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Bitter Waters: And Other Stories

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When John first asked her to take the test, Elena had refused. She told him he was being unreasonable, that he was blowing things out of proportion like he always did, reading into things that weren't there. She felt guilty about it, of course she did, but he had no reason to suspect that she had been anything but faithful.

But he was insistent, and a few days later, a few days of silences and small outbursts later, he brought it up again.

“If you didn’t have anything to hide, you would take the test.” He was pacing in front of the TV, the late morning sun filtering in through the front windows, lighting up the floating dust particles like bulbs on a Christmas tree.

Elena looked up from the catalogue on her lap. Her new client wanted her kitchen to feel “moody, but light” and she was having a hard time imagining any room looking like both of those. “And if you trusted me,” she took off her readers, new and slightly cat-eyed, and folded them primly on her lap, “you wouldn’t even be asking me to take it.”

“After seven years you’d think-”

“It’s the principle of the thing, John.” She regarded him from across the coffee table, the rich mahogany hidden by binders and other design books strewn across its surface. The chipped blue coffee cup had a ring of mauve lipstick on it. “Either you believe me, or you don’t.”

In his eyes, then, Elena saw that the principle of the thing was that he didn’t believe her. She swallowed, picked up her glasses again.

“Besides, the whole test sounds fishy in and of itself. The man sounds like a witch doctor.” Attempting to shake him out of his mood, she smiled at him. “He sounds like that crank
we went to for your back, remember him?” Several years ago, John had herniated a disc in his lumbar region when they moved into the new house. He’d gone to an alternative doctor who tried to convince him that stopping his dairy intake would decrease his spinal pain. He opted for surgery instead.

John did not return her smile. “I’m going for a bike ride,” he replied, disappearing down the hallway. A few moments later, she heard the screen door slam shut. The dust swirled furiously in the air. Glistening little snowflakes, dancing. Elena blinked and they twisted away from her.

That night in bed, as John lay with his back to her, she reached out to rub his faded T-shirt, like she would when they first started dating, when she was still in the walk-up off of Addison, the twin bed practically the only thing she could fit in her room. He shrugged her hand off, and she laid it on the cover beside him, limp.

“If taking the test is going to settle this whole thing once in for all, then I’ll take it,” she finally said, caving. “To prove to you that this whole thing is in your mind, I’ll drink the silly little potion.”

She had expected him to react in some way, to turn over and look at her at least, but he just replied, “We’ll go tomorrow.”

After a minute or two more of silence, Elena turned off the light.

John and Elena had first heard about the test two summers ago from John’s brother. They’d had him and his wife over for dinner one night, giving Elena the chance to pull out all the hosting paraphernalia, the nice cheese boards and wine aerator and other fancy things they’d received as wedding gifts that they seldom used anymore. They’d sat on the back porch, the two
couples facing each other over a table of summer salad and skirt steak, the humidity slightly cut by the afternoon’s rain. Faintly, an ambulance wailed.

John’s brother had launched into some long-winded story about his college roommate’s marital troubles, prompting his wife several times to remind him to “Get to the point, Dear.”

“Anyway, the point is,” he took a sip of his beer, “he went to a guy who was selling some sort of cheating truth serum. He mixed it into his wife’s drink that night, and what do know, it made her sick. He finally had proof that she was a whore.”

Elena raised her eyebrows. “So, he roofied his wife, is what you’re saying.”

“No, come on, Lena.” His brother looked at John like he always did when she didn’t get one of his jokes. Elena knew she and John would have a talk about it later. “He was testing her to see if she cheated. It’s not like he was trying to get a freebie.”

The ambulance got closer, causing the neighbor’s shepherd to bark. Elena flinched.

John reached across the table and grabbed the salad bowl. “What is it called anyway?”

“Purity Potion or some shit like that.”

“Virtue Brew,” Kathleen piped up.

“Virtue Brew, yeah. He pitched it to Shark Tank and they turned him down, but he obviously got some people to back it.” Mark finished the last sip of his beer and flicked the bottle’s green neck.

“Sounds reputable.” Elena tried to make eye contact with Kathleen, but her sister-in-law was suddenly fascinated by the design of the dinner plates. As the conversation turned to what a wash the baseball season had been, she picked up the cheap merlot her in-laws had brought and poured herself another glass. She passed the bottle back to Kathleen, watching a drop glide down the neck and land on the table in a crimson tear.
Later, after they had left, John brought it up again as they cleaned. He stacked the plates on the island, a fork skittering off the pile and across the marble.

“I’m sorry about Mark. I know the cheating conversation bothered you.” When she turned to him, the sheepish look was on his face again, the one he seemed to make every time they had dinner with his brother, to which Elena usually said, “You don’t have to apologize for him.” Mark had the personality of a frat boy, men of whom Elena hadn’t liked in college, and whose personality she found even more unbecoming in a forty-year-old man.

“He’s a heathen sometimes,” he said.

Despite the stress of the dinners, Elena felt especially tender towards John afterwards. Look what he could’ve turned into. Look how he didn’t. “He’s my sensitive boy,” his mother once said to her.

She kissed him on the cheek, the woodsy smell of his aftershave tickling her nose. She retrieved the stray fork and led the other dishes to the sink. “I don’t know why Kathleen puts up with him.”

“She’s a saint. The Saint and the Heathen.” He handed her the half empty water pitcher. “It is interesting, though.”

“What is?”

“The Virtue Brew. A cheating truth serum.” His brow was slightly furrowed in the way it got when he was thinking hard on something. She always imagined his thoughts rushing around his brain like cars on a track. “Think about what it could mean if there was actually a drink that made you admit to cheating.”

“There’d be a lot more divorces,” Elena tried to joke, but she could see that John was distracted. “There’s no way it actually works. It was just her guilty conscience.”
“She didn’t know it was in her drink.”

“Truth serum is a fantasy,” Elena said with the tone in her voice that meant she was done talking about it.

He looked at her again, the slightly dreamy, slightly sheepish look back on his face.

“You’re probably right.” He went back outside to get the rest of the dishes, and she was tempted to remind him to stop opening the door by pushing on the screen, but she didn’t.

Pulling on the rubber dish gloves to protect her freshly done manicure, she wondered about the possibility of a truth serum while scraping the discarded scraps of fat into the disposal. Not all things are meant to be said, she thought. It’s not healthy for a marriage.

The storefront where the test was sold wasn’t as back-alley as she expected. Nestled between a liquor store and a discounted shoe outlet, it was like a knockoff GNC, shelves of multivitamins and posters of smiling women holding diet lollipops littered the walls. Elena and John approached the sales counter, pushing past two men comparing protein powders. The overwhelming cloud of cologne made the couple look at each other for an amused moment, the task at hand briefly forgotten in a moment of affronted solidarity.

“Hi, Beth,” John said, glancing at the nametag on the saleswoman’s chest, a green plastic card with a smiley face on it. “Hello!” it read. Elena felt her face flush. She always felt embarrassed when he called service people by their displayed title. It was too vulnerable a thing, a name, to simply toss out to someone as they handed you your change.

The woman beamed. “What can I do for you two this morning?”

Elena decided she hated her.
John leaned in a little further. “We want to buy some Virtue Brew,” his voice trailing off as he said the final two words like he was at confession, shamefully recounting his sins to the man behind the curtain.

“Of course.” The saleswoman was unfazed. “His or hers?” she asked, looking at Elena for the first time. She pulled two flyers from under the counter, brightly colored poster paper advertising “Virtue Brew for Her!” and “Virtue Brew for Him!” Mirror images of a woman and a man decorated each flyer respectively, the accused and condemned clutching his and her head in shame, an empty bottle of brew next to them on the front stoop they had been cast out to.

