazing* she said. And Sarah had no reason to doubt her, but still –

He grabbed hold of her hand suddenly.

“Just a nibble, that’s all it’ll take. And you’ll love it, trust me. Practically harmless too, just feels like drinking a few too many coffees. That’s all.”

“I don’t like coffee,” Sarah replied blankly.

He snickered as his free hand snaked up her leg, his fingers tip-tapping up and up, getting closer and closer and closer to her –

“Lucky you then,” he whispered into her ear, “don’t have to taste it, just gotta snort it.”

“Ok,” she let out with a crack.

Moments later, she found herself staring down at a white line atop Jack’s makeshift catalog.

“Just like this,” Steve said as he covered one nostril, leaned down, and sucked up his own line. Then he raised his head with a sharp shake, running his hands through his hair. He wiped at his nose and the top of his lips, dotted with white sprinkles. Closing her eyes for a moment, Sarah inhaled, exhaled, opened her eyes, then followed suit –

Within a minute, she felt tingles inside of her. A minute more and her skin felt like bubble wrap, begging for hands to reach all over and pop every inch of it. *I need to move*, Sarah thought, so she pulled Steve in for a kiss and reached down for his belt.

She felt new and improved, like she had left an old self behind as the powder snapped and crackled through her bloodstream, any potential fear gone up in smoke. *The drugs weren’t a part of the plan, but that doesn’t matter* she thought, as she managed to unbuckle his belt.

I want this, she told herself, *I need this*.

“It can wait until tomorrow you know,” Sue said with a smile as she leaned into the window.

“No, no. You’re getting it tonight. Don’t know why I left it there in the first place.”

Jack sat idling in the driveway. He hadn't planned on going anywhere, but he had realized, just as they finished their anniversary dinner, that he had left Sue's gift – a Swarovski necklace – hidden in the shop's supply closet. He had even sprung a fair bit on it: an attempt at a peace offering, a hope at smothering the tension between them. The problem with Emily wouldn't simply fade away, but Jack figured resentment would hardly solve anything.

“Make it quick.”

“Promise. I'll bring back some ice cream too.”

“Thanks. I have a feeling I'll need the sugar.”

After planting a kiss on Jack's lips, Sue backed off from the truck and waved as he pulled out of the driveway.

Jack knew the why behind his forgetting: he had spent the last hour of his workday gazing up at the flags from the couch, zoned out. He hadn't even registered the date until he got home. Mentioning this to Sue however, would mean a very long and exhausting trip to the doghouse, plus at least a week on the cheap mattress in the guest room.

He noticed the light as he parked; his fingers tapped at the wheel as he idled. Had he left the light on, he questioned. It seemed entirely possible, he reasoned. Emily could be there, maybe. But she's supposed to be at a friend's at least a twenty-minute drive from here, plus neither of them even had a license to begin with. His mind recalled the baseball bat he had stored under the back seat, almost two years back now. Maybe, he thought, just in case.

He shook his head: no, it wouldn't be necessary. His forgetting to turn off the light seemed the likeliest option, just like he had forgotten the gift.

When he turned his key in the lock however, nothing clicked back in response. He swallowed, then pushed the door open –

Two people on the couch. One, a boy he had never seen before dressed only in boxers. The second, a more familiar face, but an entirely foreign sight: Sarah, in nothing but her underwear. And on top of the table, a baggie full of white powder, beside a condom wrapper. Jack's eyes lasered onto the wrapper, refused to pull away.

"Dad," Sarah said softly.

The boy shot up suddenly and grabbed hold of his clothes and shoes, brushing past the stunned Jack into the night.

"Dad," Sarah repeated as she stood up, "I – I'm going to get dressed."

As she bent down to pick up her clothes, Jack clenched his fists, unclenched his fists and clenched them again more tightly, his nails almost breaking skin.

Jack stamped across the floor suddenly, fist raised. He felt his teeth dig into his lip, tasted copper on his tongue. Sarah slammed her eyes shut, let her clothes dropped, and fell to the floor. Her arms raised in some feeble attempt to block the coming hit, she felt her body shake and curl into itself, her muscles tighten and pinch into themselves.

"Daddy, please!" She yelled out.

The thumping against the floor had stopped, the air around her felt calm. Eventually, she gathered the courage to open her eyes.

Jack stood there, a metre or so away, not even acknowledging her, his head tilted towards the bench, towards the flags. Sarah continued to shake and shake, her arms and legs sore with cramps.

"Get dressed," he said calmly.

He marched over to the bench, tore the flags down – first the American, then the Canadian – made his way to the closet, from which Sarah saw him grab two boxes, stuffing the flags into one. Then he marched past her and out the workshop.

As Sarah heard him opening the dumpster and chucking the boxes into it, she broke free of the shaking, and relaxed into a crumpled mess sprawled on the floor.

CANDLELIGHT

There're no clean dishes.

A small problem that's blossomed. First, the broken dishwasher. My problem then? A lack of money. The solution? Dish soap, sponges, and scrubbing. This worked for about a month.

Enter the second problem: Me. "Cleaning dishes is annoying," I told myself, "yes, it is," I agreed. Solution? Let's not clean the dishes, or at least put it off. "Brilliant," I exclaimed. So, the pile started. Cook something? Put the pan or pot in the sink, leave it, rinse it if needed. Eat something? Put the dishes in the sink, leave it. Have a coffee? Cup, sink, leave it. In theory, once the pile gets too large, fill the sink with warm soapy warm, scrub. Rinse, repeat. Why do now, what can be done later.

Problem three: when to buckle down and actually soak and scrub away all the gunky plates? After three days of sink piling? Maybe, but I can probably let the pile go a little longer. What about four? Five? Six? A week? At that point, the pile's too large, the sink has overflowed, and there're several new, smaller piles taking residence on the counters. Piles beget piles beget piles. And it's not that I don't have time to clean it all up – I have spades of that. I don't want to do it. So, I don't.

Enter now. I've cooked some Neoguri and there're no clean plates, bowls, Tupperware, or cups to put it on or in. The pot I used to cook it? It's the same one I used to cook Neoguri yesterday. I rinsed it after, of course. And the day before that, as well as the one before that. On and on.

At least there're some clean forks left – not many, granted, but I know there're some plastic ones sitting around somewhere anyway. Could eat it out of the pot, but then I'd have to let

it cool. I'm hungry, too hungry. It's five P.M., I've been up for an hour, and I haven't had a thing to eat.

"God damn it," I mumble aloud. My voice bounds off my empty apartment walls. The Neoguri says nothing in response.

Solution? Re-use the plates. Or at least the least grimy ones. Here's one with a few crumbs on it, brush them off, pour the ramen onto it, grab a clean fork. Bon Appetit.

I hold my breath as I walk past the kitchen trash. It's packed to the brim, I've pushed it as far down as it'll go and the garbage peeks out of the lid like a shy Oscar the Grouch. The problem's obvious there, the solution more so. Still: I don't want to do it.

On the living room table, the strawberry fields candle from yesterday sits, half-burnt out. I could re-light it today, but Mom wouldn't.

"A new day, a new smell," she always reminded me, "Why bring out the same thing everyday when you've got a whole world to choose from."

Beside the candle, an envelope, its flap opened and held in place by scotch tape. Mom's penned cursive: *For Emily*. It seems accusatory, like a pointed finger reminding me that, yes, I am very much not Emily. I push it to the side, flip it over, smother the writing against the table.

I open up the box marked "spring" in the corner of the room; a melting pot of smells and colours waft out: flowers, fresh laundry, and rhubarb pie. So many. We never went through them quick enough, but every time Mom went out shopping, she'd come back with one or two. More and more, all the time, faster than she'd burn through them.

Boxes full of candles. A lifetime supply...

Winter's my favourite: that box's in the closet, along with summer and autumn. Cheerful smells. Fireplace, hot cocoa smells. Ginger, reminding me of Mom's Christmas ginger molasses cookies. I tried cooking them once: the bottom's ended up goop and the top's crumbly ash.

But it's spring, and spring's the time for spring smells. And only spring smells. I pull out the half-burnt cherry blossom. It feels heavy in my hand, it's wick a short black nub. What's the purpose of candles if not to ultimately burn out? Still, it's not time. Not yet. I exchange it for an untouched lavender. Soft and simple; not too imposing, but fills a room up with its embrace.

I've smelt this one a lot. Reminders seep in once I light it.

Late Saturday mornings, the open window and a light breeze, watching cartoons with Emily in the den on the scratchy carpet. Mom would wait until after breakfast to light it on the couch's end table, then sit down. Sometimes she'd nurse a tea for a while, other times fold some laundry. Or maybe she'd just sit there, enjoying the *Looney Tunes* right alongside us. She'd laugh when we'd laugh and, eventually, poke at us with her feet and ask if we wanted some sandwiches, or if we'd finished our chores, or pester us about our homework.

Jack didn't stick around much, mornings. He'd finish up a coffee and an egg sandwich, be out the door before I'd even shuffle out of my room, leaving behind a folded-up newspaper, a coffee mug with a cold puddle of brown at its bottom. On weekend afternoons, though, he'd come home, kicking up sawdust with every step, giving the air a chalky texture. He'd hug Emily first, then me, before pulling out two chocolate bars. Kit-Kat for Emily, Oh Henry for me. The smells would mingle together. Lavender, sawdust, and chocolate. They should make a candle of that combo.

I flick the TV on, slurp up my noodles to the news. A story about a long-lost cat waddling back home, talk about changing speed limits, a veteran celebrating his 105th birthday. Strange,

seems like the world should be flipped on its head, like the TV should be screaming about tornado's, robberies, and multiple homicides. When I'm done, I return the plate to the pile, before stopping at the calendar. I draw an X through yesterday's date in black.

Four weeks, four days. The fourth longest I've gone. And four months since Mom died. I flip over the calendar to last month and feel the glare of the red X. My fingers trace up along the inside of my left arm, landing at the crook of my elbow. A strange habit I developed recently. I turn away, wrest my hand free and brush aside some wrappers on the counter to find my smokes and lighter.

I read amputees could develop a phantom itch or pain, their body searching for something it once had, a missing piece. I suppose that fits how I feel: fingers searching for a needle and a vein to shove it in.

Out on the balcony, the air has a crisp, cold nip to it. Not cold-cold, but a medium between a slight chill and a nice breeze. Weather befitting a thin sweater and sweat pants.

I light up, take a long drag, lean against the railing. Below, people mill about, in pairs, with kids, alone, walking in silence, chatting with one another, living their lives one step forward at a time. Four Weeks. Four Days. I'm on day five. I can do that. Tomorrow, day six. The day after, five weeks. I can make that.

Then a whole other week will unfold before me and I'll do it all over again.

One day after another, one week after another and on and on.

Jack places down the Summer box with a grunt. He stretches, rubs his knuckles into the middle of his back, an attempt to erase whatever pain bit at him, muttering about the basement steps being too steep and fixing them up one of these days.

“This is the last one.”

Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter: large labels, etched with Mom’s cursive in thick black marker. Kneeling, I open the winter box and feel my way through the collection: cedarwood, fireplace, chestnut & clove, plum, evergreen, holiday cheer, even one named winter.

“It’s not that I don’t like them. Nice to have the smells around. And they sure as hell remind me of her. Christ, barely a day went by without some smell or another filling the place up. But it just seems wrong for me to be the one lightin’ them, ya know?”

“Thanks,” I mutter, “I’ll go through them, every last one.”

“Good, good. She would’ve wanted that.”

Jack stands there a while. His fingers tap at his waist, his head turns this way and that, his mouth opens, closes, opens, closes, like a senile goldfish. I continue to peruse.

“Yep,” he finally lets out with a too-long nodding, the culmination of his building courage, “going to see Em and Jenny off. Unless there’s anything…”

“There’s nothing,” I respond, not missing a beat, “I’m good here.”

“Right…”

He leaves a chill in his wake and I shudder: a winter breeze from one of the many open windows in the house.

“Gotta air the place out,” Jack had said earlier, as if a current of fresh, cold air would carry away all the anger, all the tears, all the grief: make the house feel ok again. But the dead linger no matter what you do.

They hang heavy in a home, not like a stench, but a presence: an empty space that feels not empty, like a heavy current of air pushing down into you. It reminds me of when, for a brief

period, I worried about the monsters in the basement; non-existent things that'd tear me apart if I went down there alone without turning the light on.

The dead sit on the couch, within the flicker of a candle, hands grasped around a cup of tea. It's not that I'm an expert on the subject; it's just something I've learnt all too recently.

Like the boxes filled with candles, each one held and considered when she lit them, when she bought them. My fingers settle into the spaces Mom's once filled as I rummage through the box; the candles feel heavier than they ought to, like two people are grabbing at them once, pulling in opposite directions. Like the box filled with jewellery, much of it costume, that Emily took one look at before saying "take it all." Like all the clothes we had just finished boxing up, soon to sit in memoriam in the basement, at the thrift shop for a tenth of their price.

Or like the Christmas decorations she put up a week before she died in a small bout of energy. The strand of indoor lights and stickers she had guided Jack to hang and set in the den and entryway. A wreath Jack hung on the front door while she gave directions with a pursed, considering lip. And the plastic little evergreen tree she had fussed over, the only decoration she had placed herself. First, it ended up in the den on one sofa end table, then the one opposite. Second, on the mantle, where she hummed and hawed over it, adjusting it an inch or so one way, two or so another, taking a step back to consider its placement every time. Finally, she decided on the entryway table, where she sat it down with a titled head, moved it a little to the left, then turned it slightly to the right. Tiny movements, yet her chest heaved.

"Perfect," she said softly.

Minutes later, I helped her up the steps and she returned to bed. Two nights later, she passed in her sleep.

That morning, I found him in the kitchen, shoulders slumped, hands clutched around a coffee that smelt a little too strong. If he had cried, his face hadn't shown it.

"She's gone. We went to bed and I woke up and she was just ..." he said, his voice gravelly.

He took a long, punctuating gulp as I stood in the doorway.

"I don't know what to do," he continued.

And neither did I, but I pretended. I left him there, to drink and sulk. Then I called the funeral home to get Mom. I sat on the porch, managing my way through nearly half a pack until they came, turning my face away and clenching my eyes shut as they took away the body. The gravel of the driveway crackled underneath the wheels of the gurney, Pop Rocks going off inside my skull. After, I called Emily.

"Mom's dead," I said, my voice dripping with tar and smoke.

"Oh," she returned. Just, *Oh*.

I stand up from the candles with a stretch, I scratch at my elbow as an urge begins to creep up. From the window in the dining room, I spy Jack, Emily, and Jenny outside, talking as Jenny's car warms up. Jenny catches me and throws a small wave my way; I return it.

"She's nice," I say to the candles behind me, "If she were a man, you'd have loved him."

My eyes roll over to the entryway table, where my purse sits. Where a freshly written letter sits inside, stuck between a pack of smokes and a lighter. My fingers itch. I turn away from the window, the purse.

I'll wait until they leave, until Jack pops back inside, to have a smoke. Then I'll be off myself.

Needing to preoccupy myself from the urge, I head upstairs. Soon enough, I'm opening the door to their bedroom. The closet's open, cleared of most of her clothes. There're no sheets on the bed, those're being washed. Jack hasn't even slept in here the past few nights, sleeping in the guest room.

I sit down on Mom's side of the bed, letting my fingers trail along the bare mattress. That's when I notice it, tucked away behind a photo of her and Jack on her bedside table, smiling in front of the house before I was born.

A candle, half-burnt out: cherry blossom. A candle out of season.

Leaving the apartment means temptation. I learnt that the hard way.

Like the little one-way side road tucked away on my walk to the variety store. A two-minute trip down it, then a right into a little cul-de-sac lands me in front of a two-story redbrick house that I'd just need to knock on the back door of –

I pass it now, that side street. That's why I keep to daytrips now. It's harder to get up to bad shit under the light of the sun.

When I passed it five weeks and six days ago on a late-night hounding for cigarettes however, my feet had taken me down that route almost subconsciously. I needed something and my body seemed to think that what that back door offered had a taste better than any Pall Mall.

The wrongness had only begun to set in once I had found a vein, had a band around my arm, a needle ready in my hands, but that feeling had come far too late. One small prick later and the world felt easier and lighter, like seeing everything through *Looney Tunes* vision.