“I didn’t know there was a ‘his,'” Elena said.

“It’s new,” the woman replied. “Though between you and me, it’s not as effective as the ‘hers.’ There’s been a lot of false positives.” She said it as though she was letting Elena in on a little secret, as if they were friends, as if John wasn’t right next to her. She opened her mouth to respond, but her husband beat her to it.

“For her,” John clarified.

“Wonderful.” She pulled out two new sheets of paper and slid them across the counter to them. “I’m going to need you both to read and sign these waivers while I go grab that for you.”

Elena skimmed the three-page document. The first line in need of initials, “WOW! Health is not responsible for any adverse reactions to Virtue Brew. Please see the package for ingredients.” WOW! Health is not responsible, WOW! Health is not responsible, WOW! Health is not responsible.

She glanced at John, who was carefully initialing each one, brow furrowed as he read even the fine print. Elena finished signing before him. The two men from before left without buying any protein powder. She heard the bell tinkle as they left.
The woman returned with a bottle the size of an energy drink. “Thank you for those,” she said, collecting the sheets. “Now will that be cash or credit?”

In the car, Elena uncapped the bottle, stuffing the plastic bag it came in into one of the console cup holders. Another smiley face, this time saying, “Come again!” They looked at each other. It was the first time she had seen John look faintly scared, faintly unsure since he had started the whole thing. He lightly thumbed the steering wheel.

It made her even angrier. “Well, here you go.” She brought it to her lips.

The whole thing looked and tasted not unlike Pepto-Bismol. It left a syrupy sour aftertaste, and for a moment Elena imagined it was an oyster sliding down her throat. She and John ate them on every anniversary. She rolled her tongue over her teeth, her gums, collecting the last dregs of it from the corners of her mouth. They waited the allotted ten minutes in silence, watching a mother drag her screaming toddler behind her as she exited a grocery store. A teenager sat on a curb stop outside the liquor store, face upturned to entering customers who walked past him without stopping. Eventually, a man handed him a pack of beer and he left, the cardboard corner sticking out of his backpack as he peddled across the parking lot.

It didn’t make her buckle to her knees and roil, like she did when she had an ovarian cyst, hours spent in the hospital waiting room before she got a nurse to care. In fact, it didn’t make her do much of anything at all, definitely not grab the paper bag John had brought along “just in case.” Elena took her iced tea out of the cup holder and sipped, looked at John.

“How do you say that?”

Though it was a Saturday, Elena went to the Merchandise Mart to look at some of the new showrooms. The ride back to the house had been mostly silent; The Police crooned softly on
the radio, turned unusually low. Although both Elena and John normally sang along, neither of them was much in the mood that morning. She leaned her head back on headrest and closed her eyes, her mind filled with a forced blankness, easier to think of nothing at all than what had just happened. When they got home, Elena gathered some of her project binders and got back in the car. She didn’t know where John had gone when she came out of her office.

The Mart had been one of her favorites places to go since Elena was young. A sprawling building right on the river, it was full of wholesale showrooms, perfectly executed bedrooms and kitchens and family rooms, not an inch out of place. Though only professionals were allowed to shop there, she had been taken to the Mart by her grandmother years before. She was no professional, but her grandmother was never one to be left out of anything, and she created her own business cards, brought in her own friends masquerading as clients, in order to gain access. Elena often thinks she chose interior design because of her.

When they were decorating their own house, Elena had led John through the Mart, wandering through each showroom, imaging who they would be in each one, what lives they would lead. Could a certain bed really determine what a marriage was going to be like? Elena thought so.

The building was rather quiet on the weekends, and the obtrusive clicking of her heels on the hardwood floors had a rather sullen tone to them. She wound through the rooms, the binders full of her clients wishes staying unopened in her tote for most of it, her fingers outstretched to caress the marble counters, wooden tabletops, soft upholstered loveseats. Who would she and John be if they owned that sofa bed? This piano? Would he trust her more if she had chosen this style ottoman instead of the square one they owned? Do honest women prefer more rounded edges, love softer sides?
When Elena returned home that evening, the front of the house was dark.

“John?” she called softly, setting her bag down beside the door and the keys in the small dish on the table.

The glow of the kitchen light emanated from down the hallway. Faintly, she heard the ding of the cooking timer. She could tell it was John by the heanness of his footsteps; for a rather slender man, he clomped around the house like he had something to prove, like he was trying to rattle the very ground they stood on. “Fee-fi-fo-fum,” Elena often joked when he entered the room.

“John,” she repeated, louder this time, following him down the hall. She stopped in the kitchen doorway.

The small breakfast nook had been transformed into what Elena could only describe as a French bistro. White tablecloth and candles, a single red rose in the center. It smelled like cheese and onions, something slightly nutty.

“Lena.” He was standing at the counter, wearing the blue sweater she always liked him in.

“What is this?”

“I’m sorry.” He pushed his hand through his hair, a pining look on his face that made her heart twinge. Whether it was from a similar pining or anger, she couldn’t really tell. “I’m so sorry. Please sit.”

He pulled out one of the chairs, and after a beat, Elena moved towards it. He pushed her chair in with a type of mock formality she couldn’t help but smile at. There was a period early in their marriage where they would set aside parts of their paychecks to treat themselves to lavish meals every few weeks. Restaurants where they brought the meat to you while still smoking,
wrapped in banana leaves, or blown sugar desserts arranged like balloons, asking to be popped. Elena loved those meals, but as the maître d’ led them to their tables, she would always wave them off when they tried to push her chair in.

“Why don’t you just let him do it?” John asked once, after yet another rebuffed man walked back to the host stand.

“This isn’t Victorian England. I’m perfectly capable of pushing myself in, thank you.”

He sat down across from her. Both of them were quiet; there was much to say, but nowhere to start.

“You cooked.”

“I tried,” he chuckled. They usually only saved the grilling to John, and even then, it sometimes came out slightly charred. Elena never minded, though; it wasn’t as if her cooking was anything to brag about.

“Lena,” he said again, “I’m so sorry.” He opened and closed his hands as if he was trying to pull an explanation from the still air. “I just got so in my head. You’ve spent a lot of time working on the redesign for that single father, and I don’t know, I just started seeing things that weren’t there, I guess. You just seem to spend so much time out of the house.”

She thought about all the time he had been out lately, biking longer and longer routes, but didn’t say anything. Instead, she responded, “You’re a freelance CPA. How can you tell me you don’t understand the demand of clients on your time?”

“I know, I know.” He ran his hand through his hair again. Elena wondered if something was burning, but she didn’t mention it. “It was just something about him that rubbed me the wrong way.”
John had only met that client once, Zachary Davis, when he had stopped by their house to look at fabric samples. It was a sad story, really; his wife died of cancer two years earlier, leaving him with their twin boys to care for. They’d moved to the area recently. John ran into him as Zachary left her office, the two intersecting as John came down the stairs in his bike shorts, exchanging a handshake and introductions. The interaction had seemed pleasant enough to Elena.

“Zachary is like any other client.”

“I’m a jealous bastard.”

“A fool, too.”

“A bastard and a fool.” He took her hands in his from across the table. “Please forgive me.”

Elena gave his hands a light squeeze but didn’t say offer him anything else. “I think you’d better check on the food.”

He gave her a sad look but nodded, getting up from the table. “I made coq au vin.”

“Did you, now?”

“I guess we’ll see.”

As they ate, they conversed like they hadn’t in days, softly, like they were letting each other in on a secret. Both of them shy. It was the most undivided attention they had given each other in months. John’s phone buzzed a few times before he turned it off. “Do you need to get that?” she asked.

“No. Tonight my only focus is here.”

Eventually, sometime between carrying their dishes to the sink and John taking the ice cream, vanilla bean, out of the freezer, Elena wrapped her arms around her husband from behind,
his sweater like a pillow under her cheek, the smell of fabric softener soothing. He turned around. She felt his fingers under her chin, gently lifting it until her gaze met his. “Hi,” he said softly.

“Hi,” Elena mouthed back.

When he kissed her, she felt her lingering anger, resolve, guilt dissipate. She felt instead needy, pulling him closer, sensing the same in John, the way his breath hitched, the feeling of him against her leg. Up the stairs, into bed. She felt like they were twenty-five again, her bra discarded on the floor, the sound of zippers undoing, his mouth on her breast, her sternum, her teeth nipping his neck; the feeling that if they didn’t do this right then the world was going to end. Downstairs, the ice cream sat melting on the counter, forgotten.

Then she felt it. Her stomach suddenly pitched, twisted like a wrung rag. Elena shoved him and he rolled off of her. “What?” he called after her, slightly winded, and she raced to the bathroom. She just made it before her dinner made its presence known again, sloshing up the sides of the bowl. She had thought the chicken tasted a little funny but hadn’t wanted to make John feel bad. Elena wiped her mouth on the back of her hand and shivered. She was wearing only her socks.

She turned her head to see John standing in the doorway. “Can you get me a hair tie?”

He had put his boxers back on, looking down at her in such a way that she suddenly felt like a dog that had an accident on the rug. “The terms said that this model may have a delayed reaction. It could happen hours after you take it,” he said, almost too quietly to hear.

“What?”

“The Virtue Brew. Cheaters can get sick hours after they take it.”

“Are you kidding me right now?”
“You’re a liar.”

“You fed me bad chicken, for Christ’s sake.”

He threw her a towel. From out of frame, she heard him say, “I’m sleeping on the couch.”

“John!” she called after him, brushing her hair out of her eyes. She tried to follow him, but her stomach revolted again, sending her to clutch onto the sides of the bowl like a life raft.

The white swam in front of her, too bright. She closed her eyes and rested her forehead on the sticky porcelain. Downstairs, she heard the TV crackle to life.

Her mother always told her she could think herself into a black hole, if she wanted to. Charybdis sucked into her own whirlpool, unable to escape the chaos of her own design. As Elena lay in bed, the bathroom trash can but an arm’s reach away where John used to be, she felt herself spinning and spinning, the bed rocking beneath her. The violent tossing had knocked over a lamp, their wedding photo, untucked the sheets.

Maybe she was spending too much time with Zachary Davis. He had placed his hand on hers once as she sat at his kitchen table, going over the redesign plans. She thought he had a beautiful smile. He always had a cup of coffee waiting for her when she walked in the door, cream but no sugar, just as she liked it.

She thought of her college boyfriend, Eli Matthews, the first man she had ever slept with. The first man she had ever loved. He cried after their first time, in her lofted bed in Dana Hall while her roommate texted her to let her back in their locked room. When he broke up with her two months before graduation, she thought she would always love him. Maybe she did? Elena wondered where he was now.
The faces of the few men she saw before she met John floated above her. Then, too, the faces of the men after. Zachary Davis wandered back in. The comment that may have been considered a pass. “It’s been a long time since a beautiful woman has been in my bedroom.” The added time she put into her makeup before she had an appointment at his house. The little spark of electricity she shamefully felt when he placed his hand on hers on the kitchen counter. The extra second she took before pulling away.

There’s nothing wrong with liking being liked, she thought. That is not a sin.

John’s brother, Mark, who had propositioned at her during their rehearsal dinner, grinned at her. She heard his voice. Proof she was a whore. A whore, a whore, a whore.

Elena reached for the trashcan.

The sound of the shower woke her the next morning. She pushed herself up on her elbows and reached for the water glass on the bedside table. Her mouth felt cracked, split like dry clay. Elena spilled some of the water down her chin, onto her chest. The sheets dampened beside her.

She knew John took long showers when he was upset, and she didn’t know what to do with herself. She didn’t know how to fix it. She didn’t know what there was to fix. From his bedside table, she heard John’s phone ding. Evidently, he plugged in his phone when he got in the shower, as it had been draining battery all night on the couch with him. On the fifth text notification, Elena rolled over to peer at it. She then got up, pulled on a pair of sweatpants and a faded Ramone’s T-shirt before grabbing her car keys.

When she returned, John was fixing himself a sandwich at the kitchen counter, the fridge left agape behind him.
“Where have you been?” he asked, not looking up

She didn’t answer, instead returning, “Aren’t you missing your bike ride with Caroline? If we’re still using that illusion.”

He met her gaze then, eyes wide with what appeared to be genuine shock. Then, after a beat, tinged with resignation, “What?”

Elena set the bag on the counter with a small thud, the plastic bag rustling in protest to the rough treatment. She shoved it towards him.

“What is this?”

“You don’t recognize it?”

He opened the bag; inside, an energy drink type bottle and a flyer peered up at him.

“Elena–”

“It’s the principle of the thing, John,” she responded. “If you didn’t have anything to hide, you would take the test.”

He took the Virtue Brew out of the plastic and placed it on the table. Both of them stared at it for a moment, and in the elongated silence, Elena saw that the breakfast nook still had yesterday’s tablecloth draped over it. The red rose had wilted overnight; John had forgotten to put water in the vase.

Slowly, John raised his hand and knocked the bottle over onto its side.

“How many times?”

“Only three.”

“Only? That’s the word you want to use?”

“We really did start as riding partners. I tried to end it last week.”
Yesterday she would’ve bitten into him over the word “tried,” would’ve wanted him to take the test anyway. A tit for tat. But today she was tired. Elena pulled out the island stool across from him and sat down. She was not crying. Instead, she felt what could be only characterized as a sneaking type of relief, and as they looked at each other across the counter, she saw it in his eyes, too.

“What do we do now?” he asked.

“We could call Dr. Clark again,” she said. Years earlier, they had had a brief stint in marriage counseling. John’s father had died right around the time they were told Elena would most likely not conceive. She remembered how tightly they had clung to each other; John, who had held her, who had kissed the top of her head as she had rocked back and forth; Elena, who had wiped his tears in that hospital room when his father took his last breath. Now, they were not clinging at all.

But even as they planned, even as they both apologized, and even then, as they both started crying, she saw them months from now in that same kitchen. She was sorting the furniture in her mind, three piles: to Elena, to John, to donate.
She knew what was in the envelope without having to open it.

It was thick, cream with a pearlish sheen, the wax seal on the back so shiny it looked as if it had just been pressed. She knew when she opened it blue confetti would spill out onto her entrance hall carpet, some inevitably blowing under the console table to furl and wilt and collect into dust. She opened it anyway.

_Congratulations! You’ve been selected._ To the State’s credit, it really was a pretty card; the font was loopy and inviting, a shimmery gold, like a wedding invitation. Her sister Mariana, who was selected almost five years ago, heard that the letters were gilded with actual gold leaf. Gretchen didn’t believe it until she held one in her own hands. _Your health screening and testing are scheduled for Monday, May 16. Please report to the Sustainability Clinic on 1354 North Halstead._

She’d always wondered what this day would look like if it happened. She’d felt like there would be a sign, that she would know it was coming. After Mariana got her letter, Gretchen was constantly on edge, expecting it to come falling through her postage slot like a mail bomb, blowing her life to bits with cerulean confetti. But then when she turned thirty and it still hadn’t arrived, she thought she was in the clear. She thought she’d been passed over for more viable options, ones farther away from the cut off age of thirty-five. She didn’t think she’d come home from the corner store with cat food and a bottle of merlot to find it there, winking at her naivete. And even though she knew what it was, the last sentence still knocked the wind out of her. Gretchen set her keys on the table, let the bag slip off her shoulder.