I leaned in close to a lit candle, Tulip Fields, bobbed my head along with its flicker, snickering away. Then I spied the envelope, still closed, pinned lightly by the cherry blossom

candle. My hands wasted no time: I tore it out from under the candle, ripped it open and my eyes engulfed Mom's words whole. I traced my fingers along her writing, two whole pages of it, every syllable meant for Emily.

Half an hour later, I felt like a cinderblock.

The rest of that night slowly slithered away from me. On the couch with late night TV and my shivering skin, wrapped up in a blanket as my nose drifted to the cherry blossom candle, beside the open letter. When I got up to dry heave into the toilet for a few minutes, I put the candle in the spring box before pushing it into the room's corner, stuffed the letter back in its cage and taped it up.

That's when I set the curfew: home before sundown, every day. Mom would appreciate that, call it smart, *forward thinking*.

Inside the variety store, I feel the gaze of the elderly cashier on my back, my fingers scratching at their usual spot. Can't blame her, used to come in here all the time, walking with a slow, heavy step as if every inch forward needed heavy consideration, my head tilted, mouth open, as I chose from a row of candy bars. But she let me in all the same: any money's good money, I suppose.

I place a 12-pack of ramen on the counter, ask for a pack of Pall Malls. Her eyes heavy-set, her face granite, she places the pack of cigarettes on the counter gingerly, before snatching her hand back like a snake striking in reverse, making sure that our fingers don't brush one another. My body tenses up, screams for a smoke, remembering that time a mother had yanked her boy in close as I stumbled by in a daze. At the time, I laughed. Later, once I sobered up, I curled up on the couch and lost myself in infomercial after infomercial, ignoring the scratchy wetness on my cheeks.

“I’m trying,” I want to tell her, “I swear to God I’m trying, I’m really, really trying.”

“That’ll be twenty-two fifty-four,” she lets out in monotone.

I pay without saying anything, feel a need to curl my toes inside my shoes. My calves bite at every step until I make it outside, the outside air soothing my nerves, at least a little.

On the walk home, my phone rings: Jack. I had made the mistake of answering one of his calls two weeks ago, partly out of pity. I don’t make the same mistake.

“How’re you?” he had asked.

“Fine,” I told him.

Then, a pause, the sounds of his nasally breathing on the other end.

“I’ve been thinking about your Mom,” he started, “You would’ve been too young, this is back before Emily was even born. She had ya in her arms as we shopped and this man bumped into her, almost dropped you. Really laid him out, I could see the spit flying out of her mouth. This guy – scared him half to the death. Lord, when she had the mind, the words she would use...”

He went on like that: ten excruciating minutes of him dawdling on about random stuff about her, a fair chunk that I’ve heard before, and settling into long pauses, waiting on my responses of “yes’s” and “no’s” and “fine’s” and “ok’s” and “oh’s.”

“Anyway, sorry for bothering ya. I found an apple pie candle, just tucked away in some cupboard. Not even lit. Got me thinking, wanting to talk is all,” he pauses, coughs, “Smells pretty nice, ya know.”

Another candle out of season, I thought, Mom would give him a swift kick in the ass for that.

“Right,” I said.

One final pause, inhale, exhale, inhale –

“Nice talking,” he said, as if I had actually said anything of value, “but I gotta go shopping.”

When I get home, I smell lilacs, the candle burning on the living room table. I imagine Mom’s hand slapping into the back of my head, lightly, of course. *Leaving a candle out like that, she’d start, now that’s just asking for trouble* and I’d say *I know, you’re right Mom, and If you know I’m right then you better well listen; no need to turn what little you have into ash.*

“Sorry Mom,” I say as I snuff out the candle, “It’s just nice to come back to a smell like that, makes the place feel alive.”

Silence. Always silence.

“I wish he’d stop calling,” I continue, “It’s annoying.”

Sure, he can always talk to Emily, no problem. But it’s not the same as with me, at least when it comes to Mom. I’m the one who got all her candles after all, all her jewellery, a few knick-knacks. Even one of her old sunhats, not like I’ll ever wear it. Emily? She’d sooner see all that thrown into a pit and paved over.

He calls to reminiscence, to swap stories. But me and him? We can’t do that. We can never do that. I wonder if he calls with that same hope every time, that maybe this time my voice will perk up and I’ll chatter away with him. Then he hears my voice and the monotone syllables I reserve for him and all that hope deflates like a sad little balloon.

Or maybe he honestly doesn’t even know why he’s calling. That would track too.

I lean back into the couch, breathe in the lingering smell of lilacs, still trapped in the air. A collage of memories spreads out before me: Emily and I playing with dolls on the living room floor, Mom chattering away on the landline from the couch, the sound of her swirling spoon

clinking against a cup as she keeps her hands busy. Or making chocolate chip cookies in the kitchen and Mom lets me have a spoonful of the mix, but takes the spoon away before I can go for another –

My noses crinkles at a sudden, awful smell. Just a whiff of it, from the kitchen, mixing itself in with the lavender: that damn garbage can. I drag my hands down my face, get up, grab my smokes, and head onto the balcony.

Mom starts to shake as I help her lower herself down onto the couch.

“Thanks honey,” she says, “the walking I can handle. The up and down? Not so much.”

“Whatever you need,” I tell her, sitting down.

Sticking around seemed the right thing to do. Isn't that sort of what children are for: pop them out, take care of them, get old, and get taken care of? The true cycle of life.

Emily didn't agree. Hell, she couldn't manage a week back home to visit Mom in the hospital without getting high every damned day. School presented an easy excuse, a simple way to disappear and bury her head without being questioned.

“Mom's dying?” I imagined Emily's voice, “No, I don't have time for that. I've got exams.”

I stuck around in spite of my potential excuse. He lumbered around the house, slept beside Mom in bed, woke up early to plate up eggs, toast, hash browns, and bacon almost daily. And every step he took, every breath in and out, every movement, made my body tighten up, my lips beg for a cigarette to massage between them. But my excuse and I shared the same goal, cared deeply about the same person.

“Coffee,” he would ask.

“Sure,” I’d smile, “thanks.”

“Can you clean the bathroom, my back and all,” he’d complain.

“No problem,” I’d nod.

“Can you head out to the shop,” he’d inquire.

“What do you need?” I’d return.

He’d move around me slowly and with purpose, never wasting a syllable more than needed, never pushing for small talk. In turn, I swallowed what needed to be swallowed, I provided him with smiles and nods, pretended as best I could – played the part of the good, perfect daughter. And sneaked off for a smoke nearly every half-hour.

As long as I could help her stand up when she needed it, be beside her, and offer a helping hand, I could make him inconsequential. Any anxiety, any tension I couldn’t bury, I could quiet down with a little nicotine.

“It’s about that time, don’t you think?”

“Hm?”

“Christmas candles.”

She sounded like an excited preschooler, eager for their first day of school. Around this time, in this house, the changing seasons and the swapping of the candle guard became events unto themselves. Still –

“Bit early, don’t you think? November’s not even halfway over.”

She had a system for this stuff. Every season had its candles and to step out of those boundaries, to her, seemed in bad taste, not unlike those people who leave Christmas decorations up until February. And though Winter and Christmas candles overlapped one another in their

smells, she always set aside a particular batch of smells for December: evergreens, gingerbreads, peppermints.

“No,” she let out softly, “no, I don’t think it’s too early this time.”

This time. Shivers crawled up along my skin. It’s an attitude I had seen before, from a friend in a support group, when I used to run in those circles.

I had taken her out to lunch at this nice, family-run diner after her boyfriend dumped her, an attempt to cheer her up. She ordered a chicken caesar wrap –

“You’re a vegetarian,” I had said.

“Yeah,” she let out in a tired voice, “nothing wrong with a little cheating now and again though.”

The words seem underlined with something then, a certain uneasiness that I couldn’t get past. A vegetarian shouldn’t actually think that, an addict would know the danger behind such justification, but sadness does funny things to people.

Twists them up, wrings them out.

A few days later, her landlord found her on the couch. The cause of death? Drowning in her own vomit. It’s easy to place the blame on the boyfriend. Too easy.

“Yeah,” I let out, “guess Christmas is going to start a little early this year.”

“Just a little.”

I got up and grabbed an evergreen, then went to light in –

“No. I’d like to. Please.”

The lighter trembled as she held down the trigger.

I take a sniff: nothing too cloying, not too subtle. The type of candle where you can pick out the exact scents and imagine yourself underneath a flurry of floaty, pink petals, but won't exactly dominate a room.

I place the cherry blossom candle down on the table. It's a little thing, packed with so many questions. Every once and while, it gets hard to resist, the need to pull it out becomes as enticing as a cigarette between my lips. Never to light it, though – no, just to hold it and feel it in my hands, to settle my fingers into the spaces Mom left behind.

December, January, February came easy. The pull began in March, when the snow faded, the air warmed. It's a spring candle after all. Yet, I found it in her room, recently lit in the winter, hidden behind a photo like a shameful secret. Busting out the Christmas candle's a few weeks early bent the seasonal rules she lived by; lighting a cherry blossom however, came as a full-on dismissal. A middle finger in the face of the pointless rules that, for so long, she had followed absolutely, like some holy oath.

"I don't fucking get it."

You don't? Mom's voice echoes in my head.

"I just don't."

It's not like an answer will change anything, she'd say, or that I even have an answer to give. And it wouldn't, but answers come with neat little bows. Just look at this kitchen. The smell, and not just the trash, but the whole place. You got bigger problems than some candle.

A staleness had set into the air, along with the smell of the trash, the odour from the dishes. A fishy smell from some cans of tuna, the rotting veggies I'd left in the crisper too long: I could pick out the worst smells one by one, but the staleness seemed impossible to place. It hung

in the air, tickled at my nose, caused me to twitch and turn through the night, itched at my tongue with the taste of mushy, flavourless crackers.

It didn't have a smell to it per say, more a feeling. A feeling of days stretching on too long, of losing track of time on the couch, of lying in bed, counting cracks on the ceiling until the pulsing need to piss or a crying stomach finally forces me up.

Honestly Sarah, Mom would say, Clean up after yourself, make the place nice. Dust a little, clean the dishes, take out the trash – do something, do anything.

I push the cherry blossom to the side, rummage in the box and settle on a purple Springtime. It smells like warm grass clippings left out under the sun, brings to mind little bees buzzing around.

Goddamn it, she'd complain, Candles aren't some band-aid, some quick fix. No matter how many you light, no matter how good they smell, they won't hide the stench underneath. Sooner or later, you have to grow-up, sooner or later, you have to –

The sudden ringing of my phone pierces through her voice, skewers it still. I already feel a headache pinching between my eyes before I look at the name because who else would be calling me except Jack. Except, maybe, on an off-chance –

Emily.

For a moment, my hand hovers as it continues to ring. I bite at my lip as it rings closer and closer to voicemail. Finally, I answer –

“Hello?” I croak out.

“Oh my, not only does she breathe – she speaks too.”

“What?”

I can hear her sigh on the other end, can imagine her rubbing at her eyes.

“Could you answer Dad once in a while? He’s pretty worried.”

“That’s why you’re calling, on Jack’s behalf? Come on. Not even a ‘hey, how’re you?’”

“Well, you sound like shit, so I assumed you were feeling like it.”

I snort. No fault in that reasoning.

“Look,” she says, “you don’t have to talk to him. God knows you don’t want to. Just tell me that, at the very least, you’re... y’know, so I can let him know.”

“Yeah, much as it sucks, I’m clean. Or trying to be at least.”

“Good, I’ll pass that along.”

I pick up the cherry blossom again, rub my fingers over its label.

“Emily?”

“Hm?”

“Do you even miss her?”

I hear tapping against a counter, an almost-answer in and of itself.

“Mom,” she starts, “made things difficult. And... I don’t know, we never reached any kind of understanding.”

I set the candle back on the table. The white back of the envelope taunts me and I flip it over. *For Emily.*

“And if you could find that understanding? Would you even want it?”

“Why’re we talking about this now? I mean, I hate to be harsh, but – well, y’know, the dead don’t exactly do much talking.”

Dead: the word coils itself around my heart, gives it a tight squeeze.

“Right, but, like hypothetically, if you could get something out of her, not even an apology necessarily, but I guess, more like,” I swallow, “more like an explanation, maybe? Would you...”

“Would I what? Want it? Forgive her? Not sure what this hypothetical is getting at.”

“The first one: would you want to hear it, I guess. Even if you knew it wouldn’t change anything. Do you care enough to want something like that?”

“Hell, I don’t know. An explanation doesn’t just wipe away the years I spent in that house – won’t make me forgive her, not ever.”

“Right.”

“Still. I guess I am curious to hear what she might have said.”

The sound of a shattering plate, a crash that echoes through the quiet of the house, followed by a sharp “fuck!,” tears me away from the den into the kitchen. Mom stands at the drying rack, the shards of a plate littering the floor around her. Her hands tremble, her face beet red.

“I was just moving the damn plates, putting them away” her voice comes out in huffed, quivering gasps, “my hands, I don’t know, I was holding them and then –”

“It’s ok, Mom.”

I grab hold of the broom and dust pan, approach the mess.

“No, it’s not, I was just – fuck, give that here.”

I cringe at her language: something about hearing a parent spit out a swear like that, impossible to get used to. She rips it out of my hand, begins sweeping up the shards into a pile with a surprising amount of energy.

“Mom –”

“No, it’s fine,” she snaps, “I’m dying, not a baby.”

The admittance freezes me in place. I should’ve stopped her as she knelt down, said something as she swept the pile into the pan. Yet no words came, my body refused to listen. Once she finishes, her back sets into a tired slump, and she lets the full pan sit beside her. She doesn’t get up, doesn’t speak, doesn’t move.

She just sits there, face turned away from me. Had the words come as much as a surprise to her as they did to me? Then, Jack walks in from the backyard, smelling of dry leaves.

“Sue?” He says.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” her voice soft, “just a little mess. Could you be a dear and help me up?”

When she first collapsed, went into the hospital for a two-week stay, she went with a soft voice and a shaky body. But every day there breathed a little more life into her: she moved with a little more certainty, spoke up, said what she wanted instead of letting everyone else decide for her.

“I’ll be honest,” the doctor said, “there’s not much we can do. We pulled you out of one spiral, but they’ll keep coming. From here on, you can expect good days and bad days. Until, eventually –”

She listened to the words with a dull face and half-shut eyes.

But the anger set in the day she got home. At times, her body listened to her well, obeyed every command with a slight shake; up the stairs without issue, down the stairs without issue, to the bathroom without issue. But sometimes it got too much. Sometimes, her body refused her.

Once, when I woke up, I found her at the top of the steps, hand unsteadily gripping the railing, making no move to go downstairs. When I offered to help, she took it up wordlessly, clenching her fingers into a tight fist as we walked down.

Another time, she had called me into the kitchen. A loaf of bread sat on the ground.

“I dropped it,” she muttered, “I can’t really bend down.”

“Right,” I said, picking it up with ease and placing it back down on the counter. She didn’t breathe a word of thanks.

Good days, bad days. What would today fall under, I wondered as I sat in the den. A rosemary candle crackled on the table, its flicker swayed back and forth. She dropped the plate: bad. She cleaned it up herself: good. She couldn’t get back up: bad.

She admitted she’s dying: good or bad? It’s probably good to accept that, or else you’d end up a jumbled mess of anger. But still...

When the sun had begun to set, she sidled herself up in front of the couch –

“Want to go for a walk?”

“Sure.”

The air’s cold and dry, a few scattered leaves tumble about on the ground, having escaped Jack’s rake. My breath clouds in front of my face, puffy smoke curling into itself before disappearing. Mom’s clouds, tiny and brief, disappear almost as soon as her breath hits the open air.

“I’m sorry, about earlier.”

Her arm’s wrapped around mine for support. I hadn’t even offered her the help, she did it willingly, without a spoken word.

“It’s ok,” I tell her.

We reach the driveway. The gravel crackles, muted underneath our steps.

“It means a lot you know, that you’re here, helping. To me and your father.”

She stops suddenly, tilts her head up towards the grey, clouded sky.

“I’m proud of you. Proud of having raised you.”

“Thanks,” I say, not really knowing what else to do. We stand there a while, she and I. Eventually, she lets her head droop and I feel a shiver crawl throughout her body. Her hand reaches into something in her coat pocket and she produces an envelope.

“I have something I’d like to ask you, a favour.”

She presses the letter into my hand, squeezes my hand between both of hers. When she lets go, I flip the envelope over. *For Emily.*

“What is –”

“It’s a letter. For Emily.”

“Right, but, why’d you give it to me?”

A surprisingly large cloud of breath puffs up in front of her face. It lingers, then dissipates.

“I feel like if I give it to her now, she’ll bunch it up and throw it away without reading it.”

“You don’t know –”

She curls her arm around mine again, gives it a squeeze.

“A mother knows these things. And if I give it to Jack, he won’t have the heart to hold off passing it along.”

“So, you want me to, what, exactly?”

“Give it to her at the right time. That’s all.”

I rub my fingers into the envelope, feel the letter inside. Problem: when is the right time.

“But —”

“It’s ok dear, I trust your judgement. Just squirrel it away until then.”

I slip it into my coat pocket, it feels like a jagged chunk of steel.

“There’s one more thing, before we go back inside,” she says, “It’s about your grandfather – my father. You have the right to know. Your Dad and I always agreed I’d be the one to tell you this, when I felt it the right time.”

It smells terrible. Like, god awful. Like some bloated thing crawled into garbage bin and kicked the bucket. Something no candle, no matter how strong, would be able to mask.

“Shit.”

Surprised it took this long, Mom would say.

Walking into the kitchen, I pull my shirt up to cover my nose, and hold my breath. Even then, I can feel the stench dragging its meaty hand along my face, caressing my watery eyes, trying to stick its fingers up my nose. Hell, even my ears feel assaulted, like all they want to do is pucker inward.

I try pulling at the edges of the bag, but nothing gives, the trash perfectly compacted into the bin. After pulling a little more, a little harder, I hear the bag tear. I slap the palm of my hand against the side of the pail; it responds with a sting that tingles along my reddening palm.

I rummage through a drawer and manage to find some tape and use as much as I can to keep the bin shut. Then, I begin inching the heavy bin out of its nook, push it along to the front door like I’m corralling the world’s chubbiest toddler. Once I’m out the front door, I do the same down the hallway to the elevator. Luckily, I manage to get on the elevator without bumping into

anyone. When the elevator doors chime open on the next floor down, my luck dissipates along with it.

A man, not much older than me, wearing a suit and holding a briefcase. His eyes raise at first in confusion at the sight of a woman huddled over a taped-up trash bin. Then, his face twists and contorts as he cranes his neck away. He lets his brief case drop to cover up his mouth and nose as a gag squeaks out.

I clench my eyes shut tight, turn my face downwards. Is it that much worse than I thought? The elevator doors crawl to a close; no one interrupts on the rest of the ride down. I see no one else when I maneuver the bin outside the elevator, waddle it outside to the dumpster. Pushing it up against its big blue cousin, I step around a corner and collapse against the side of the apartment, away from the smell.

An itch for a smoke in crawls up through my throat. My fingers start scratching at the inside of my elbow. They feel like they want to keep scratching until the beds of my nails become caked with my skin and blood; until they finally reach the white of my bone.

“Damn it.”

I stand up with a stretch, finally realize the tickle of the muggy heat on my skin. Summer’s inching ever closer. Nine weeks, five days since last I got high. Five months since Mom’s been gone. I can make six days, then a week. And a whole other week will unfold in front of me.

I’m going to need a new bin, should probably clean up those dishes too. Not today though. Maybe tomorrow. *Maybe.*

VANISHING POINT

The blank, white space of the canvas sits across from me, propped up on thin, easel legs. From behind, the evening sun peeks in, floating between the curtains, caressing my back in an orange glow. A shadow splotches out over the canvas, a moving piece painted by the hand of the sun's dying light, with the half-closed curtains as its tools and me as its hue. Its edges soft and rounded, its innards lacking definition, and its movements fuzzy.

I tilt my head; the shadow tilts its head in kind. I lift my arm, so too does the shadow. Yet its arm cuts off at the edge of the canvas, a nub. I sit up a little straighter, breaking from an unconscious slouch, the tip of the shadow's head lops off, just a little bit.

Jenny's words ring through my head, I've heard them time and time again as she entered my studio: "Stop doing that," she'd laugh as she pushed her palm into my back, trying to force me to sit up straighter, "you'll thank me in a few more years. Trust."

The shadow's alive, only at this time, so long as I leave the curtains open, so long as I sit on this stool, so long as the sun sets. It will die as the sun goes through its cycle, sets and falls under the horizon. And it will rise again tomorrow evening: another brief life against the underscore of an empty canvas.

The shadow's like me. Only blobby-er. Only shadowy-er. Trapped within the confines of a white space, unable to leave a lasting streak, a dab of colour, a pencil outline or even the tiniest mark of permanence.

I stand up, crack my fingers, wrap them around a warm Pabst on the nearby table and drink. Jenny bangs about in the kitchen. The smell of chicken, garlic, oregano, rosemary, sizzling in an oiled pan, wafts in between the cracks of the studio door.

The cousins of my current canvas populate one corner of the room, plopped up on top of one another haphazardly: eleven in total. I suspect there'll be a number twelve, sooner rather than later. But not tonight.

Canvases filled with the half-est of half-starts. Five of them carry nothing but toner between their walls; thin, transparent coverings meant to set the mood. Light reds, oranges, and browns. Soft, warm colours that bring to mind crackling fireplaces, sunsets, a mug of hot cocoa. The rest at least have the semblances of the beginnings of a painting, lazy outlines and blotches begging to be filled out and filled in.

None of them right. None of them close enough.

Some with strokes too large, too small, others with edges too angular, too rounded, a melting-pot of approaches swirling around, but never reaching, a perfect centre. They seem crafted by hands painting by the numbers, destined to line the walls of farmer markets and garden centres, alongside signs of wood and canvases proclaiming "eat, pray, love" if finished.

I chug the rest of the beer and it sloshes down, room temperature, fuzzy. Sorting through the pile, I grab hold of the attempt closest to finality.

The tone's a lightly brushed woodsy-copper, a mix of half-and-half cadmium orange and a light brown. The clearest thing, the woodworking table, stretches long and proud. Two shapes adorn its presence: one on the table, the most detailed aspect its bottom-half and dangling legs, the other, a heavy-set back, slightly slouched at the table, hard at work.

I search for the memory. The edges frayed and torn: threads that threaten to unravel just as much as tighten if I so much as pull a little tighter.

I'm seven or so, scribbling away in a colouring book, plopped on the blue couch. Mom and I brought lunch to Dad's workshop. She sits on the table, her legs dangling off, eating a

sandwich. Dad's back rumbles as he speaks. Mom lets out a laugh: crumbs and bits fall out of her mouth. Her face lacks definition and form, impossible to make out. She leans in for a kiss and Dad, back still turned to me, breaks from his work for just a moment, meeting her halfway.

Above the bench wave the two flags, the ratty American one, the newer Canadian one. I haven't tried painting either of them yet –

The sudden clang of metal meeting floor.

“Shit,” Jenny says, “God damn it.”

My fingers trail along the shapes on the canvas. Where can I place the blame, what's causing this need to start again and again? The colours are agreeable: they give the canvas a sawdust grain, bring to mind all the little particles kicked up by Dad's bandsaw, that hung in the air. The brushes then? The strokes? The piece seems to call for finer details and sharp angles sketched out by an exacting hand. I thought my round and filbert brushes suitable enough; a decent balance between detail and space. Somewhere, stuffed in the back of a closet, is a binder filled with Dad's sketches, a plethora of potential references; maybe looking at that could spark something. Yet –

No, none of that seems quite right; something technical and exact would come as an easy fix, spark a subconscious need to trace and copy. No, the solution is simple: patience, practice, and trial and error. I press my thumb into the hazy image of Mom, almost as if to blot her out. Her form doesn't change however, the paint long since set.

I toss the canvas back onto the reject pile.

In the kitchen, Jenny's splitting her time between the crackling pan and a pot full of noodles –

“Don't worry, everything's under control. Just dropped a knife.”

Leaning down, I scoop up the culprit and put it in the sink, its blade covered in a slight, slimy sheen and stuck with bits of raw chicken. Charlie bounds around the corner, nuzzles up along my leg, tilts her head up, her nose twitching. I stick my tongue out at her. *You snooze, you lose*. Then she starts licking the floor.

“Hope you’re not burning the place down.”

“Hey,” she turns about, pointing a tong at me, a bit of sauce dripping off onto the floor, more for Charlie, “I made a promise that I’d do the cooking when I got some time off.”

She turns back to the chicken, stirring. My nose crinkles at the heady scent of garlic.

“You know, its a lot less threatening when your weapon drips onto the floor.”

“Shut it, you,” she mumbles.

I kiss the nape of her neck as I sidle by her, reach into the fridge for another Pabst: this one cold and much more tolerable.

“How’s the painting coming along?”

The can lets out a sad hiss as I crack it open.

“Uh. It’s coming.”

“Take all the time you need.”

“Right.”

A memory bubbles to the surface as I sit down at the table, take a swig. A talk from a professor – the exact class escapes me now.

“Here’s the thing about nostalgia.”

He stood in front of a projection at the front of the class. A smorgasbord of paintings: impressionist, expressionist, surrealist, and realist works draped in watercolours, oils, acrylics, and pastels. Up at the top of the presentation, “NOSTALGIA” in cheesy PowerPoint word-art,

signalling a common thread between the works below. The sorts of images offered up? Playing children, setting suns, rising suns, streets covered in light drizzlings of snow under morning suns, living rooms illuminated in evening light – what the fuck is with nostalgia and the sun – elysian fields dotted in tulips, roses, and sunflowers, splotches, wheels, spirals, and whirlwinds of colours, warm and bright, like the vomit of a rainbow. The only words suitable to describe them? Cliché, dull, predictable, and, of course, that ever terrifying death knell: only really suitable for Hallmark.

The professor tapped his head, covered in a thin, wiry wave of brown. Dr. Davidson? Dr. David? Can't recall.

“It is perhaps the most prominent feeling our unconscious yearns for. It wants those buttons pressed: that shot of endorphin all because we saw something from happier times. It craves that familiarity. That familiarity however, begets complications, no matter the art form. After all, familiarity can never breed surprise, and that familiarity can hardly be called original, let alone exciting.”

He brought a large mug to his lips, taking a long chug of black coffee. The man a fiend for the stuff.

“Now. I'm not saying you can't approach nostalgia, or consider it in your work. It's merely a wellspring to draw from, like any other. But I advise caution, a search for feeling beforehand. Your impetus, where would you place it? Do you desire simple rendition, a bringing of the past into the now? In art, why should the now care about the past? Art is not a tool for retelling history – you are not history students, dealing in facts – it is a lens through which that history can be refracted. Even in photography, a photo is not simply taken to capture a moment; it comments on that moment, makes that moment appear as more than it is.”

With a deep exhale, he tilted his head towards the projection, considering the gallery of mediocrity.

“Before you even sit down to start such a piece then, ask yourself: is this rendition, or refraction? Are you a simple camera, or a lens? What is the point – the impetus – in painting this piece?”

I ask myself the questions over and over, never able to settle on an exact answer. Yet the answer to the final question remains unchanging, a monolith that won't move an inch –

What's the point in painting this piece? I have to do it. I have no choice.

I sip at my coffee, return it to the side table. It's a little too hot, but only a little; it nips at my tongue with a slight heat, but not enough to burn. My fingers fumble about with the brush in my other hand, a poor attempt at twirling, something to keep busy.

The white of the canvas gazes at me. If it had a face, would it mock me? I give my head a shake, what a stupid question.

Pushing myself off the stool, I end up at the window. Detroit stretches out below me, the city and its people unfurling and stretching with a lazy yawn as the morning crawls towards noon. On the sill, Dad sits in his little clay pot. With a light touch, I tap on the lid of his urn, circle a finger around its grasp.

I could paint a scene with just Dad, toiling away at his workshop bench. It's a sight that chiseled itself into the back of my eyes ages ago. I had even tried it before, in that very workshop, when my hands lacked confidence and carried themselves with an uncertain shake. Back then, I hadn't quite grasped the vanishing point; how to apply it and trick the eyes.

For a time, it hadn't just been Dad's workshop – it had been *our* workshop. He measured, cut, and pieced together; I observed, sketched, and painted. Back then, Mom came as the intrusion who broke apart the peace of the space.

So why –

I let my eyes shut, attempt a return: I'm seven, I'm colouring. Dad scrapes sandpaper across a plank atop his bench. Mom has no face; she's a blur, a smear. Whipping around, I grab hold of my coffee, begin pacing the room.

– why do I need to paint this scene?

When I sat down in the studio for the first time again after months of drifting, the original plan involved only the back of Dad working away, his workbench, his wall of tools, the two flags, all while he watched from his sill. A fitting memorial.

As brush met canvas however, the scene with Mom and Dad wormed its way out of my fingers and plopped out onto the canvas, began to thrash about and roll around.

And I froze.

When I unthawed, every brush, every stroke, every thought rang false. The only certainty became the need to lay out that single scene. A memory so hazy that I couldn't even tell if I had made it up.

Harsh memories with Mom resound far more easily, offer themselves up unfettered by the decay of time.

Like when I first heard her say faggot.

The end of high school and the approach of university. By then, enough curves, breasts, and flowing hair told me what my lips craved, my body wanted.

I woke up late at night, a desperate, pinching need to pee, fumbled my way out of bed. As I passed the stairs, I noticed a dim light at its bottom from the kitchen and heard strained, hushed voices. Mom and Dad, arguing. I tip-toed down the stairs, avoiding the usual creaks and groans, stopping halfway.

“It’s not a big deal. She’ll end up just fine,” Dad said.

“She won’t,” Mom let out, her voice racked with tears and frustration, “Once she’s out of this house, there’s no telling what she’ll get up to.”

“She’s eighteen. She can make her own choices, do what she wants.”

“And if she *wants* to be a faggot?”

Dad went on, “Damn it Sue, this has nothing do with you or...,” his voice crawling away as I sneaked back up the steps. For a while, I sat in the dark on my bed, not crying, just ... sitting. I felt tired, yet wide awake: no anger, only a tinge in my chest, a light thrumming.

Once I heard their thumping up the stairs, the shutting of their door, I finally trudged towards the bathroom.

Mom’s terminology made it easier to swallow. I even wanted to correct her the morning after, to tell her to call me a dyke over breakfast, not a fag.

“If you’re going to insult me,” I imagined saying, “at least do a proper job of it.”

The potential popping of her eyeballs, her stunned stammering, the red beating of her face: those thoughts carried me through the day.

When she used it out of the blue a few years later, I realized the stupidity behind those thoughts. I should’ve gotten pissed, should’ve stomped down those stairs and screamed in her face. I should’ve done a lot of things.

I take another sip of my mug, but no coffee follows: it's empty. Afternoon light flutters in between the curtains, not oppressive like the evening glare. No shadow can sprout here now; it's only the canvas and I.

The shadow comes later, when I inevitably dwell on my failures to the backdrop of the setting sun.

“Shit.”

I pinch at the bridge of my nose, rub at my eyes, then leave to get another shitty cup of pod coffee.

“Where do you want this?” Jenny holds up a too-tall lamp with an ugly beige shade: a cheap, ten-dollar thing that we scrounged up at a salvation army.

Sarah considers it alongside the living room, populated with piled boxes and a single, slightly-used couch.

“Hell, I don't know. Just put it in a corner for now. I'll figure it out eventually.”

“Roger.”

Jenny places down the lamp, takes a step back, adjusts it a little, then goes back outside to grab whatever else needs moving in. I, meanwhile, have my ass planted trying to figure out how to put together a TV cabinet, the instructions about as useful as drunken scrawl on a wet napkin.

Sarah fumbles about with a shelf, grabbing around in a pile of screws –

“It's going well then?” She asks.

“I mean, I can't really tell up from down with this thing.”

She smirks, finds the right screw, then plops the shelf into the bare skeleton we've put together so far –

“I meant overall. Almost nine months now.”

Nine months since Dad died. Nine months since we sorted through what he left behind, and whatever tiny scraps of Mom remained. Four months since we sold the place.