_It is with heroes like you that we can rebuild. Thank you for your service._
She was young when the Sickness occurred. It had an actual name, a scientific one with lots of uppercase letters and seemingly random numbers, but everyone just called it the Sickness. The name was softer, kinder, though the actual illness was anything but. It swept across the country in less than a year, rippling through like a breeze bends a wheat field, flattening stalks as it blows. Experts couldn’t identify with certainty where it had come from, but most agree that it came from a parasite common in the stomachs of Atlantic crustaceans. A tourist up in Maine ate the tomalley where one little, mutated parasite had survived the lobster boil and that was it. It only took one. When he died, quickly, within a month, the hospital staff came in contact with some of his body fluid, and the Sickness began.

Their dad was one of the first people to get sick in their area. At the time no one was quite sure exactly what they were dealing with, so there was no real response plan, no real panic. People were still going out to dinner and the lake because all was well. At least it seemed that way.

One night, near the end of that August, Gretchen had wandered downstairs in the middle of the night for a reason she could no longer recall. She found their dad in the kitchen, otherwise dark except for the blue glow emanating from the open refrigerator, its contents spilled out on the granite countertop. He was at the sink, emptied gallon milk jug in hand under the running water, which he would then bring to his lips with fervent gulps. She watched him do this once, twice, three times before he looked up and saw her there in the doorway, still blinking with sleep. Even in the bad lighting, she could see the whites of his eyes had turned green.

She didn’t remember a lot about her dad, just little things like the calloused feel of his hand around hers when they crossed the street, or how his beard tickled her cheek when he bent
down to hug her. He was always wearing flannel. But Gretchen remembered exactly what he looked like that night, when he glanced over at her from the sink, water dripping down his chin. Earlier that summer, she and Mariana were playing in their grandparent’s backyard when they discovered a sick racoon in one of their Oma’s hosta bushes. It was on its side, heaving, unable to move but following the girls with its eyes, snarling when they poked it with a branch. Her grandpa shot it and buried it in a cornfield. Her dad had the same feral desperation in his eyes. If he had tried to talk to her, she wondered if words would’ve come out as if he was biting them. He died four days later.

After that, time sped up and slowed down all at once. They paused reopening schools, and more people began to die. The Sickness hit hard and worked fast. The hospitals became overwhelmed. Those in truly dire condition were transferred to the high school gymnasium to succumb to the illness in an environment the State claimed was comfortable, but in reality, was probably just rows and rows of gym mats with patients screaming for water or their wives or their children before they finally seized up. The most common symptom of the Sickness just prior to organ failure was extreme thirst. Some victims died of water toxemia, essentially drinking themselves to death before their heart and lungs shuddered out.

By the time they realized it was mostly men dying, it was almost too late. Hospital staff were asked by the State to take sustainability samples from all Sickness patients, even if they were still alive. Anyone near death had to have a sample collected and catalogued. It was unclear whether or not they already knew they would have to create the Selection Process to repopulate, but when the dust settled and the Sickness abruptly ended, nearly all reproductive age men were gone. The samples proved useful.
When she had gone with Mariana to the Sustainability Clinic and they flipped through the binder of donors, her sister had whispered, “Do you think Dad is in here?” The thought of him listed within those laminated pages, smudged from use, made them pause. Did they have hundreds of half-siblings out there? Crying and eating and breathing like one large, invisible army.

The Halstead Street Sustainability Clinic was much nicer than the one she had been at with Mariana, and for that she was grateful. The walls were light yellow, framed photos of sonograms and moms hugging their pink, squawking newborns. Gretchen hadn’t opened the donor booklet by the time the nurse called her name, and she followed her down the hallway, holding the binder away from her body like it was hurting her eyes.

In the exam room, the nurse took her vitals and some background information. Smoker? Never. Drinker? Yes, but not excessively. She thought about the three empty wine bottles near the sink. Current partner? No, not at this time. Then the nurse handed her a gown, told her the fertility specialist would be in soon, and left.

Gretchen put the gown on like a jacket as instructed, the opening to the front, tying it closed as tightly as she could. The linoleum was cold even with her socks on, the chill seeping through the cotton, up her legs. She crossed her arms over her chest, feeling the gooseflesh on her forearms. When she lay down on the exam table, the gown crinkled. She might as well have been wearing a plastic tarp.

A sudden, sharp knock. “Gretchen?” a voice called through the closed door.

“Yes.”

The woman who entered had tightly curled brown hair, gray streaked, wire rimmed glasses perched delicately atop her head. “Gretchen,” she repeated, a big smile on her face as she
extended her hand towards her. She clutched a clipboard in the other. “My name is Dr. Zebago, you can call me Dr. Z.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” she said on instinct.

“You as well.”

Now that she had sat down closer to Gretchen, she could see a smudge of lipstick on the doctor’s teeth, still bared in a smile.

“I first want to say congratulations and thank you for participating in the Sustainability Program. It is a great and life changing experience.”

Gretchen said nothing.

The doctor cocked her head slightly but didn’t remove the smile from her face. “The purpose of this first visit is to run a few tests to make sure that there are no obvious problems that will prevent you from having a safe pregnancy.” She glanced down at her clipboard, the first time she broke eye contact since she had entered the room. “From the records we have obtained from your primary care doctor, there do not appear to be any major concerns, but we’ll check just to be sure.”

She knew the doctor was expecting some sort of answer from her. She offered, “Okay.”

“Excellent,” Dr. Z beamed at her. “I’m going to do a little physical examination and then an ultrasound. Nurse Annie will come back afterwards for some bloodwork. Lay on down for me and put your arms up.” She walked to the sink and washed her hands. “They may be a little cold, I apologize.”

She plucked at the ties of Gretchen’s gown, chatting as the stiff fabric fell away and exposed her chest. Her hands were indeed cold.
“Has anyone close to you also participated in the Sustainability Program?” the doctor asked. Her hands were pressing gently against the underside of her left breast, then firmer. Each time her fingers moved to a new spot it felt like an electric jolt.

“My sister.” The doctor moved on to the other side. “My younger sister. Five years ago.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful.” Her hands roamed, around, over, up to her throat, pressing.

“What is your nephew’s name?”

Gretchen tried to make eye contact with her. “Her name is Sophie.”

The slightest purse of the lips, like a twitch. “Well, that’s just wonderful,” she repeated.

“Truly. Sit up please.” She unwrapped the stethoscope from around her neck, gently prying the side of the gown open farther to place the chest piece on Gretchen's back. “I assume you are then familiar with the State’s gender policies?”

“Yes.”

“Good. They will also be outlined in the informational booklet we send you home with today.” She glanced at the donor packet that Gretchen had discarded on the extra patient chair. “You will be able to select a donor at your next appointment.” She situated the headpiece into her ears. “Now take a deep breath for me.”