This is a new thing. Talking between Sarah and me. Brought on by the aftermath of Dad. We fumble through it most of the time: awkward phone calls, the occasional dinner, conversations where we both seemed equally afraid to say the wrong thing to one another, and, right now, helping her move.

Can't call talking about our feelings a thing we've figured out 100% quite yet. But we're working through the kinks. At least I like to think so.

I let go of the shelf I've been fiddling with.

“I'm trying to paint.”

“Aren't you always?”

“Yeah, but... it's about Dad. And Mom too.”

“You're making a painting of Mom,” her voice coated in surprise, “are you making her fifty feet tall, giving her tentacles, a hundred eyes, and rows of sharp teeth?”

“What? No? I'm not painting fucking Cthulhu.”

“I don't know, seems like something you'd do; an artist's rendition.”

“What am I, twelve? I have enough dignity and pride as an artist to not make her into some ridiculous caricature. Also, pretty sure that phrase doesn't mean what you think it does...”

“Probably not,” she lets out a laugh, “Seriously though, I think that's a good thing. Right? Maybe?”

Maybe? She's probably afraid to say the wrong thing, piss me off.

“Yeah, well, good or not, I just can’t do it. I’m on my thirteenth canvas. I keep starting, but ...”

“Artist’s block?”

“More like a ‘something-block’. Can do anything else just fine. Hell, I’ve painted a few other things since I started trying. Just, I don’t know...”

Jenny walks in, carrying a decently-sized box. She lowers it to the floor with care and her knees buckle a little, her back bends in an awkward way – better tease her about her posture later.

“This thing really filled with candles?”

“Sure is.” Sarah says.

Jenny raises an eyebrow as Sarah grabs hold of the box, prepares to lift it up.

“Shit’s heavy.”

“Lotta candles,” Sarah pushes up the box with her knee, grabs better hold of it, “I’m just going to put this away somewhere, wanna join me for a smoke outside after?”

“Sure. You joining Emily?”

I push myself up of the ground. The box is marked with thick sharpie, *candles*. Not Mom’s writing, but Sarah’s.

“Maybe later. Probably best I’m not high putting this thing together.”

“Right-o. I’ll be out front.” Jenny says as she leaves.

“Those Mom’s?”

Sarah grunts as she lets the box drop –

“Wanna look?”

I open up the box and, surprise, it's filled with candles, more than a few dozen. I grab hold of the only one wrapped up in crinkly paper: a half-burnt cherry blossom candle. I weigh it in my hand, pop it open to have a quick sniff – smell's faded a fair bit. The wicks have burned down to black little nubs, its specks and crumbles dotting the waxy surface. Cherry blossom, just like –

Sarah's tattoo: cherry blossom branches snaking up her arm. Her hand is squeezing around it. Might be better not to ask.

“These all hers? Dad mentioned giving you some candles at one point, but I never imagined...”

Sarah picks up the box again with a deep breath and a grunt. Seriously, someone's going to throw out their back lugging that thing around.

“She kept stockpiling them even after we left – all that's left now. Gone through them slowly for almost Shit, about three years now. They've lost most of their scents though, just been burning them well, just to burn them, I guess.”

“Huh.”

Sarah thumps up the stairs. I can hear her rummaging around, mumbling to herself, pushing the box away somewhere. Thin walls here. We've already heard the neighbours a number of times: banging around, laughter, the paws of a heavy dog thundering across the floor. The thought of somebody listening on the other side of a wall like this, of hearing me stomp around, of hearing Jenny and me in bed... Yikes.

Sarah walks down massaging a lighter between her fingers. She passes by.

I stand up and peek out between the front curtains: Sarah lights up a cigarette for Jenny, they're shooting the shit, Jenny laughs.

I brought up the noises to Sarah earlier today, already annoyed by them after an hour of moving her in.

“I don’t mind them,” she said, “Last place I lived sounded like a graveyard – always too quiet. It’s nice to have a new start, to feel like you’re not alone.”

“What do you think? Am I cured?”

I reach up and grasp the air. The Strokes debut lumbers out from my speaker to a close, the monotone drawl of Casablancas worms its way about the studio, surging to life in the final track. The light of the evening sun splays out across my body, ending just below my neck and above my thighs. What’s the word for that again?

...

Bisection? Is that right? Bisectioned by the light on the hardwood floor of my studio: my head and legs are furthered shadowed by the nearby light warming my body. It’s a neat image, something I could work with. Can really play up those contrasts. Is the body draped in shadow or light? Does a zebra have white or black stripes? Bit of a cliché maybe, but I can pull something worth while from it...

The canvas perches above me, awash in the fading sun, brushed with a woodsy-red tone. Number fourteen. The tone’s alright, it can work.

Still.

The shapes wobble and melt down, the outlines fall apart as I try to form them in my head. Number fifteen seems inevitable, but I’ll try anyway.

I sit up.

“Bust, huh? Figures.”

The urn doesn't respond. Obviously.

Leaning against the sill, I pull up my phone: *Five Ways to get Past a Block... Number One: Lie Down with Some of Your Favourite Music...* I close the tab. Don't know why I bothered in the first place, not like some two-bit answers from some random-ass blog are going to suddenly upend the gridlock I've been forcing through.

Charlie mews at the door, rams against it. She's not allowed in here – figure getting booted out and blocked at every attempt might clue her in eventually. Too bad cats seem to have a knack for intense cognitive dissonance. Jenny won't be back from the firm for a while now and I've been holed up in the studio most of the day.

"I'm sorry sweetie," I call to the door.

She lets out a long, agonized meow. I turn up the music just a bit, Spotify beginning to play whatever they deem remotely similar to The Strokes.

I close my eyes: workshop, little girl, colouring, sandwich, Mom, Dad, back, talking, laughing, kiss. It's all scribbles, a tangled mess of knotting loops.

I open them and nothing has changed: answers, revelations, epiphanies, and eureka moments do not exist.

"Shit."

Pushing myself up off the sill, I begin to pace, set Spotify to play *Is This It* again. My lumbering shadow pops up on the canvas in brief flickers each time I pass between it and the window.

Break apart the memory into bits, simplify them to the stone age, slot the pieces back together like a misshapen puzzle. I'll force it if I have to, make it so everything connects. I can round a square peg, the hole's not the problem –

A memory trickles out suddenly, a forgotten piece. A complication.

I'm in my bed, just barely a teenager, listening to The Strokes on Sarah's old Walkman, which I managed to scrounge it up from the back of her closet. It didn't sound great, but I couldn't find anything else to play a disk: I didn't have a laptop yet and the only computer sat in the den, in full view, under Mom's eye. The fact that the Walkman worked seemed a miracle.

I picked up the illicit CD case, which I had shipped to a friend's just in case, all the way from the UK. A black leather glove placed gently on a woman's bare ass, only just covering it; her belly sunk in between the thighs, just a slight turn away from being all-revealing.

It wasn't just a sex thing, though I couldn't deny the appeal of its artful eroticism; an appeal that the brash porn I had managed to sneak a few late-night looks at decidedly lacked. No, the duality of it drew me in, the existence of two covers.

One, plastered with a mosaic-like tangle of blue arcs and lines, that I had seen constantly in whatever store I went to, approved for the eyes of Canadian boys and girls. The other with its coy promise of sex, its artistic suggestion: when I first read about it in a magazine, I felt an intense need to swallow, followed by a desire to hold it in my hands.

Even the track list underneath the two covers differed slightly, brought on by the unfortunate titling of a song in the wake of 9/11, furthered the two-ness.

The music underneath the suggestive cover had an energy my ears begged to hear, even if they'd heard most of it before.

Mom found me, later in the day, sprawled across my bed and lost in the music, CD case beside me. My body jolted to find her standing over me, the case in her hands. I took off the headphones. Her lips pinched, her eyes narrowed, and she dropped the case back down to my bed with the softest thump. I could feel the impact ripple through my bed.

“I knocked, but you didn’t answer,” she said in a dry voice.

“Ok,” I squeaked.

A finger tapped at her side, she seemed about ready to let out an accusatory torrent.

Instead, she bit her lip, then –

She turned around, “Dinner’s ready.”

The evening light begins to recede back out the window, shuffling away from the canvas.

Charlie lets out another piercing meow

Why hadn’t I remembered that? Such a strange, little happening. I had gone downstairs to eat afterwards, heart pounding with tension, expecting the blow-up, yet... nothing. We sat at the table and didn’t exchange a word – she didn’t even acknowledge me. I could barely swallow mashed potatoes, fearful that at any moment, any second, she’d make some offhand comment or accusation.

By the time we finished dinner, I felt almost cheated, angry at all the excess anticipation and anxiety bubbling up inside of me. Anxiety I worked through in slow, shallow breathes as I laid on my bed, finding patterns in the ceiling, drifting the hours by –

Another cry, another thump against the door. When I open it, she lets out an excited mrrrp, stretches up along my leg, her paws padding just below my thighs.

“You’re ok, you little whiner.”

I pick her up, cradle her, she nuzzles against my hand, revs up her engine.

“Quit your bitching,” I muse as I push my hand into her face, which she excitedly pushes against, brushing my fingers against her teeth.

“So, thoughts? Garbage, good, great, amazing?” Jenny takes away Sarah’s plate. A light summer breeze pushes itself inside from the open balcony door.

“Great,” Sarah returns.

“Hell yeah.”

Jenny grabs my plate, places a light peck on the top of my head.

“Why don’t you two go on the balcony and have a smoke? I’ll clean up, join you in a bit.”

I down the rest of my red wine, feel the floor wobble slightly as I stand. Sarah takes a sip of her water; only that, pop, and juices for her. By the time I get a half-burnt joint from my stash, Sarah already has a cigarette between her lips. She holds out her lighter and I hold the joint over it, taking a puff –

“So, real talk – what’d you really think of it?”

“Hmm? Good.”

“Yeah, but not great, a little dry,” I take another puff, “I’ll tease her about it later. I, for one, expect my chicken to be perfectly moist. Juicy on the inside with the slightest crisp on the outside.”

Sarah leans against the railing, looking out at the lights and sounds below. I let myself drop down against it, Jenny scrubs away in the kitchen, swaying back and forth to a radio I can’t hear –

“Aren’t you cruel.”

“I’m cruel because I care – it’ll push her to grow. Plus, she gets kinda cute when she’s flustered.”

“Only the noblest of intentions with you.”

“Damn right. I think she just feels kinda bad, hoisting a lot of the house work on me, Dad dying. If I tease her a little, maybe that’ll help. Who knows.”

“The firm keeps her pretty busy though, don’t they? Sounds like hell, just sitting around sorting paper half the time...”

“Meanwhile, I’m sitting on my ass painting, home most days. I don’t know, more than grateful to have her, but I feel like a leech sometimes, y’know?”

“That’s because you are one.”

“Wow, jeez. No hesitation there.”

This experiment went over well: some dinner, some chatting. In Sarah’s words, she’s doing “about as well as she could be” and the search for a new job’s “going,” she figures she’ll end up at a grocery store or something, maybe waiting tables again, but she’s hoping for a job that doesn’t require “dealing with a bunch of assholes.” Great neighbours too, she’s heard more than her fair share of a bed stand slamming against a wall – “she even calls him fucking Daddy” – but they have a cute boxer and have invited her over for a spring equinox dinner – “whatever the hell that means.”

“How goes the painting?”

“Number fifteen.”

“Shit.”

“Don’t I know it.”

A siren wails out from below us, another follows shortly after. Red and blue lights dance past, twisting and turning against the building opposite us.

“What’d Jack think of you living here? I never asked.”

“In America? Or just in Detroit?”

“Both.”

“Called it crime-ridden. Didn’t come to visit once, his back hurt too much, too old, yadda yadda. Just excuses.”

“Excuses?”

“He didn’t like America – at least I don’t think he did. One of the few things he never really talked about, whenever it came up or I’d push, he’d tighten up his lips, give out nothing but basic, cliché answers. Remember, when we were kids, he’d always say—”

“That he liked the cold in Canada.”

“Hell of a reason, upending your life for a little extra snow.”

We share a laugh. I stand up with a stretch, take a final puff, and throw the roach into the ashtray.

“I think it had to do with Grandpa,” I say, joining her against the railing, “never said much about him. If he came up, Dad would get cagey, would say that grandpa died a while back. And then... nothing. Remember that ratty American flag? I think that came from him.”

Sarah takes a drag, holds her cigarette at a distance, then puts the rest of it out in the ashtray. Ash and smoke billows up from the squashed corpse, catches a breeze inside.

“That... makes sense actually.”

“They fuck you up, your mum and dad.”

“Pardon?”

“It’s a line, from a poem. Larkin.”

“Oh,” she mumbles, “you know I don’t know shit like that.”

“Right, sorry.”

Sarah taps at the railing, the reverberations tickle at my elbows. An awkward silence? Or a silence shared between two people comfortable enough to fill the space between them with nothing?

“Guess that explains Mom though,” she speaks up, her voice cracking.

“What do you mean?”

“With her Dad.”

“What?”

Sarah’s bites lightly at her tongue. A knot tightens in my stomach, tangles itself up.

“I have something for you,” she says before walking back inside. After a quick rummage in her purse, she returns and pushes an envelope with tired edges into my hand. *For Emily*, it reads.

“Mom’s writing...”

“I-I debated for a while, on the right time to hand it over. That’s what Mom told me, to give it to you at the right time. But it’s sort of like when you want to tell someone something, but you forget to tell them on a day that makes sense, and you keep forgetting, and forgetting and even though they have a right to know, you still don’t tell them because you feel so fucking awkward about the whole thing. So, I’m sure there were plenty of times to, but —”

“It’s open,” I interrupt, tugging lightly at the tape, which falls off immediately and floats to the ground.

“Yeah, sorry. I kinda got pretty high a while back – like a long while back – and just, well, opened it.”

I open up the envelope: two pieces of paper, folded into one another, creases well-worn, sit. I pinch them between my fingers, but don’t pull them out – each are filled with faded cursive, front and back.

“How long have you...”

“She gave it to me a few days before she died.” Sarah starts to leave but stops at the screen door, hand gripping its handle. “She thought you’d have thrown it away if she gave it to you herself. Would you have?”

“Knowing me? Probably.”

“Right,” Sarah starts to slide the door close –

“Does,” my voice stops her, “does she apologize in any way? Does she say sorry?”

“You should just... read it, I guess.”

“So, no then,” I mumble.

Sarah shuts the screen door, leaving me alone on the balcony with Mom’s faded words. I take a deep breath, then take out the letters, unfolding them –

I thought a while on how to start this letter, what to say, when to say it. I figure, after all this time, you’re at least due an explanation, if nothing else...

“How’s it going out here,” Jenny’s voice worms out onto the balcony, the screen door cracked open a bit. I’m sitting on a lawn chair, the envelope and letter on the balcony table,

unanchored by anything. The smallest gust of wind, that's all it would take and, just like that, poof – like the letter never existed at all.

“You can come out,” I reply.

Jenny steps gingerly out –

“Sarah gave me the skinny.”

“The skinny,” I snicker, “You a beat cop?”

Jenny sits down in the chair opposite, lights up a smoke –

“Na, just this other associate, been working with him a lot lately. Rubbing off on me, I guess.”

“Sounds like a bit of a dumbass,” I muse.

“Just a bit, maybe.”

Jenny picks up the letters, turns them over from side-to-side, but doesn't read them –

“So,” she says, “what'd it say?”

“Y'know how like when some famous guy gets caught doing something bad or called out for being an asshole and the media is tripping over themselves to get a response out him...”

“And then he comes out and deflects, saying that his parents abused him or he got bullied as a kid or some shit?”

“Sorta like that, yeah.”

“Ah, the sob story defense.”

I nod.

“Want to talk about it?”

“Yeah, eventually. Right now, I kinda just want to paint. That strange?”

“I’ve seen you stumble out of bed at midnight after we spent the past hour fucking, mumbling about wanting to paint. Trust me, it’s not strange.”

I snort, “Thanks.”

I stand up, stretch my arms, crack my fingers.

“What about this,” she asks, letter in hand.

“Read it, keep it, throw it away, let the wind carry it wherever the hell it wants too.”

“Right-o. I’ll just put it away for now, let those thoughts sit a while.”

“Probably smart.”

“Good luck,” she squeezes my hand, “I’ll be waiting until you’re ready.”

“Thanks,” I say.

Inside, Sarah sits at the table, scratching at her tattoo. As I pass, she stands up suddenly and I hear a bang against the table. Her hands drop to her knee, which she rubs furiously.

“Damn it,” she grimaces.

“You didn’t have to stand ya know. I’m not royalty.”

“I know. I just, didn’t really know what to do, to be honest.”

“Why don’t you and Jenny keep each other busy then, I’m going to go paint.”

“Go... paint?”

“That’s what I said, yes.”

“Um. Ok.”

She continues to stand there, not making a move; her hand returns to scratching at her tattoo, her shoulders look about ready to snap, and her eyes dart everywhere I’m not. I reach out and poke her lightly on the shoulder and she takes a step back in surprise –

“Don’t need to be so afraid,” I say, “You’re just the messenger.”

“You’re not mad? I took forever to get it to you. I thought about it all the time, even left it in my purse most of the time just in case.”

“Not mad at all. I’m just high and... tired of wasting time hating her. I’m kinda glad you waited, let everything scab over.”

“Did... did it help at all?”

“No, not really. I mean, maybe. Hell, I don’t know. But it’s like, I waited so long for something that I kinda just stopped waiting. And all the sudden, an explanation just plops down right in front of me, and all I can really muster myself to think is: ‘huh, makes sense’.”

“Oh.”

“Thanks for being the messenger though.”

“You’re...welcome?”

As I walk away, Charlie weaves between my legs, nuzzling up against them, following me along. She manages to sneak in as I open the studio door, my senses too rubbery to stop her quickly enough.

“Just be a good girl,” I say.

She mews in response then waddles up to the pile of discarded canvases, giving them a sniff. I spy the full moon through the window, the whole room is covered in a light shadow. Dad sits upon his sill, stoically.

“Why?” I ask.

I know the answer, Mom said so herself: *it’s something we promised one another. That I, and I alone, would tell you this story and he would tell you his own.*

What really catches me is the words that followed: *I hope that, someday, he might find the strength to open up to you girls. Tell you his own story.*

“I would’ve liked to know, I would’ve listened,” I tell the urn, “It’s not like it matters, but still...”

I collapse on my stool, tilt my head at the canvas, its toned skin almost rippling in the dark.

“Mom was a bit of a cliché, wasn’t she?” I say, half to the urn, half to myself, “both of you were.”

My mind feels dull, but the urge to pick up a brush bites at my fingers. The memory remains a haze, Mom uncapturable. This is not an epiphany, but a need.

I don’t know if I’ll get it right, but I have to try.

With a sigh, I dip my brush in an oak brown, set it against the canvas. I’ll begin with the bench, go from there.

RUM AND SMOKES

Jack didn't rest here for long, at the bottom of the stairs. Not even a day. A few hours at most, more than likely. The lonely, crumpled heap I imagine he became barely even cooled before getting scooped up and carted away through the same door Mom once wheeled on through.

I kneel down and run my hand along a dent at the foot of the stairs. A tiny little decline in the floor, caused by the back of Jack's skull cracking into it a week ago. Maybe.

He really didn't leave much of a mess: a small pool of caked blood that I scrubbed away in under half-an-hour. Apparently, most of it internal something or other – at least that's what we heard from the nurses.

Ahead of time, we received a call from one of the attending paramedics, a warning about there being a tiny mess – a kind gesture. Emily had sent me into the house first, to assess as she tapped away on the porch.

“I don't want to see it,” she said, “whatever's left. Just get rid of it, please.”

That's when I noticed a little trench dug into the wood, as I bleached the floor and bristled away the last of Jack's life. I didn't recognize it: this dent. I feel like I would've, should've if it sat here before; that I would remember this gauge at the bottom of the steps that I had walked up and down so many times, despite its tiny size. I place my foot on the mark, press down. I can feel it, ever so slightly, through my socks, like a small part of the floor has sunken.

It's ridiculous, of course, to think that. Why would I ever notice something this small?

It's possible that it's laid here since before I was born. Jack dropped a paint bucket or something on the floor, or maybe Emily dropped some wooden blocks there as a kid. Mom could even be its cause: a dropped candle or a vase. Whatever the case, the mark never registered

before. Nothing more than background noise alongside dozens of other marks, chips, and paint blisters dotting the rest of the house.

Or it's actually the final mark our father left in this world. Either way, it's no more than a tiny little chip.

"God Damn," Emily lets out from the kitchen, "Coffee will be a bit bitter. This thing's filthy. He probably used it every day too."

In the kitchen, she's scrubbing away at the coffee pot. She stops, holds up the pot to some dusty sunlight peeking through the window, let's out a swear, then gets back to it. She'll give up eventually, make coffee with the pot anyway. Some stains you can't get out, no matter how hard you try. Better just to give up, move on, and keep going.

Before Jack's fall, Emily had taken to calling him almost daily; short check-ups to make sure that he hadn't drunk himself into a coma and his liver still wheezed pitifully along.

I had long accepted he would drink himself to death, but I guess we never really talked about it. A fall really didn't occur to me, though it's perfectly obvious in hindsight. I recalled the moment he had almost taken me down the stairs with him, a year or so back.

Makes more sense for him to die in a bout of drunken clumsiness than for the cirrhosis to finally kick in.

"The first missed call, I got little worried," she slurred out on *that* late-night call to me. A call she had started with a long, wheezy "Heeeeeey, Sarah," drenched in so much booze and weed that I didn't even notice the grief at first. Then she followed up with a "So, uhhhh," before bursting into tears.

It took her a while to even break the news proper, though I guessed what happened from the rambling and crying. By the time she got to the nitty-gritty, she could do nothing but blubber and spurt.

Later, on the car ride down here, she admitted to spending a quality few hours with some whiskey and weed. That she barely remembered a second of that phone call. Then she offered up a simple “sorry.”

Before I had even left my apartment to get her, I made a point of taking the letter out of my purse, slipping it underneath the cherry blossom for safe keeping. Some stupid, pointless way to punish her, to bite back.

“Dump that shit on me like that, will you,” I muttered to myself as I walked out the door. Course, she doesn’t even know about the letter – don’t even know if she’d want to read it anyway. But the need to do something, anything, to spite her in some way...

“Waited an hour, called again. Nothing. Waited. Call again, nothing. Called in for a wellness check...” then she let out a squeak halfway between a hiccup and a burp. “Fuck, Sarah... He’s fucking dead.” After that, a rustle from the other end – her phone dropping to the ground.

For that entire call, I steadily worked my way through a pack of smokes on the balcony, only really offering up “ok’s” and “oh’s.” I didn’t mention how she had spent the past few hours inhaling and drinking whatever she could get her hands on. Didn’t bring up how she had neglected to even send me so much as a text. Didn’t say how it would be nice to learn that Jack died from an Emily that hadn’t devolved into a bumbling mess trapped in a hazy fog of liquor and weed.

No, I mostly just listened. For an hour. After she dropped the phone, she stopped talking to me at all, probably forgot she had even called me to begin with. Still, I listened: to her mumbling, her sobs, distanced by an overturned phone, and her sighs of relief from a long drink. My phone teetered on the balconies railing, set to speaker as I watched the road below, a car drove by now and again to the tune of her mental breakdown.

Eventually the line just went dead, probably from her phone dying. I called the landline again and again, waiting a few minutes between each attempt, wondered at whether I even had the right number. Finally, a click –

“Hello?” A voice, drained of life. Jenny.

“It’s Sarah,” I hacked out, my voice like gravel, “I assume my sister is still alive?”

“For now,” she sighed.

“She ok?”

“Shit, I don’t know. Was absolutely piled under a load of case work. She called a few times, but I didn’t pick up. Took forever to even coax out what happened once I got home. No idea how much she’s drank, what she’s been doing; had to shower her, put her to bed. Pretty sure she even pissed herself on the couch. I don’t think she needs her stomach pumped or anything, but hell...”

Emily places a mug on the table in front of me, then sags down into a seat.

“There’s sugar, if you want it. No cream. The only milk... it turned a little solid, so I, uh, threw that down the drain. Well, more shoveled it down.”

“Black is fine.”

Emily raises her brows as she takes a sip.

“I didn’t know that.”

“Hm?”

“That you liked black coffee.”

“Oh. I don’t, but there’s no milk. Not like I’m going to complain.”

“Right...”

I scratch at the inside of my arm, begin to run my fingers up along my tattoo, but stop myself. Emily takes another sip. I do the same. The knuckles on one of her hands are red: specks of dry blood, slight scratches.

“This coffee’s shit,” I say.

“Dogshit.”

I set the mug down, resolve to stomach it as best as I can, tap at the table. Emily continues to drink her coffee, clasping her mug with both of her hands, eyes set on the pool of black sloshing around in it. We sit like this for a few minutes –

“So,” I speak up, “where should we start?”

Sarah hasn’t noticed. At least I don’t think she has. But I’ve never understood how to pick out something from her eyes, how to read her. Even now, sitting across from her, sharing some of the worst coffee I’ve ever had. She’s like a wall, covered in jagged spikes, pots of bubbling oil at the ready, a moat filled with alligators at the bottom –

I spent some time in the upstairs bathroom, closing my eyes as I approached the stairs and walked up the first few steps, the heavy scent of bleach wafting up my nose. My knuckles stung as hot water splashed down onto them, blood-tinged water swirled down the drain: the hydrogen peroxide I poured all over my knuckles felt like tiny little hornets. Probably a waste of the stuff. Not like it’d get any other use now though...

Stupidly, I walked back down the steps the whole way with my eyes clenched, working off memory. *You want to die too?* Dad's grumble of a voice poked at me.

She'd call it a "childish outburst," or something. I don't even know why it happened. Cooped up in the car with her for so long, we barely said anything. Yet I felt judged the whole way down, like every silent second became dedicated to ridiculing me and my choices.

I said sorry, knew that wouldn't be enough, but didn't know what else to say, how to apologize more fully. Jenny coached me before Sarah picked me up, had rubbed at the tension in my shoulders, soothed the nape of my neck with her lips.

"Tell her sorry as best as you can," she said as she wrapped her arms around me, squeezing my back tightly into her chest, "be honest about how you feel."

I didn't have the heart to tell her I didn't know what the fuck I felt.

Instead, I used the coffee sloshing around in me as an excuse to pull off to a rest station.

"All right," she said blankly.

When we came to a stop a short ten minutes later, I jumped out the car, pushed my way inside.

In the stall, I sat down to piss and cried before I even finished, wiping at my face with scratchy-thin toilet paper. Next thing I knew, my fist had slammed against the stall door with a pathetic thud. For some inexplicable reason, it felt almost good, some random moment of release. On the other hand: *ow*.

Luckily, I had a too-big sweater I had borrowed from Jenny, mostly worn to keep me calm. So, I wrapped the shitty paper round my hand, which felt like rusty nails against my wound, walked back out with my arms folded, hand tucked into my sleeve.

And just like that, back on the road, not a word shared –

“So,” her voice rattles me, “Where should we start?”

The word *instantaneous* got fed to us as we talked to the nurses. Supposedly, nothing about the fall left room for thought: one moment, walking upstairs, the next, dead on the ground. *The injuries really did point towards a quick and sudden passing, he couldn't have felt much pain, if any at all. He barely even knew what happened before –*

Under the right circumstances though, a moment can last an eternity: a father raising his fist at you, a needle in an arm, a fall to your inevitable death. He probably realized a half-second before he slammed into the ground, a flash of a thought that no person wants to have: I'm going to actually, literally die here. Then, he floated for a while, suspended, one foot in the air, the other barely clinging to the ground, falling backwards ...

“Well, what do you think?” Emily asks as I follow her into the den. She holds up her arms in a mocking gesture of presentation.

“You asking if I want any of this stuff?”

“I mean, that's why we're here.”

Emily plops down on the couch. It squeaks.

“I'm pretty sure that couch's as old as me,” I say.

“Older even.”

She presses her hand into the cushion and it lets out another cry. All the while, Jack sits upon the mantle in his new home, observing as we prepare to take apart what's left of his life. The only place we figured to stick him for now.

“This whole place, well,” I run my finger along the side table, disturbing a coat of dust, “it's a bit dated.”

Jack probably never had a use for this side table. Mom, on the other hand, she used to set her tea down here, beside the candle of the week. Never a day went by when I don't remember some candle sitting here, lit or not. Mom just seemed to like putting them there, made sure to dust and wipe practically daily. Without her around however, the age of everything began to show. Not a damn thing has changed since I was a kid.

“This whole place, and everything inside it, is also ours. So, we've got to, deal with it. Jenny will get here tomorrow with a moving van so, until then...”

“Just figure things out?”

“Look, I know it's vague, but I honestly don't have any clue what I'm doing,” her voice quivers slightly, “no idea where to even begin. Dad handled most everything with Mom.”

“I handled it.”

“Huh?”

“I handled, I organized, I made sure everything... went along. I had the body taken away, managed the funeral, sorted through her stuff, decided what went to the dump, to the thrift shop. I pointed Jack in the right direction, told him what to lift, what to grab, where to put it, where to drive.”

She flinches when I say his name.

“Oh. I didn't know that. Sorry.”

Jack stopped handling things. Sitting around in his recliner (that's getting thrown to the curb with those stains), watching tv, and drinking seemed about all he could muster up. And it's not that he couldn't do anything else, more like he wouldn't.

Emily wouldn't appreciate hearing that though.

I remember once, that the front door started squeaking in the winter. The tiniest of noises at first that grew and grew into a piercing yelp. The first time Mom swore in front of me, because of that door –

“I’m sick and tired of this God damn thing,” she muttered as we carried groceries in to the tune of a tinny screech.

Then her eyes puffed up and face turned red as I started dancing around proclaiming that “Mommy made a swore.”

As we ate dinner later that night, she asked Jack when he could finally get around to fixing that door. His response?

“I hadn’t even noticed anything wrong with it.”

Mom rubbed her temples, then let out a “Jack, dear,” in a sigh of a voice – the sort that you reserve for a dog or small child that’s done something stupid, but cute all the same.

Jack could build and fix just about anything. Without Mom however, he seemed a discarded tool with no hands to wield him and whack him against the right nails. And what can a discarded tool do but collect dust until it finally turns to rust?

Emily pushes herself up off the couch, breaks into a long stretch –

“To hell with it,” she says, “I’ll start upstairs, in his bedroom.”

“I can check out the basement, I guess.”

“Odd choice...”

“Gotta start somewhere,” I shrug. I don’t tell her the second-half of what I’m thinking: *there’s probably still stuff left of Mom down there.*

The first thing I find in the basement? A dead rat, a pretty old one: tail firmly locked between the jaws of a rat trap in the corner, its body all dried out. I wonder how long it decayed here, if Jack even knew about it, if he came down here at all. Why would he care about a problem tucked away in the shitty old basement?

A basement that sat perpetually on his to-do list, always snugly at the bottom. An extra project to be done with free time he never had. He brought it up now and again to Mom, sometimes mentioning a bar, a pool table, even a home theatre. He wanted a mancave, but he called it a 'personal space'. Mom would just tell him to go for it when he had the time.

But another problem always crept up: squeaky hinges, leaky roof, shitty plumbing. So, the basement stayed as it had always: concrete walls and floors, filled with little more than boxes upon boxes of storage. And a dead rat apparently, to spice up the decor.

He never complained, just took a look at whatever new problem popped up for a solid few minutes before nodding to himself and setting to work. Sometimes he'd ask me to help, at least when I was younger: he'd tell me to stand beside him or wait at the bottom of a ladder, handing up a screwdriver, a wrench, a hammer, taking away drywall and whatever other garbage.

Whenever we'd finish a project, he'd take me out for ice cream, his form of payment. Always at this little family-run place that churned their own ice cream by hand and I'd get rocky road and he'd get tiger tail. They went out of business when the mom got hit by a car, pretty sure the guy who hit her never even got caught.

Then Emily grew up, became his little helper.

How much does a basement like this hurt the price of a house? It certainly can't be a positive, but I don't know shit when it comes to selling a house. A dead rat definitely wouldn't

help, gotta get rid of that. I should probably bring selling up to Emily. I'm sure it's passed through her head. Neither of us want this place so what else is there to do but...