She’d met Alison at work, her first real job after grad school. ClickPoint was one of those new age offices where there weren’t any cubicles, but an open workspace with lots of natural light and conference rooms that looked like glass fish tanks. There was a gym and yoga studio on the fourth floor, and staff were encouraged to use them whenever they needed a break. Exercise makes the mind sharp, their boss had told them. On the fifth floor there was a daycare, free for employees.
Gretchen and Alison were assigned to a new marketing campaign for Vitalit, a supplement that eases musculoskeletal pain related to menopause. Their team supervisor was an older woman named Marcie, who loved to say, “How would you market a menopause product without the experience of an actual menopausal woman, right?” in every meeting. The three of them would often meet for drinks after hours to continue talking about the project, and eventually Alison and Gretchen would start going out for drinks to talk about anything but the project.

She was the first woman that Gretchen had seriously dated. In college she had had a few girlfriends, sure, but those relationships never had a real weight to them. Not like her relationship with Alison. She ended up leaving ClickPoint two years after they met, but she moved into Gretchen's one bedroom in Edgewater shortly after.

It was the time in her life that Gretchen was happiest. Alison’s college friends lived a few blocks away, and during the summers they all played beach volleyball without any sort of skill, but then again that wasn’t really the point. That was how Alison was; carefree, didn’t take herself too seriously. She balanced Gretchen out. Alison made her loosen up a bit, let go what she normally clutched to her chest in a death grip. And she thought, this is what fulfillment is. That if the rest of her life looked exactly like this, she would be content. But then Mariana was Selected.

Since she had gotten her own letter, Gretchen had called Alison eight times. She never called her back. The generic answering machine message, “The caller you have reached…” echoed in her ear. She never left a message. When they were dating, she always told Alison she should change it. Now, it mocked her.

*****
It was an unusually warm June. The first month of summer was normally a barrage of torrential rain and fluctuating temperatures; one day the weather might call for a sweater, the next it may steam residents in a pressure cooker. But the month had been warm and mild that year, and the lake was even warm enough to swim in on the hottest days, which it was on the last Saturday of the month. Mariana had called her the night before to see if she wanted to go to the beach with them, and at promptly half past ten the next morning, her sister had picked her up outside of her apartment building. She’d had her first round of insemination three days before. Gretchen got into the passenger seat, turning briefly to see Sophie asleep in her car seat in the back. She clutched pink, star-shaped sunglasses in one chubby fist.

“No Ed?”

Mariana eased back into the road. Though the city had plenty of beaches, she had suggested that they go to one farther north. There was more room for Sophie to run around. “He didn’t want to slow us down. He’s not very steady on sand.”

“Because he’s geriatric.”

“Don’t be cruel.”

Gretchen didn’t see what was cruel about a simple fact, but she nodded her concession anyway. It had been the bone to pick between the two of them for three years, and she realized she was too worn out at the moment to start into it again. She regretted saying it. It was a bad habit, needling her sister like that. A compulsion as soon as she saw her.

“He’s been nothing but good to the two of us.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“If you don’t understand it yet, you will soon.”
Marina had met Ed Corrigan a year after Sophie was born. She was working as a night nurse at a hospice home, and Ed’s wife was there with stage four breast cancer. He’d survived the Sickness by some sort of divine miracle, as he liked to say. Gretchen thought it also helped that he was older than the most devastated age group, but she never said it. After his wife died, he still came by the hospice to see Mariana. They moved in together shortly thereafter. When Mariana had told her all this three years ago, Gretchen had accused Mariana of something along the lines of prostituting herself, daddy abandonment issues gone too far.

“That’s not what this is” she’d said, her face red. “He’s lonely. I’m lonely. We keep each other company.” She’d looked at a then tiny Sophie, kicking her legs in the stroller next to their table. “And I need help with her.”

What she didn’t say then, but brought up later, another time when Gretchen’s offhand comment started a spat, was that it wasn’t like she had a lot of options. “Can you put yourself in my shoes for just a minute?” Mariana had snapped. “It’s not like my relationship prospects are high. Sometimes I go days without seeing a man.” Gretchen mentioned that they had seen three that morning. She didn’t remind her that they had been toddlers and a man in a wheelchair. Women of all ages looking at Mariana with varying degrees of envy when she went anywhere with Ed. How many fathers, grandfathers, brothers, husbands did he remind them of? What would they sacrifice to walk by his side?

Ed had grown on Gretchen, though she didn’t often admit it. He treated her sister well, Sophie called him her “Eddy.” He taught her to swim in his backyard pool. The fact that he was closer to their mother’s age, and even then, older than her, didn’t seem to bother Mariana, so Gretchen was actively working on trying not to let it bother her. It was a touch and go process.
When they got to the beach, she took Sophie’s hand as they walked over the sand, each step they took creating miniature dunes. The lake was sparkling, blue, stretching out of eyes’ reach. At the shore, Gretchen helped her put on floaties, and Sophie flapped her arms as she ran back and forth from the lapping water, her excited shrieks carrying on the breeze.

Gretchen and Mariana folded a towel to sit on at the shoreline, their legs outstretched enough to feel the cool licks of the waves. As kids, their mom and Oma had taken them to the beach a lot, especially after their dad died. They’d spend whole days there, eating ham and cheese sandwiches and carrot sticks for lunch, their mom always staring at the water for hours, motionless. She would forget to reapply the sisters’ sunscreen, and at home they would peer at themselves in the bathroom mirror as their skin transformed into an alien red, vivid and hot to the touch. If they got mad at each other, they would hit each other on the arms, taking pleasure in the white handprint that would appear, if for a second, on the other’s skin.

“When you found out Sophie was a girl, how did you decide?” Gretchen picked up a fistful of sand when she asked, and in the silence that followed, let it trickle out between her fingers. An ant marched near her thigh. With the next fistful she buried it.

Mariana licked her lips. “They give you a few days to decide what you want to do. They give you a lot of incentive to terminate, like financially.” Her gaze followed Sophie intently, as if she didn’t have an eye on her at every second, she would disintegrate into the sand, melt into the water. “I couldn’t raise a kid without the full stimulus package they give for boys. I wasn’t delusional. But then, when I went back to the clinic,” she paused, bit a loose cuticle on her thumb, “I couldn’t.”

When they found out Mariana was having a girl, she had moved in with their mother for a while. The State paid for everything pre-birth with the girls to come out of the Sustainability
Program, but nothing after. Not like the boys, even if you gave the baby up for adoption.

Gretchen remembers one night, when she was staying at their mother’s house for the weekend, her sister yelling on the phone to a friend, “They act like they don’t need girls. What will they do when all of a sudden there are no women left? What then?” They were both sleeping in their childhood bedrooms.

Later, Gretchen got in the water with Sophie, just up to her waist, while the girl paddled around her. Occasionally she would hold her hands and she tried to float upright, but inevitably she would tip forward to paddle again, giggling. The pale bottoms of her feet flashed like silver fish under the surface.

“We have very exciting news!” Dr. Z entered the room with her trademark smile. “This round was a success!” She clasped her hands together and sat down on the doctor’s stool, wheeling it closer to where Gretchen was reclined on the exam table. She had worn shorts that morning in an attempt to stay cool, and her bare thighs stuck to the vinyl. She lifted one, then the other, peeling her skin away from the cushion with a ripping sound.

“Young blood work has just come back; you’re officially pregnant,” Dr. Z continued, at this point familiar and indifferent with Gretchen’s silences. “While I assume you’ve read the materials, I do need to go over a few points with you.” She picked up a sheet of paper and a clipboard from the desk and handed them to Gretchen. She plucked a pen from her coat pocket and passed it to her.

“If the embryo develops into a male fetus, not only will the cost of the pregnancy and birth be covered, but you will be given a $300,000 stipend to help cover the cost of care. If you
choose to put the child up for adoption, you will still receive a small portion of that stipend as compensation.”

Gretchen looked at the paper in her hand. It was a bulleted list of the Gender Policies, each line offering a place for her to initial her understanding. At the bottom, she had to sign.

“But,” Dr. Z put on her best grave face, “if the fetus is female, you have several options. You may terminate and we will try another round of IUI, or you may carry the child to term. The cost of pregnancy and birth will be covered by the State, but you will not be given a stipend for care. That money has to be put towards the regrowth of the male population.”

Dozens of portraits of milking mothers and their children in the waiting room. All of them were boys.

“Why do I get to decide?” The volume of her own voice startled Gretchen. But with every other step designated by the State, it annoyed her that this was the part she got to choose. “It’s such a personal choice, we can’t tell you what to do with your body. This is your decision.” She tapped the clipboard Gretchen was holding with another pen.

“Now, please initial and sign.”

It was Mariana who suggested that she download the dating app, Meet Your Match.

“This is going to be a really lonely time for you,” she’d said on their drive home from the beach. “You’re going to want someone else in your corner.”

When Gretchen told her she’d been calling Alison, she was happy at first. When Gretchen told her, at last, that she hadn’t been picking up, she was no longer as pleased. “If you keep calling her, she’s going to put out a restraining order on you.”

“No, she won’t.”
“Maybe not, but she obviously doesn’t want to talk to you if she isn’t picking up. Give Alison some space.”

In trying to do just that, or perhaps more accurately, trying to get her mind off of her, Gretchen made a dating profile. Woman seeking woman. In the “Do you have children?” box, she clicked no, her belly still small enough to be concealed under a well layered shirt. It wasn’t technically a lie.

The app was designed so users could meet in a public spot generated by the interests expressed by the matches. Coffee shops, restaurants, concerts. Gretchen knew plenty of women who felt comfortable enough meeting their match in private, forgoing the built-in safety check. She was not one of those women.

“Are you Gretchen?” She looked up from the table to the woman who was presumably her date. She was fifteen minutes late, not that Gretchen had been counting. She looked pleasant enough, brown hair cut short at her chin, blue jeans, her blouse so crispy pressed it shocked Gretchen that she would arrive late to anywhere if that’s how carefully she handled her clothing. Gretchen gave the woman her best smile, standing up to give her a quick hug. Open up a little, Mariana’s advice echoed in her head. You know you can be prickly.

“Nice to meet you, Nicole.”

“Sorry I’m a bit late.” Her nails were long, painted red, making Gretchen notice how particularly stubby her own were.

“I hadn't even noticed.”

Gretchen was pleasantly surprised about how well the date went. Nicole worked as a publicist for a natural hair magazine, she enjoyed walking her bulldog near the lakefront each morning. On the weekends, she played the trumpet in a group called Rumor Jazz It, a jazz quintet
with a particular fondness for Adele covers. When Gretchen laughed, she smiled good-naturedly.

“IT sounds strange, but just wait until you hear us.”

At one point, as they sat sipping in a comfortable silence, Gretchen asked what she was thinking about.

“I like to people-watch,” she explained. “Something about imagining what people are doing here, what their story is.” Nicole leaned closer to her. “What their secrets are. It’s exciting.”

As they were leaving, exchanging real phone numbers to talk outside of Meet Your Match, Nicole held the door open for a heavily pregnant woman pushing a toddler. She waddled past them, the boy in the stroller screaming, his mother’s weary cooing doing nothing to soothe his colic. “Can you imagine?” she asked, turning towards Gretchen as they stepped into the bright sunlight.

“No,” Gretchen breathed softly as they embraced in goodbye, careful to angle her stomach away from any bodily contact. “I can’t.”

When Alison had told her she wanted a child, Gretchen laughed.

They were lying in bed, Alison holding a worn paperback from the library that Gretchen could tell she hadn’t really been reading, more absently skimming. She had figured she was thinking about their visit to see one of their friends, pregnant with twins, her belly now swollen grotesquely under her shift, feet puffy like they had been submerged in water too long. In a way, she was thinking about their visit, but not in the way Gretchen had thought.

So, when she turned to her, her face nestled halfway into the pillow, blue eyes peering at her, the last thing Gretchen had expected to hear was, “What do you think about having a kid?”
She didn’t know what to say, so she laughed. It came out more like a bark, startled out of her throat in a sharp heave of breath.

“What do you mean?” she asked after Alison’s gaze darkened, annoyance flickering behind narrowed eyes.

“What do you mean, what do I mean? It’s not a complex question.” Alison was rarely short with anyone. “Have you ever thought about having a kid?”

Gretchen sat up. “It’s never even crossed my mind. Why, what do you think about having a kid?”

“Pretty favorable actually.”

“Where is this coming from? Didn’t you see how miserable Catherine was today?” Alison sat up too, tossing the paperback onto her nightstand. “It’s not coming from anywhere, and she wasn’t miserable, you just think she is. Not everyone ascribes to your mindset, you know.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You always think that your opinion is the right one. You're very my way or the highway when it comes to having kids, or music, or which pizza place is the best. You’re not always right.”

Gretchen opened her mouth to respond, but then decided not to. They sat in silence for a minute or so. She could hear Alison’s watch ticking on the nightstand.

“There are plenty of children up for adoption from the Program, or I could even sign up for it myself,” Alison finally said. Gretchen could tell she was using her de-escalation voice, which she had been using more and more lately, it seemed.

“You would seriously voluntarily sign up for the Sustainability Program?”
“I've been thinking about it for a little while now.”

And in a moment that she would replay over for the years to come, she said, “Why would you ruin our life like that?”

Gretchen doesn’t remember exactly how the conversation went after that. Eventually, somewhere down the hall, the cat knocked a planter over, the shards of shattered clay skittering over hardwood. Alison grabbed her pillow and said she would go fucking take care of it, and then she didn’t come back to bed that night.

Gretchen had spent hours poring over the donor booklets, trying to decide who would be the father. There were no names, of course, just traits, characteristics, interests. How nurses were able to get them to answer questions like, “How would you describe yourself in three words?” or “What is your favorite activity?” while they were dying was beyond her. Gretchen wondered if they just made some of it up.

Caucasian. Hair: brown. Eyes: blue. Build: athletic. Age: 33. It seemed most appropriate to her to choose someone near her age. At least when he died. She felt a strange sense of intimacy with him. She’d asked Dr. Z if she could have a copy of his donor page. She kept it on her bedside table. She thought about him often, especially when she found herself bent over a sink or a toilet seat, the nausea often bubbling up at unexpected times. Sometimes, she thought she hated him. Sometimes, she thought she loved him.

She imagined the baby inside of her assembling, not growing, day by day. A limb attached one afternoon, fingers and toes subsequently added, pieces of a LEGO set popping into place. Male or female, Gretchen wondered. What would the baby’s fate be? What would be hers?
Gretchen thought about the pregnancy fight a lot after their breakup, which had finally, perhaps inevitably, come a few months afterwards. Each time they saw a pregnant woman, the air between them would become charged, thick enough to suffocate. Each time they had a disagreement, which happened more and more often, Alison would accuse Gretchen of being unyielding in every regard. In one of their final arguments, she asked, “Why do you think I left ClickPoint? I needed space somewhere!”

They’d tried to be friends, something that always sounded dumb to Gretchen when she heard women say it about their exes, but she felt that she needed Alison in her life somehow, in some capacity. But eventually that friendship faded into pleasantries at gatherings of their mutual friends, everyone always pretending things weren’t as uncomfortable as they were.