I plop down in front of the pile of boxes, most of them big plastic tubs, a few of them cardboard. Most labelled, some not. Most of it probably no more than trash and old knick-knacks, things to get rid of, sold, or donated, but mostly gotten rid of. Still, gotta look through it all the same.

Kids toys, Kids clothes: probably too old to sell. *Emily's art*: I open it, spy a few crudely drawn paintings, some very old brushes, paint tubes no doubt dried out, put the box aside for Emily. *Electronics*: a bunch of tangled up wires, trash. *Sue's cookbooks*: set aside to look through. Three boxes labeled *Jack's old tools*: might fetch something, maybe.

I continue on, through box after box after box, almost all of them filled with things not worth keeping. I find one carrying photo albums, an exception to the pace I've settled into. I open it up, flip through an album till I land on a photo taken of me and Jack from behind on a nature trail: I'm on his shoulders, head tilted up at a canopy of branches, leaves, and birds as he marches on through dirt and mud.

I set that box aside for later, something for Emily and me to look through.

Eventually my hands grab hold of: *Sarah's schoolwork, jk – 8*. I bite my lip a little, open it up. I grab hold of a pencil case, a shitty plastic thing. I remember it smelling weird... smells even weirder now, mouldy. There's a pile of those old Hilroy exercise books as well. I open one at random: it's from grade one, a light pink, and feels stiff with age, one edge of its cover torn off. I snort at the happenstance: the page reads *my family*, scrawled with my tiny hands in faded pencil. *My baby sister Emily, she cryes alot. My mommy takes me to play at the park all the time.*

My daddy works with wood, he's really good at making things. The teacher scratched out my mistakes, corrected them with their red pen.

“I guess Emily hasn't changed all that much.”

I flip through the pages again, land on a page entitled *my dreams. I want two be a righter, they tell fun stories.* A smile bites at the edges of my mouth.

“Huh. Did I really?” I honestly can't remember...

I lean my head back, focus on a tiny crack on the ceiling above, let my mind drift.

I remember waddling up to Mom, shoving a piece of paper into her hands, a short little story I had written. About flying, I think? Or wanting to fly? Mom read it over as I sat, cross legged, on the ground in front of her, bubbling. When she finished, she gave me a smile, a pat on my head –

“What a lovely story honey. Keep it up.”

But I didn't. And I can claw no more memories. The infatuation mustn't have lasted long. Hell, I remember wanting to become a vet in grade two, barely a year later, even dressed up as one on Halloween. What had I set my sightson in grade three? I couldn't recall, but something new and different. I could never really decide.

My Dreams? Waitress and recovering addict hadn't really topped my list. But that's how it goes.

My fingers scratch at my tattoo, itching for release. I let them flail about in their mindless way for a moment; let them dig and wander.

By the time I'm walking up the basement steps, the fact that I've been down here almost two hours without needing a smoke hits me. This place feels different with Jack gone. Almost like home again.

As I balance a cig between my lips and feel the crunch of the gravel underneath my feet however, I feel a tightness swell up all the same. That sound – I still hate it.

The smoke and tar well up inside of me, warming my insides, calming my outsides.

“How’s it going?”

Emily leans on the porch railing. Didn’t notice her come outside.

“Found a few boxes you might want to look through.”

“Yeah?”

“Some of your old art. Photo albums. You find anything interesting?”

She lets out a devilish smile and leans down to pick up something she’s hid behind the railing: a bottle of alcohol. *Appleton Estate* it reads, and below its name the number 30.

“Even when he was alone, he kept the best stuff hidden. We’re drinking this, all of it, tonight.”

As I enter his room, I go to turn the light on, but my hand lingers at the switch before I let it drop.

Sweaty smells hang in the air, emanating from clothes strewn across the floor. I take care with every step, tip-toe around the mess. The bed sits unmade, the sheets still wrinkled from his body. There even sits a little sag in the middle of the bed.

“The basement,” I say aloud, not sure to whom, “why the basement. It’s weird, isn’t it?”

The question bounces off the walls right back at me.

“It’s definitely weird...”

A lowball glass sits on the bedside table, filled with a slight watery-brown. I lean in and sniff, not wanting to move the glass: rum, of course. An overturned, hard cover book sits beside

it, a solid green. My hand hovers over the book, wanting to flip it over, Dad really never mentioned reading. But I pull back. Absently, I go to sit down on the bed, barely stopping my ass before it ruins the sheets.

Deep breathe in, deep breathe out. Maneuvering to one corner of the room, I pull out my phone, take a picture. I do the same from all four corners.

“I wish it were later in the day,” I mutter, remembering the way the sun would angle in through the window, the shadows it cast. And with all this dust here? All the little floaty spots that the light could catch. I flip through the photos: good angles, every one of them. Yet I can always do better. Maybe one day, I could sit down in front of a canvas and...

My vision blurs, I wipe at my eyes with the back of my hand, my knuckles burn at the salty drops. I don't want to disturb much, not yet. I want to let the room sit a little while longer, let it stew its juices just a bit more.

I google the sunset time, set an alarm, shove my phone back in my pocket. I twist and turn my head around. The closet door, its open a crack already – the light's even on. Dancing over the clothes to the door, I go to open it a bit more, stop, retract my hand, then try again.

The brass of the knob pricks at my skin. Deep breath in, deep breathe out. The door edges open an inch at a time until it comes to a stop on a pile of clothes. I shuffle sideways into the closet, just enough room.

I spin slowly around in the middle of the space: somewhere I've never actually stepped inside. Unsurprisingly, there're not too many clothes, most of them dotting the ground. I glaze over a few old dresses of Mom's and –

What's that? On the top shelf. A tiny little cardboard tower. *Appleton Estate*. I reach up with both hands and freeze again, a few inches away from grabbing hold. My foot bounces against the ground.

"Fuck it," I say, and grab hold.

The cheese tastes like plastic, the crust like cardboard.

"Did it always taste like this?" I ask.

Emily holds a slice at a distance as the cheese begins to slide off the pizza, almost too soggy to hold together. Then she takes a nibble. "Maybe?"

Getting *Antonio's* used to mean getting the best pizza in town. Now it feels like rubber in my mouth, a tasteless assault on my tongue. I scarf it down all the same because it's the only damn thing to eat around here. Tomorrow we'll get Chinese, hopefully that doesn't disappoint either.

As we eat, the bottle of rum taunts me from the table. A hasty promise causes aches in my belly.

"It's tradition," Emily exclaimed off my less-than-enthused look after she revealed the bottle, "when a dad dies, the kids sit around drinking his best alcohol and get way too drunk."

I feel like she leaned into that tradition a little too hard already.

"A tradition for who? And you're aware I'm an addict, right? Part of that means staying sober." I said as I crushed the cigarette into the gravel.

"Yeah, but, like, with drugs though. This is different. It's alcohol."

She's not that stupid, I know she isn't.

"Emily..."

To some, it's considered cheating. Sometimes explicitly, other times implicitly, depending on who you asked. Even if drinking had never been a particular bedbug of mine, sobriety means sobriety, through and through. Trading off one mind-numbing thing for another...

"Look, I know you two never really... got along. But he was your Dad. *Our* Dad. Like it or not. And I'm making sure this bottle's empty by the time the night's over. I'd like to do that with you. If that's ok. You don't have too, of course. I'd understand. It's just... I'd like it."

The last time I drank escapes me. Four years now? Five? My mind likely already addled with a thing or two before I brought the bottle to my lips. Could I handle it? Almost certainly. This is bargaining, I know that, but I don't feel that old itch, not in the least.

She looks pitiful, almost like a little puppy pouting to go outside, but worse, far worse. I notice the lines under her eyes for the first time, their dullness. I haven't really paid attention to how she's holding up. People grieve in all sorts of ways and Emily is firmly in the camp of drowning the feelings until they disappear.

"Ok," I said, already regretting the syllables as they leave my mouth.

Before I know it, I've downed three slices. They sit in my stomach, already fearing the rum that's about to rain down on them. A whole half a pizza remains: it'll taste good later on, before we throw it all up.

We move over to the Den. Emily carries the bottle and three lowball glasses, placing the glasses down on the table. Jack kept those in good condition, if nothing else. Beside the table sits the box with photo albums and her box of art, which I dragged up as we waited for the shitty pizza to arrive.

I spy a look at my phone: 7:21. A long night ahead of me, taunting me with its wagging bum, gives its cheeks a slap.

“Apparently it’s a couple hundred. This bottle.” Emily cradles it in both hands like a precious glass baby.

“Didn’t even get to drink it,” she mutters, “saving it for anything, you think?”

“No idea.” If she notices the nervous jump in my voice, she doesn’t let on.

Rummaging around the TV cabinet, I find a couple collections of early seasons of *The Simpsons*. I put in a season nine disk, something to have on. Then I sit on the squeaky couch. My fingers grasp at my arm, tip-toe up along it. Emily turns the bottle in her hands.

“Well,” she says, “here goes.”

Jack gets the first pour. And a generous one at that as rum threatens to slosh over the edges. A decent chunk of the bottle empty, just like that.

“Consider it a little cheat,” Emily says with a small smirk, almost as if she senses my tension, “all we gotta do is empty the bottle, more than enough in it to do us.”

“Right,” I say, grateful for the small reprieve. Why did I agree to this again?

“Besides,” she says as she transports the glass with two steady hands to the mantle, placing it beside the urn, “his bottle anyway.”

She pours the other two glasses. One, she lets the rum pour out until she’s satisfied, filling a good half of the glass. The other, she takes care to slow down, dribbling it out.

Compared to hers, mine’s a puddle, yet it appears deep all the same.

“First one goes down the hatch,” she says.

“Let me guess,” I question, “Tradition?”

I pick up the glass, take a sniff. It doesn't smell bad. Smells sweet more than anything, even a touch of honey.

"I'm sorry if I was, y'know, pushy or anything. But thanks for doing this. Honest. I appreciate it."

Her eyes take on a watery sheen. I down the rum. It burns a little, yet doesn't taste terrible: there's honey, a touch of vanilla I think, mostly just tastes like wood. The fuzziness sets in almost immediately – a light, pleasant buzzing, spreading out from my centre to my toes, my fingers. And my head.

Emily takes a moment with hers. She sashes it around, watches the little brown waves fold in on themselves. Is the guilt already cropping up, before she's even had her first drink? Typically, it takes a while with Emily, for the self-awareness to set in, that lightbulb to click on alongside what I imagine to be a single resounding thought: *am I the asshole?*

She lets out a nasally sigh, raises it towards the urn, and follows through. Then pours herself another drink that she glugs a quarter of down.

"It's a shitty thing," I say, "to push an addict like that, even if it isn't their poison."

"I know," she lets out softly.

"But, my mistakes are my own to make all the same."

She leans into the couch, her eyes set on the tv.

The night ticks away slowly. 7:21 bleeds into 8:21, 8:21 sinks into 9:21, 9:21 crawls into 10:21. For every drink Emily pours, I match her with one a quarter of its size. But that's enough for me all the same. I feel light and airy. My head feels a few inches too high, my legs wobble, my fingers tingle. I feel a strange urge to laugh every time Homer opens his mouth.

For the first time in... three, four, five years, I am drunk. At one point, I almost fall as I get up to go piss, stumbling back on to the couch. Emily lets out a snicker, I join in.

Every few minutes I have to remind myself: *can't get used to this*. I replay the words over and over again. I already know this is a mistake, I just can't make it again. And I hope I won't.

...

I know I won't. It's pleasant, it's enjoyable, but I can live without it. I have for a long time. Think in absolutes.

Emily and I share drinks, but little else. I can feel the couch practically bouncing up and down, her feet vibrating against the floor. I'm sure her liver's seen tougher nights than this. If that phone call is anything to go off, it can probably take a beating and a half –

“Why did you wait until you were drunk to tell me he died?”

The words worm out of my mouth, helped along by a drunken tongue, sounding far more accusatory than intended. I tense up before the sentence is even out, but I can't stop saying it all the same.

“So, you do want to talk about it. After talking around it for so long.”

“I didn't think we were talking around it, I just–”

Emily gets up off the couch, downs the rest of her drink as she does, starts pacing, trips up, then steadies herself. Uh-oh.

“Just, what? Sarah? I bring up Dad, and you call him Jack. You avoided talking to him half the time, never saw him. Christ, acted like a simple phone call would cause your ears to blister over and fall off. Do you think I wanted to call you sober and just have you say *oh, that sucks* when I told you, like it's some kind of minor inconvenience –”

I flinch at her slurred words, hear the dull, distant response she gave about Mom bouncing around in my head: “oh.”

“I didn’t want to argue. I just... asked. Ok? That’s it, that’s all.”

“Look, I’m honestly sorry. Really, I am. It was a shitty thing to do. I’m a shitty sister. I think we’ve proven that again and again. I couldn’t keep myself together long enough to tell you he died without blacking out and now I’ve pressured you, an addict, into drinking. So, come on then, let’s not stop here, pile it on; tell me what you really think of me. No better time than now to get it all out, in full view of our dead fucking father. Remind me of all the things I’ve done wrong, about all the ways Dad fucked you over. I’m sure you’ve got plenty in that little head of yours, if you got enough braincells that haven’t hung themselves —”

I jolt up, bang my knee against the low-rise table. My glass wobbles, almost tilts.

“Oh, and you were so much better with Mom?”

I bite my tongue; it starts to bleed. *Fuuuuuuuccckkk*. Stick, meet hornet’s nest.

She brings a hand to her mouth, lightly biting down on her thumb.

“Don’t you ever,” her voice sputters, “ever make excuses for her with that shit.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Never, ever.”

“I’m —”

“Fuck you. You don’t get to say that. Not after how she treated me. Not after you treating Dad like, like, like — some excuse for being a junkie.”

She sounds like she’s about to hyperventilate, her chest heaves up and down. She bangs her battered fist against her thigh repeatedly, head tilted towards the mantle. The air bubbles between us, fizzing and popping.

“Is that what you think?” I ask, “That I blame him? That...” *I’m some kind of cliché. Some poor little girl with daddy issues.*

“Didn’t you? I felt like it, he did too.”

People like easy answers, easy reasons. $A + B = C$. I can’t blame her, or Jack, for seeing it that way. It’s not like I didn’t know how it came off. I played the blame game once too, an attempt to excuse myself for jamming a needle in my arm every damn day. I lost my virginity the first time I got high – truly high –, figured my endorphins or some shit got shot, even if the sex sucked. Like that crossed my wires somehow, gave me a dragon to chase until holes covered my arms and my veins collapsed.

But no. “I did drugs because I liked drugs. That’s all.” That’s it. Where and how I got my first taste, and what happened after, doesn’t matter.

“I’m an addict because I *made* choices. Stupid, stupid choices. Not Jack, not anybody else. *Me.*”

“Then why? Why did you hate him? I just... don’t understand. It’s not like Mom, he didn’t try to cut your core right out of you. Didn’t spend day after day making offhand comments, ignoring an entire side of you.”

“I didn’t hate him, not really. Ja-,” I stop, take a breath, “Dad had issues. Had a side to him I don’t think you ever really saw. But I did. And it scared me. He didn’t do anything, not really. And I think it scared him too, not that it’s an excuse or anything. But, it’s just, he...”

I trail off and she doesn’t ask anything more. I could tell her, let her know what Jack looks like when he’s stomping you down with a raised fist. I might one day. And she’d believe me, I’m sure of it.

But she doesn't want to know. Doesn't want to hear it, doesn't want to face it. Because it's nice to be ignorant, to bury your head. I know better than anyone.

I feel tears biting at the edges of my eyes. My voice wants to quake, but I push it down, steady it, "And if you're looking for a why, a reason. I don't got it. And I never will."

A few drops streak down my face, but I don't cry. I scratch at my arm. Emily wanders over to the mantle, rests her chin on it beside the urn. I collapse back into the couch; my muscles feel about ready to tear.

"I should never have said that. Even if we had our issues, I figured that's a line I'd never cross. I loved Mom, I did, but how she treated you – I hated that. But I ignored it, to make things easier on her. And on me. I'm the big sister and... Shit, I can't think of a moment where I ever actually acted like one."

Emily pushes herself away from the mantle, stumbles as she catches her balance, turns about, the imprint of the mantle splayed across her chin. She crosses back over the floor, barely able to keep a straight line. When she reaches the table, she grasps hold of the bottle – just under half left.