Gretchen really had thought she’d been moving on in the year before her Selection. She’d seen other people, hadn’t thought about Alison as much. She and Nicole had met up several times since their first coffee together, the last time ending in a sleepover at Gretchen’s place, which had been the first time Gretchen had slept with someone in months. She had not responded to Nicole’s last text, though. She was feeling the sudden urge to cut and run. It’s not that she didn’t want to see her, necessarily, but it seemed easier than having to explain that she had been Selected, and why she had omitted to talk about it to begin with. She knew it wasn’t fair.

But now that Gretchen had been selected, she felt a sudden, burning need to talk to Alison. What would she have to say about the baby shower that her coworkers at ClickPoint were going to throw her, parties they had suffered through plenty of themselves, but never on the
receiving end? What ideas did she have for her year-and-a-half long maternity leave? Has she read any good books lately? Did their friends even tell her that Gretchen had been Selected?

Did she ever have a kid?

One time, waiting for the bus after work, she thought she saw Alison go into a coffee shop across the street. She knew that the company she worked for had moved their offices close to her own, so she believed, for that moment, that she had appeared. That she could talk to her.

She crossed the street after her and hurried into the cafe. The acidic smell of espresso made her stomach roil, the steaming milk a high-pitched screaming sound as the barista nodded along to the beat of the music over the loudspeaker. She tapped Alison on the shoulder, smiled as she turned around.

After a couple beats, “I’m sorry. I thought you were someone else.”

The woman smiled. “That’s all right.” She looked nothing like Alison.

“It’s going to be a little cold.” Dr. Z squeezed the jelly across Gretchen’s exposed stomach. She didn’t look; she didn’t like how the skin was starting to pucker, how her belly button looked taught, like a stretched latex balloon.

“There is the head, the feet are curled there.” Dr. Z moved the wand around Gretchen’s stomach, the staticky image of a fetus undulating on the screen. “Now let’s see what the sex, is shall we? What we’ve all been waiting for.”

 Afterwards, Gretchen squinted into the mid-morning sun outside of the Halstead Street Clinic, stepping back as close to the bricks as she could as not to be flattened by a passing cyclist. Part of her shirt was sticky where she hadn’t wiped all of the jelly off. She dialed Mariana’s number and asked her to pick her up.
“Can you give me, like, an hour? Maybe forty-five minutes. Sophie is having a rough morning, and we’re going to be a little late getting her to enrichment.” In the background, Gretchen could hear her niece wailing as Ed coaxed her, “If you keep your shirt on, we can go get some Cheerios.”

Across the street, a mother pushed a stroller while talking loudly on the phone. The toddler threw a blanket out of the side of the basket, a sudden puddle of warm yellow on the dirt-flecked concrete. The mother did not notice. “That’s fine,” she said. “Thanks, Mari.”

“Is there a place you can wait?”

There was a bakery a few blocks away that she and Alison used to go to a lot. She hadn’t been since they’d broken up, but she remembered the chocolate croissants fondly. Chicks and a Biscuit was the name. She had spent many a Sunday morning there, pouring over a crossword that she always became too frustrated to actually finish, but enjoying the routine, nonetheless. Gretchen told her sister to pick her up there.

She was tempted to call Alison but thought the better of it. She hadn’t in a week or so, trying to follow Mariana’s advice, but she felt itchy, an addict who went cold turkey. As she walked through the door of the bakery, the sonogram photo was heavy in her purse. If she waded into a river, she thought she would sink like Virginia Woolf. The bakery, for its part, looked just as she remembered it. Familiar smells of fresh baked bread and pastries, mismatched mugs and plates on every table, rescued from estate and rummage sales. She chose a table by the window, took the Times off the stand after she ordered her tea, and asked for a pen.

She was about to pull out her phone and cheat on 33 across, the actress who became a senator of Alabama, when the tinkling of the door chimes drew her eyes up. Gretchen had a sudden, warped feeling of déjà vu. Alison closed the door, shutting out the oppressive heat.
Beneath her blue summer dress, the rounded arc of her stomach might as well have been a beach ball.

When the two made eye contact, Alison’s mouth made the slight “o” it always did when she was surprised, an expression Gretchen was sure she was mirroring in her own way. She approached the table. “Hi, Gretch.” Her voice held no hostility, her demeanor not one of a woman who had ignored a dozen of calls.

“Hi, Alison.” She felt like she was fumbling for words. “It’s been a while.”

“It has. Too long.”

Gretchen gestured to the seat across from her. “Would you like to sit?” She hoped she didn’t sound too eager, too needy.

Alison smiled in the easy way that Gretchen missed. “Always.” She gestured to her stomach as she pulled out the chair. “I’m meeting a friend, but I’m a bit early.”

“I’ve never known you to be early to anything,” Gretchen said lightly.

“I’ve made a few changes lately.” She cocked her head to the side, raised her eyebrow slightly. “I see there’s been a few big changes for you, too.”

As much as Gretchen had tried to hide her bump, it was visible now no matter what she tried to hide it under. “Yes, there have been,” she replied. She felt her cheeks flush with a sudden embarrassment she couldn't place.

“I’m assuming you were Selected,” Alison said gently.

“I was. And you, did you,” she moved her hand in the air, her mind short circuiting on the right word.

Alison filled it in for her. “I signed up.”
“Congratulations,” Gretchen said. “I’m happy for you.” And she realized, as she said it, that she actually was. It felt the grip around them loosed.

“Thank you.” Alison readjusted in her chair, bumping the table as she did so. “Do you know the sex?”

Gretchen told her, pulling out the sonogram in her pocket.

“Are you going to keep him?”

“I don’t know,” she replied truthfully. “I wouldn’t be able to do it alone.” Gretchen’s phone buzzed. A text from Mariana informed her she was outside. “Mariana is here to pick me up,” she said, wishing for more time.

“Make sure you tell her ‘hi’ for me.”

“I will. Would you like to get lunch sometime?” she asked before she could stop herself.

“Or a tea, or something. Just to talk.”

Alison gave her a small nod, but a friendly one. “That would be nice,”

“Will you pick up this time?” Gretchen tried to joke, but she wasn’t sure it landed right.

“What?”

Gretchen was sure she was the color of a bell pepper. She wondered if she could blame it on the hot flashes. “You haven’t picked up lately, when I tried to call.”

“Oh Gretchen, I got a new number a few months ago. I asked Anne to pass it along to a lot of my contacts, but she forgot a few people. You, too, obviously.” She reached for Gretchen’s crossword, a small smile on her face, like a shadow of recognition. “Here is my new number. Invite me to lunch soon.”

“Okay.” She took the paper back from her. “Bye, Alison.”
As Mariana pulled away from the curb, she asked Gretchen how the appointment went. The glass of the passing buildings made her squint in the sunlight. “Give me one second,” she replied, avoiding the question for the moment. She dialed, put the phone to her ear.

The woman on the other end picked up. “You know, I don’t really want to do this alone, either.”
Though you grew up in the city, you always liked to look up at the stars. On those rare visits to Grandma in the country, you’d always take the time to sit on the porch at night once she fell asleep, open-mouthed in front of the TV. Lightning bugs would pop off like spark plugs in the field, and you would trace the constellations with your pointer finger. You liked the idea that way out there, galaxies away, they had their own planets spinning around them. From where you were standing, they were small enough to be afterthoughts, inconsequential. Yet they were still beautiful, still worth tracing with your finger. You’d always liked that.

Though you liked them less with the dirt in your mouth. The muddy sticks piercing your back. And even less with his hands around your throat, squeezing.