"Shame, really good shit," she mutters to herself.

Then she blinks towards me, once, twice, three times, "Do you want to come outside?"

"Sure," I say, wiping at my eyes, "I need a smoke anyway."

I wish I didn't have that last drink. Or that I had drunk at all, really. But I always wish that around the time the room stops being dizzy in a "ha-ha" fun way, and dizzy in a "the floor seems a little too close to my face" way.

The chilly mantle nips at my chin. Five minutes ago, it seemed like the right thing to do: to burst up from the couch, down a drink, and lay it out – finally, lay it out – to Sarah. She had started it after all...

But fuck, my eyes are swimming, head feels like a whirlpool. I cross my arms, squeeze them into my body, feel my knuckles cry out in response, but I squeeze tighter all the same; *a childish outburst*. I tilt my neck to the left: I can make out the individual specks on Dad's urn, all the slight divots and bumps. A reflection of the man himself.

It's not like I saw him as some saint or anything. I knew about the rum in the workshop closet, the drinking behind closed doors. But when you're drowning so hard and you don't even know up from down, you grasp onto any hand you see tight as you can. Especially if it's a parent.

Fear. Anxiety. Anger. Those were the feelings I picked up from Sarah in Dad's presence. From every flinch she made, every inflection of her voice; *I do not want to be around this man* she said in every way but words.

I'm not blind. I'm not stupid. But I am selfish. And I want to keep being selfish, just a little.

Inhale: the sickly-sweet scent of rum fills my nose. An hour ago, it smelt delicious, begged me to practically scull the bottle. Now it makes my stomach warble... Warble. Is that a word? Sounds like it should be one, sounds like wobble only more sickening.

Exhale: tilt my neck to the right. A picture of *us* – Sarah and me – splashing in the water of a beach. I remember this, I think. We never really did vacations or beach trips, with Dad always shut-in at his shop.

The sun ripples off the tiny waves, I peer through squinted eyes, stomping through the knee-high water behind Sarah. Then, a sudden, brilliant idea: I dip my hand into the sandy water, splash it up towards Sarah's back, she responds with a sudden shriek before whipping around, kicking up water in my face. Then she stuck out her tongue before breaking away and galloping through the shallows, water bounding up around her.

Wiping my face, I turned towards the shore. Mom and Dad, holding hands.

"Sarah," Dad called out, "you really shouldn't splash water in people's faces."

But he laughed all the same, shook his head. And then I took off after her.

In the distance, I can hear her voice. The words are impossible to pick out. My body sags, my legs want to give out. I squeeze again, feel the burn ratchet up my arm, bounce inside of me like a pinball. My spine straightens out – I feel Jenny's hand pressed into my back, having snuck up on me, lost in a canvas.

"Keep that back straight," she laughs, "trust."

I stumble back off the mantle, turn around, catch myself before I trip. Sarah is planted in the couch. On the couch? In the couch? Which one is it, exactly?

My mouth opens, there's still more bile I can pull up, bubbling away inside of me. But I'm just tired...

Just so God damn tired.

The full moon hangs heavy in the sky, a hell of a nightlight. Emily stands at a distance, planted on the gravel driveway, her back to me. I stick to the porch, leaning on the railing with a cigarette between my lips.

She dangles the bottle at her side, head tilted upwards. It looks like she's saying something, but it's impossible to make anything out. She turns to face me, extends her free hand out –

“Wanna come down here?”

I take a long drag, burn it down to a nub. Stopping on the porch steps for a moment, I listen to them creak and moan under my weight. Jack probably hadn't ever touched them after he built them.

The gravel crunches beneath my feet. I cringe at the first step I take, hear the sound of Mom's gurney, but push the thought down.

It's just gravel. That's all. I flick my nub down into it.

“Anything you want to say?”

“Sure,” I say, “why are we out here?”

Emily smirks, gestures with the bottle, “Tradition.”

“Everything that happen back in there tradition too?”

Emily lets out an exaggerated shrug, snorts, “Depends on the family.”

“Right...”

“Goodbye Dad,” she says, nudging her shoulder against mine. I guess this where I'm supposed to say –

“Goodbye...”

Emily tips the bottle over, the rum pours out in a few short glugs, the gravel swallowing it whole. We stand there a minute or two.

“I kind of want to throw this. Is that weird?” Emily blurts.

“Can I?”

She hands me the bottle. I weigh it up, turn it over, grasp my hand around its neck. A few splashes of rum trickle out, sticky my fingers. Everything is still a little wobbly, but I can do this. I bring my arm back, tense up – Emily stumbles back a foot or two. Probably a good idea.

Then I release: the bottle flies through an arc, turning over itself again and again until – It shatters somewhere in the front lawn. Between my drunken sight and the dark of the night – as bright as it may be – I can't make out where it landed.

“You know we should sell this place, right?” I say.

“Yeah.”

“We're going to have to clean that up.”

“Yeah,” Emily rubs her eyes, starts towards the house, “tomorrow though.”

“And there's a dead rat in the basement.”

“I said ‘tomorrow’,” she mumbles.

“And –”

She comes to a stop and raises her hand, which flops about, “Saaaaaraah.”

“Right, sorry.”

She doesn't start up again, her back sways back and forth. Even standing still seems a near impossible task –

“I wanna talk tomorrow. Not argue, just... talk,” she says.

“We can try,” I reply.

Her back shakes. A chuckle? A burp?

“Try, huh?”

Her footsteps crunch against the gravel again, the porch steps croak beneath her weight, and the front door squeaks as she wanders in, no doubt to pass out.

I linger, alone in the near-midnight air. It's quiet out here, so long as I don't move my feet. Save for the buzz and chirps of the insects.

I take out another cigarette, light it up, and take a long drag.

The Short-Story Cycle: Nostalgia, Fragmentation, and Unification

In my thesis project, I establish the simultaneously unified, yet fragmentary structure of the short story cycle and explore how this structure carries with it an innate leaning towards an exploration of the nostalgic. In this essay, my goal is not necessarily to focus entirely on the classifications of the short story genre; rather, I wish to examine how the structuring of a short story cycle can potentially inform and complement the stories within. In this respect, family acts as a unifying beacon for the characters in my cycle, with its trappings in nostalgic feelings of longing and home, reflective of the short story cycle's structure. I argue that, inherently, the very structure of the short story cycle is driven by nostalgia.

Coined by Forrest L. Ingram in 1971, a "short-story cycle [is] a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader's successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies [their] experience of each of its component parts" (Ingram 19). In other words, a single work composed of individual, interconnected short stories. The short story cycle is a genre that appears unsettled: it is, in the words of Hager Ben Driss, "a nomadic genre ... [that] inhabits a liminal space straddling the short story and the novel" (Driss 60). The cycle is novelistic then, in that it seeks to tell a singular story, yet that singular story is built of much smaller stories, thus the cycle's structure is built on the contradiction of being both unified yet fragmented. By unified, I mean that it is a work that should be considered as a complete whole, with its individual elements – its short stories – forming a web of connections. By fragmented, I mean that those short stories also operate as their own complete works: the stories work together to form a greater work, but they also function as complete works in and of themselves, thus they are fragments making up a unified whole. This tension is at the heart of the

short story cycle, a constant push and pull between the whole – unification – and its parts – fragmentation – that, as I will argue, can never be resolved.

Critical examination of the short story cycle is a surprisingly messy space, with the genre embroiled in a debate of definitions. As evidenced by my use of it, the phrase I employ is the “short story cycle,” the term that has garnered the most critical acceptance, as made clear by works such as Jennifer J. Smith’s *The American Short Story Cycle* (2018), James Nagel’s *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre* (2001), and Gerald Lynch’s *The One and the Many: English-Canadian Short Story Cycles* (2001). A great many terms have emerged however, illustrating the, at times, indecisive criticism surrounding the genre. In addition to the descriptive phrase, “short story cycle,” two other prominent terms are “short story sequences” (Robert M. Lushcer) and “composite novels” (Ann Morris and Maggie Dunn). But the lexicon includes a dozen or so more obscure terms, such as “short story composite,” “short story cluster,” or “anti-sequence,” that have also popped up in criticism. The term short story collection is often not applied to such works as, as Ingram notes, the term brings with it a suggestion of “[e]ditors who collect stories into a single volume [based] ... on a variety of criteria,” with examples including “humorous stories, war stories, horror stories, [and] detective stories” (Ingram 6). Ingram also notes that “single authorship of the individual pieces should not be a final criterion separating a short story cycle from ... a ‘mere’ collection of stories” (Ingram 5). While a “mere collection” may be unified in one aspect or another then, it lacks the purposefully designed linkages of plot and character found in a cycle. For example, it seems disingenuous to slot Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*, the 1919 work often cited as one of, if not, the first of the short story cycle genre, alongside a work such as *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*. Both are undoubtedly a collection of individual stories, yet

the former features a singular setting with a recurring cast of characters while the latter “[merely]” collects together every short story Hemingway published (Ingram 5). Thus, a clarification of sorts seems a necessity with works such as *Winesburg, Ohio*, which carry with them a structure and purpose more deliberate than the typical short story collection.

I consider the term “composite novel” a false equivalency because it seemingly disregards the function of the individual short story, while placing a greater emphasis on the unification of the work via the term “novel.” Morris and Dunn define it thusly: “a literary work composed of shorter texts that—though individually complete and autonomous—are interrelated in a coherent whole according to one or more organizing principles” (Dunn and Morris 2). While Morris and Dunn introduce the term as a means to illustrate the discrete demarcation – through the term composite – and unifying – through the term novel – nature of works such as *Winesburg, Ohio*, the use of the term novel is disingenuous. For example, Rolf Lunden, who himself employs the term “short story composite,” notes that the use of the term “novel” carries with it “connotations of unified story, coherent narration, and closure” (Lunden 13). Since the novel is typically a more unified work, in that its individual chapters are not meant to be extracted and consumed by themselves as individual experiences, the term “composite novel” suggests that what is most important about cycles is their unified nature. While the unity of cycles is undoubtedly important as they are purposefully designed by their author to be whole works, a view that places a primary focus on unification can potentially disregard the importance of the individual stories that make the whole. Consequently, cycles are stripped of their status as short stories through such terminology, resulting in them becoming “a variant of the novel” as opposed to their being “made up of discrete short stories” (Lunden 13). This view appears implicitly present in Dunn and Morris’s own phrase, “though individually complete and

autonomous,” (Dunn and Morris 2) with the word “though” suggesting the individuality of stories is almost secondary to their unification. Ultimately, the problem with such a view is that it disregards the tension between unification and fragmentation.

The term “composite novel” then, seems rather apt for describing works such as Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, a novel which takes a single linear story and tells it from a multitude of varied perspectives. In contrast, a work such as *Winesburg, Ohio* tells multiple, branching stories circling around a singular geographical point: a small town and its inhabitants. The key difference between a novel such as *As I Lay Dying* and a cycle such as *Winesburg, Ohio* is arguably of perspective. Whereas *As I Lay Dying* takes a whole and fragments it, *Winesburg, Ohio* works in reverse, building a whole and complete work out of its many individual stories. The structure of the cycle is not dissimilar from a family unit, the notion that first led to me working in the genre as the focus of my thesis. A family is, after all, a collection of fragments that come together to form a whole and not a whole that is fragmented, in that the individuals of a family are its fragments and the notion of the family unit the resulting unification. *As I Lay Dying* then, illustrates how even a novel with a narrative told via various perspectives is decidedly different enough from works such as *Winesburg, Ohio* to warrant opposition to the term “composite novel.” In a recent criticism in the genre, *The American Short Story Cycle* (2018), Jennifer J. Smith explores one potential reasoning behind the composite novel term. Smith finds that Dunn and Morris use the term as “it conjures the story’s inferior position to the novel in the marketplace,” which misses “how formative the short story is to such books” (Smith 3). In other words, the use of the term “novel” is partly a marketing ploy to give the potential reader a sense of comforting familiarity. For example, Smith notes how some cycles occasionally “include the inscription ‘A Novel’,” so as to slot the work in a more easily identifiable and

marketable genre, indicating “publishers’ anxieties that short stories do not sell and that readers need to know how to read these volumes” (Smith 3). This tactic signals that uncertainty surrounding the cycle, illustrating the traps of signification and definition that the genre often gets bogged down in.

Robert Luscher’s term, the “short story sequence,” is perhaps the second most prominent, which he defines as “[a] volume of stories, collected and organized by their author in which the reader successively realizes underlying patterns of coherence” (Luscher 148). He continues on, noting that “[t]he volume as a whole becomes an open book, inviting the reader to construct a network of associations that binds the stories together” (Luscher 148). In some ways, the use of “cycle” or “sequence” can be interchangeable, depending on preferences: each notes how the work functions as a volume of collected, interconnected stories and how the author constructs a purposeful pattern. Notably, Luscher introduces the notion of the reader taking on a more active role in constructing “a network of associations,” which is a function I will be touching upon later. Still, my reasoning for using “cycle” as opposed to “sequence” lies in the definitional associations with the words themselves. Both can be potentially employed in defining certain volumes of short stories, yet I feel the term “cycle” is appropriate in the context of the genre’s most prominent works, as well as my own project, in that it suggests a work that continually re-treads over its tracks.

Suzanne Ferguson provides a useful differentiation between the “short story cycle” and the “short story sequence” as she finds that “short story cycle” suggests a “[going] around something – in time, in the consideration of a theme” whereas “a sequence should be linked by development (going from one place to another), whether in time or theme” (Ferguson 102). In my own project, I employ several symbols, relationships, and objects that characters constantly

return to or “go around.” For example, Emily’s relationship with her mother and the negative feelings she associates with that relationship is illustrated as being emotionally draining yet she struggles to escape from it all the same, as if she is stuck in orbit around her mother and cannot pull out. Likewise, Sarah’s tattoo and the habit she develops of scratching at it is a repetitious urge consistently reminding her of the addiction she is attempting to escape. Overall, I want my thesis to read as cyclical. Certainly, the plot advances, but the plot also re-treads some notions again and again as the characters push towards breaking out of their own cycles. It should also be noted that in this very same paper, Ferguson throws yet another term into contention, the “anti-sequence,” furthering the tumultuous nature of the genre’s study. She defines her term as stories which “obviously *do* fit together, or *could* fit together in a sequential pattern, but whose authors have refused to put them together or allow them to be put together” (Ferguson 108). On one hand, the “anti-sequence” seems disconnected from the cycle or sequence; on the other, it also takes the aforementioned tensions between unification and fragmentation present in the cycle and pushes them to their extremes. Ferguson points towards “Grace Paley’s stories of Faith Darwin,” as an example of an anti-sequence, a recurring character throughout several of Paley’s collections that, when Paley’s “publisher asked her to put them all together in a sequence, she adamantly refused” (Ferguson 108). As Ferguson notes, Paley felt the stories involving Faith “are individual short stories, [meant] to be read basically independently and at random” (Ferguson 108). Thus, there is undoubtedly unification to be found in these various short stories spread out over several collections, but the author herself flat-out denies the possibility of a complete unification, placing emphasis on their individuality. To my mind, the “anti-sequence” and the example of Paley only highlights the tension of unification and fragmentation in the

cycle all the more. Whether or not the author desires a series of connected stories to be collected, they will more than likely face the pressure of the push and pull of these two dichotomies.

Smith identifies “short story cycle” as reflective of its “accurately [capturing] the recursiveness central to the genre and [privileging] the short story as its formative element” (Smith 4). The use of the term short story cycle then, suggests a work that is circular in its themes, plots, settings, and structure. The use of the term short story sequence rather, suggests a more linear development in which resolutions are consistently found and themes, characters, and plots move explicitly forward as opposed to re-treading their tracks. Story collections that reflect the former definition include Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*, Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, and Munro’s *Who Do You Think You Are?*, to name a few. These books eschew clear resolution, focus on the minutia of life, hop through time, and feature a set of varied stories circling around a single focal point, such as setting or character. For example, *Winesburg, Ohio* has a quasi-protagonist in the form of George Willard, but while he consistently pops up in the book’s stories, it is the town itself that acts as the connecting glue for the book. While time in terms of plot may be moving backwards, forwards, or sideways, these works consistently foreground their characters as negotiating their place and present in an attempt to not explicitly arrive at resolution for their conflicts and plots, but rather to discover a feeling of belonging. For example, in *Winesburg, Ohio*, two back-to-back stories feature the perspective of a preacher peeping at a naked woman (“The Strength of God”), and the woman being peeped upon (“The Teacher”). Through telling the same story through different perspectives, a circular repetition is highlighted, illustrating the notion of re-treading tracks while offering new perspectives. Notably, neither story features concrete resolution, with both characters left in the throes of various frustrations of faith, sex, and states of life. These two stories in *Winesburg, Ohio* highlight the circular

narratives Anderson employs, where climatic conclusion continually becomes denied or pushed back. Likewise, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* employs a record company executive as its focal point, jumping between characters with the smallest of connections and straddling great chunks of time. In the first story, “Found Objects,” the protagonist, Sasha, goes on an awkward date with the protagonist of the final story, “Pure Language,” Alex, fifteen-years prior. The result is that the reader is imbued with a sense of characters living their lives outside the confines of their stories. This notion of characters living outside their stories is highlighted by the fact that Alex and Sasha barely acknowledge one another when they meet again in “Pure Language,” thus the reader will connect the two characters and may expect a callback of some kind. Egan however, purposefully denies a realization or resolution between Sasha and Alex, who don’t appear to remember one another, suggesting how the characters have moved forward in the space between stories, illustrating the unwritten changes that can take place in a narrative. Munro’s *Who Do You Think You Are?* tells the story of Rose, from girlhood to womanhood, over several different stories. In no story however, does any final conclusion occur for Rose, particularly in regards to her disastrous love life, as she seems to continually fail at connecting with people due to both happenstance and her own character. Thus, the work ends up a set of stories examining the experiences of one woman’s life and her tendency to re-tread her mistakes as opposed to illustrating how those experiences build towards a personal enlightenment. Ultimately, these three works feature characters who appear in constant states of transitioning from one state of being or mind to another, yet their stories always end before any final resolution. The result is that such works become a continual examination and negotiating of what it means to feel content and what it means to feel like one belongs.

In my manuscript, I translate this searching for a belonging into a desirous nostalgia. While nostalgia comes with its fair share of connotations, it is, at its heart, the practice of wishing for a place to belong. In the opening of her work *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym establishes succinctly and precisely why this is the case:

Nostalgia (from *nostos* – return home, and *algia* – longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship. (Boym 1)

Nostalgia, then, need not necessarily involve returning to the past; one can be nostalgic for something they have never experienced so long as their perspective is charged with a longing desire. Additionally, what that longing is directed towards can be any number of things, such as a wish to have a certain relationship with someone, arrive at a certain state of mind, or arrive at a literal place, to name a few examples. Boym breaks down Nostalgia into two halves: “restorative nostalgia,” which “stresses *nostos* and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home,” and “reflective nostalgia,” which “thrives in *algia*, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming” (Boym 41). In other words, “restorative nostalgia” is where one longs to relive the past and works towards enacting that past (even a past infused with imagination), whereas “reflective nostalgia” is when one feels wistful about the past, but accepts ongoing change. For example, in *Winesburg, Ohio*’s final story, protagonist George Willard is departing his small-town home for the city. As he makes the walk to the station, he spends his time taking in the town, wistful for his past: this generic nostalgia however, is superseded by a forward-looking nostalgia in its final lines, as his “mind was carried away by his growing passions for dreams” and “Winesburg ... [becomes the] background on which to paint the dreams of his manhood”

(Anderson 122). Before the train has barely even left the station of Winesburg then, Willard is already enthralled in a “restorative nostalgia,” as he longs for a life he may never live, yet so desperately wants to make. As Boym further notes however, nostalgia is also akin to a fool’s errand as “a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images – of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life. The moment we try to force it into a single image, it breaks the frame or burns the surface” (Boym 1). In my own cycle, Emily reckons with this very idea in “Vanishing Point,” as she attempts to paint a memorial to her father. When she sits down to paint however, the pleasant image of her father is overridden by one involving both her mother and father (109). Thus, in trying to deal with two versions of nostalgia – one in which she has fond, genuine memories, and one whose existence is dubious – she faces an intense block. This scene illustrates the potential of the cycle in approaching nostalgia as the structure of the cycle allows the reader to contextualize “Vanishing Point” with an explicit awareness of where Emily’s nostalgia originates by reading other stories. While a novel can function similarly in some respects, such as via flashbacks, or returning to ideas brought up in early chapters in later chapters, there is arguably a more intense distance to be found between the stories within a cycle than the chapters of a novel. This distance stems from the literal separation of stories within the structure of the cycle. It is not merely that Emily is wistful for a past experienced years ago, that can be read in “Two Flags,” but rather she is nostalgic for events in an entirely different story, which I purposefully connect to “Vanishing Point,” yet each story remains its own individual work. Each story is both whole and within its own bubble, so to speak, yet it also depends on stories disconnected from it for contextualization. This is the tension between unification and fragmentation, which can be found in any cycle, heightening the act of nostalgia illustrated via Emily’s own story contextual nostalgia.

This tension between unification and fragmentation in the short story cycle is reflective of the inherent tension found in what Boym outlines as nostalgia. While the majority of Boym's work deals with nostalgia in exploring the actual cultural, historical, and political contexts of various European nations, these ideas of nostalgia seem readily transported to criticisms of fiction. I view Willard's concluding nostalgia as restorative as he seeks to prove his feelings as truth, yet the feelings he illustrates towards his hometown itself as he walks towards the station can be viewed as reflective as he lingers on the past. In my own cycle, Emily's nostalgia is an act of failed restorative nostalgia, and her artist's block a subconscious reflective nostalgia in which she delays forming a dogmatic and resolute artistic truth. These two examples illustrate the tension bound up between reflective and restorative nostalgia, the decision of whether to leave the past in the past, or mould the future in accordance to perceptions of the past. Additionally, it is clear that the two nostalgias are not mutually exclusive as proven in both cases: one can transform into the other or they can exist simultaneously, clashing against one another. Whereas Willard's reflective nostalgia is superseded by a restorative nostalgia, Emily's nostalgia remains muddled, caught up in her uncertainty of how to define her future in light of her past. The short story cycle too, is inherently at odds with itself: it is both unified, in that it's built of pieces working towards a shared goal, and fragmented, in that those very pieces are of individual importance and can function independent of the whole. Arguably, to resolve this tension would cause a "short story cycle" to cease being a "short story cycle:" key to the genre's capabilities is the balance between its individual parts and its whole. Likewise, while Boym's opposing nostalgias can be resolved, as illustrated in the case of Willard, there is no guarantee that any resolution will become permanent, as illustrated in the case of Emily. Thus, the structure of the

short story cycle connects to Boym's nostalgia via their shared tensions, with both the cycle and Boym's nostalgia in states of negotiation between two opposing points.

Interestingly, this connection with nostalgia is not only found in the structure of the short story cycle, but it is also present in criticism surrounding it. As noted by Smith, one intriguing occurrence in reaction to the genre is that "critics and tastemakers" consistently seem to "herald" any new addition to the genre as "unlike anything that had come before" (Smith 1). For example, even a more recent addition to the genre, 2010's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* faced many "reviewers [who] laboured to define and name the ostensibly genre-bending volume" (Smith 143). This despite the fact that various critical terminologies explicitly exploring the short style cycle as its own independent genre have sprouted up since 1971 onwards and that some of the most readily recognizable works of the genre are around a century old. The mindset behind these critics' vexation with new writing, I would argue, is not dissimilar to Willard's own feelings at the end of *Winnesburg, Ohio*. A restorative nostalgia by critics who assess something which appears new and attempt to slot it into a suitable box. The irony that the supposed "newness" isn't new at all is reflective of how restorative nostalgia can become a tool of misdirection which can overwrite history and replace it with falsities. Fittingly, Boym explicitly connects such a nostalgia to misguided acts of nationalism, extending into racism, and its twisting of history. More specifically, she points to restorative nostalgia as taking up one of "two main narrative plots," which often overlap: "the restoration of origins and the conspiracy theory" (Boym 42). Three prominent historical examples that Boym points towards to illustrate these narratives are Nazism, Stalinism, and McCarthyism. These movements not only sought to restore their respective nations to a perceived past glory – the restoration of origins – but also set up "scapegoat[s for] misfortune" – conspiracy theory (Boym 43). Under the flag of such a

movement, scapegoats thus “conspire against [the] homecoming,” pushing those emboldened by restorative nostalgia to “conspire against ‘them’ to restore [the] imagined community” (Boym 43). These notions illustrate how nostalgia is not simply about feeling a certain way, but that it can also function as an effective tool, able to shape and craft perceived meaning.

While one may discern such nostalgia in many works of the genre thematically, I argue that this nostalgia is present in the very structure of the cycle. One can discover and understand the existence of this nostalgic structure by following two unique observances about the cycle genre. One, that “stories can be read singly but gain meaning together, drawing on both the power of particularity and explosive energy of fusion” (Smith 5). Two, Smith’s claim that “nothing could be more important than the pauses that happen in the in-between” (Smith 143). While she specifically speaks about these pauses in *Goon Squad*, I argue that this “in-between” can be found in any short story cycle, regardless of its themes, plots, or characters (Smith 143). This in-between is, of course, the pause between stories in the cycle: the moment where a reader has finished one story in the cycle and is ready to move onto the next. In a regular collection bound together by author or genre, such as the aforementioned collection of Hemingway, this pause serves only to physically divide one story from another, rather than offer the purposeful, overarching pattern identified by Ingram. In a cycle however, the stories are individually complete, but garner greater meaning from being apart of a unified whole. A prime example of this in my own cycle is Sue’s homophobia, which is given deeper reasoning in “Two Flags,” thus giving her actions towards Emily in other stories more complexity that would not exist otherwise (64). As Lydia Davis, famed for her intense focus on brevity via short narrative fragments, notes “we catch only a little of our subject” through fragmentation, yet “[w]e have written about it ... and allowed it to live on ... in our ellipses, our silences” (Davis 32). Within the cycle, the space

between stories is not simply an empty gap, but rather a bridge; the individual story is finished, but the greater cycle is not. The question then becomes what exactly creates these “in-between” spaces and, consequently, what happens in them.

One element of the cycle is that it need not necessarily be read in any set or concrete order, which can lend the stories a sense of happening or existing along side one another. A typical novel must be explicitly read in succession with each page, regardless of its story chronology. While such a method of reading is ideal for the cycle from an authorial perspective, it is not as set as stone as with the novel. For example, a reader can open up a collection of short stories, such as the collection of Hemingway, and pick one at random, despite the order indicated by the table of contents. Likewise, as a collection of short stories, a reader can also open up a cycle and read the stories in any order, despite its overreaching pattern. After all, the cycle balances between two modes: its whole is important, but so too is the individuality of the fragments that make the whole. The order of stories within a cycle then, is a purposeful creation of a pattern on behalf of the author and while that deserves respect, there is nothing to stop readers from creating their own pattern. This potential method of reading is the consequence of the cycle’s tension between its whole and individual parts, and while the reader will likely follow authorial intention, a different order can potentially open unexpected perspectives. This method of reading speaks to Luscher’s “network of associations,” as the reader not only reads along in a cycle, but also takes up an active role in crafting their own connections (Luscher 148). This “network of associations” helps create the so-called “in-between” in the cycle. For example, it is on the reader of *Goon Squad* to extrapolate the meaning and connection behind Alex and Sasha’s dating – the book does not provide it. This occurrence literalizes the function of the “in-between;” Alex and Sasha have no doubt undergone major changes over time, yet those changes

are not explicitly outlined by the author. Meanwhile, in my own cycle, losing Jack comes as a major shock to Emily, but I leave the majority of this character work to what remains unsaid and unwritten between “Rum and Smokes” and “Vanishing Point” as the reader is given a portion of her immediate grieving process and must fill in the rest. While there is a fair amount of chronological difference between the two stories, I want to make a point of how the reader is forced to consider them as occurring simultaneously congruent. Beyond my own authorial intention, the order in which they are read is not what is most important, but rather how they relate to one another. In a cycle, readers are not simply reading the stories one after another, but they are constantly mediating the stories in relation with one another. For example, in my manuscript, Sue’s letter clearly overhangs Sarah’s relationship with Emily throughout various stories, even if it is not always explicitly pointed out, causing the reader to charge interactions between the two sisters with meaning garnered from another story.

This simultaneity is what imbues the structure of the cycle with nostalgia. Structurally, closure is pushed aside in the cycle as a true finality never appears to be present, even if a reader has finished all the stories within the cycle. Consider Jack and Sue; both die, but their stories still continue on through their daughters grieving and seeking to understand them. Each story present within a cycle is itself, to quote Boym, a “double exposure” (Boym 1) that, as consequence of its contradictory unitary and fragmented state, cannot be settled into a single unit. Indeed, to resolve this “double exposure” would require that which the cycle seemingly denies: total resolution. Of course, the structure of the cycle does not deny any and all closure, but the stories carry with them a sense that they are unfinished or missing something as a result of the in-between. The reader of the cycle is then faced with a set of stories that may span a great amount of time, but they must also constantly consider how each story actively works alongside one another. In my

own cycle, for example, only one story is told in the third-person point-of-view, “Two Flags;” this story mediates a good chunk of what happens throughout the entirety of the cycle as it explores the beginnings of Emily’s and Sarah’s troubles. In part, it seems disconnected from the rest of the cycle via narrator, but also due to the great span of time between it and any of the other stories. Yet it is vital to the whole: it is the only story which presents Jack’s perspective, while the rest of his life onwards is gathered via fragments in the other stories, and mediated in the space between the given plot. By framing it as uniquely disconnected from the rest of the cycle, the importance of its connection to the rest of the cycle is highlighted via its contrasting elements. It is both deeply in the past in relation to the rest of the cycle and additionally differentiated by its use of a third-person narrator. While “Two Flags” is a particularly striking example due to its contrasts, interrelations are strung throughout all the stories, forming a web of connections. As a result, the structure of my story cycle manufactures an underlying sense of being consistently in the present moment as the stories dance between allowing and disallowing closure. In a sense, it is as if the very structure of the cycle is nostalgic, stuck in a loop of searching for closure, yet never fully reaching it.

This nostalgia is ultimately stuck between being both reflective and restorative. Through its fragmentation and denial of closure, the structure appears plainly reflective, as though it wants to lounge in the possibilities of what may be left unsaid in the “in-between” without ever actually reaching a conclusion. At the same time, its unification naturally lends itself towards the restorative nostalgia as it suggests the potential of finality, wholeness, and of crafting a wholly completed product. It is in the actual content of the cycle itself where potential mediations on the nostalgic structure may take place, but where these mediations land do not change the structure itself. The cycle is inherently at odds with itself, both reflective in its refusing unification, yet

restorative in attempting unification all the same. As Boym notes, “[n]ostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship” (Boym 1), and while what is being discussed here is not love, there is arguably a certain distance that the cycle holds not only its reader at in its approach, but itself. Through its individual stories, the cycle allows its reader to craft an attempt at understanding its whole. At the same time, since those individual stories must exist in a partially unresolved state to maintain the unique balance with the cycle, a full resolution remains elusive. A “long-distance relationship” is a fitting analogy for the cycle: though it certainly hints at change, its very structure denies the possibility of realizing that change, allowing the cycle to merely admire its narrative possibilities at a distance, mirroring the tension between restorative and reflective nostalgia. This “long-distance relationship,” I argue, is very much at play in my own cycle. For example, neither Sarah nor Emily ever fully come to terms with the respective parents they had issues with, who both die before any conflict resolution. Thus, their stories remain unfinished without satisfactory conclusions, yet the sisters are in a transitioning mode, represented by Sarah’s moving, or Emily’s attempt to paint a memorial to her father, with her mom intruding. To my mind, this state of transitioning and this lack of conclusion both reflect the cycle’s structure. It is no wonder then, that many of the stories within a cycle, such as those in *Winesburg*, *Goon Squad*, and *Who Do You Think You Are?* take up themes involving loss, longing, distance, discovering a place for oneself, and forging towards an uncertain future. The cycle’s very structure fuels these themes in its own longing towards unification and fragmentation: a longing that can never be resolved for to conclude the cycle’s twoness would be to take away its unique identity.

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