You didn’t see his face. You hadn’t the entire time. It’s not as if he had covered it, so you had in fact seen it, but still it floated at the edge of your mind, a shape beneath the surface of the water, dark and distant. You could smell him though. Sweat and desperation. His breath reeked of cigarettes. He had offered you one. You wondered where that butt was, imagining it smoldering in the wet grass, maybe seething between the cushions of his passenger seat. It felt like the smoke was burning your lungs. You scratched at his hands, knowing your fingernails were broken, but that made them sharp. You hoped they hurt.

Even when the switch turned off and you were gone, your eyes stayed open. Looking at the stars.

You don’t remember being told you were dead. You just knew. You were dead and sitting in a chair and there was a woman in front of you and you didn’t understand that, because you
were dead. *Welcome, Graciela,* the woman said, or she must have, though it didn’t look like she had.

On instinct, *Gracie.*

*Welcome, Graciela.*

*I’m dead.*

*Yes.*

*Okay.* What else are you supposed to say?

*I’ll show you to your room.*

You got up and followed her, because again, you didn’t have any idea what else to do. Walking as a dead person didn’t feel any different than walking as a living person. At least not yet. You were in a long hallway, and there were doors as far as you could see. It did not turn; it did not twist. The woman opened one. *This is where you’ll stay for now.*

*Why?*

*No one knows you’re dead yet. This is the first step.*

The room was long and skinny and full of girls. All girls no one knew were dead. There was some furniture, but as you’d learn, you didn’t have to sleep or eat or do anything bodily anymore, so it was more for show than for use. When you turned around to ask where you actually were, the woman was gone, but in her place another girl was there. She looked like she was blown out of brown sugar and air. *I’m Trina.* She told you she’d been dead for two months.

*Welcome to Saint Maria’s Home for Murdered Girls.*

Time flows differently when you’re dead. It seemed to be passing all at once and not at all. You learned the ropes fairly quickly. Your room designation depended on where your case
stood. You were in “dead, not presumed dead.” There was “dead, presumed dead,” and “dead, body found,” and then “dead, no leads,” “dead, suspect identified,” and on and on and on, a million different doors for a million different situations for a million different girls.

Where do you go at the end? you’d asked Trina

The end?

When your case is solved.

Into the case solved room.

You never leave?

Only when you get justice.

And that isn’t always when your case is solved?

No. Usually isn’t.

For the most part girls couldn’t go from room to room freely, but there were special circumstances, special girls. Normally if their case was infamous. If they were martyrs of legend. One in particular jumped around, bleeding through the walls, standing behind you until you turned around, whispering in your ear.

My name is Elizabeth Short, maybe you’ve heard of me.

No.

Well, they’ve made a lot of movies about me. Books and shows, too.

Oh.

Elizabeth seemed a little too old to be in a home for girls, but what do you know. She sought out newcomers. She acted drunk, delirious, always too close, always too happy. She had been dead for almost seventy-five years. Do you know what he did with my tattoo? He cut it off and he put it up my-
You always tried to plug your ears whenever she was around. But of course, you could hear her anyway.

You spent most of your time with Trina trying to do things that normal girls would do, like sit or talk. You tried braiding her hair once, but your hands couldn’t grasp onto anything solid. The brown strands sifting right through your fingers like sand through an hourglass, spiderwebs in air. You gave up on that idea quickly.

Trina was killed by her stepfather. Her body was behind his work shed, disintegrating under feet of gravel and dirt. He convinced her mother she had run away.

She doesn’t realize what he did?
She never realized what he was doing.

Why did he do it?
Because I said I would tell her.

It felt to you that there was nothing more transient than the life of a girl. You’re there until you’re not anymore. Until someone doesn’t want you there anymore.

Every so often, you met with Maria to talk about your murder. She met with everyone; the first time she summoned you, you asked Trina who she was, and she told you as if you were supposed to know. As if it was natural that a Saint did something as benign as show you to your room or call you to chat. Even though that was the name of the home you didn’t realize that she was the actual Saint Maria. You wished, not for the first time, that you had paid more attention in Sunday School.

Saint Maria was old and young all at once, morphing from a waxen faced child to a wooden faced woman in the same instant, never one or the other long enough to definitively be either. She asked you if you knew the man who killed you. You told her you didn’t know.
I want you to think about it, the girl told her. Then the old lady, really try.

You remembered asking for a ride. You remembered the stain on the passenger seat armrest. The cigarette, the wet leaves, his hands on your neck squeezing, squeezing, squeezing. He still had no face. You remembered until you didn’t want to remember anything else.

She let you go.

That morning had been one of those oppressively hot daybreaks only a Midwestern August can deliver. By the time you got up, not unreasonably late you thought, though Mama disagreed, everything was flattened under the weight of the humidity, the cicadas even taking the day off, their crescendo of sound barely registering. The rising heat made the pavement swim before your eyes as you biked down Fourth Street, your drawstring bag secured over one shoulder, the other cords flying out behind you.

You were taking algebra that summer, surprisingly your own choice. By taking summer school, you freed up your semester enough to sign up for woodshop. You were in the second six-week session, July to mid-August, and as the temperature ticked well into the 90s, you sat in an unairconditioned classroom with two dozen other fuck ups and early-planners, learning about quadratic equations with sweat pooling in the crooks of your elbows. You weren’t bad at algebra, you actually didn’t mind it, but the long days and the teacher’s droning voice were enough to make anyone want to crawl out of the open yet ineffective windows. But it was Friday, and that meant you had the day off.

As you pedaled past the Buckhead Strip Mall, you contemplated stopping to get a Big-Gulp, but knew that Isabella was probably already waiting for you. The 7-Eleven was nestled between a beef jerky outlet and the Diamond Deli and Video Gaming, a place you go to
once before realizing that ham sandwiches and arcade games are too strange a combination. You kept going.

Sometimes you visited your body. Or what was left of it. Even the lowly maggot had to eat, and on you they feasted. You hadn’t thought about doing it until you once looked down and the sinews of your fingers were exposed, all bones and gapping flesh. You thought there might be something crawling under your skin.

Trina told you that a lot of your existence at Saint Maria’s depended on what was going on down there. If there was energy in your case, then you had energy. You looked as you did before death. Like a person. But the longer time went on when no one was looking, or nothing was happening, or it went cold, then your energy began to wilt. You didn’t have the stamina to keep up appearances. You could see that in the girls who died decades ago, just skeletons, but honestly, they weren't so bad. It was the recent girls that no one cared about at all that were the worst, rotting. Mangled. Especially if their death had been brutal. Some were missing pieces. You could use your energy to check in on things on earth, if you wanted. So far you hadn’t looked in on your parents or Isabella, because you thought it would make you sad. So, you went to see yourself instead, the watery images coming to you when you closed your eyes, like peering through a slightly mottled mirror.

You were still lying face up. He had covered you with dirt, but barely. No one came out here but to hunt, and it wasn’t deer season yet. Your lips were gone, and that was the part that perhaps scared you the most, more so than your eyes or other fleshy bits. Without your lips you looked old. Without your lips your teeth, slightly crooked, which still bothered you even though
you had better things to worry about at that point, were exposed for all to see. One of them was chipped, which was new. It must have happened during that night. You must have swallowed it. You wondered what your Mama would do when they found your body. Perhaps if. When Abuela had died, Mama yelled at your dad when he even suggested cremation. They were still together then. Over her shoulder, the clock on the kitchen wall had ticked loudly, slightly crooked. It fell into one of the angles of the crucifix nailed below, giving the illusion that it was held up by the splintered wooden cross.

But you couldn’t imagine your Mama letting them bury you like this. At least you hoped she wouldn’t. You didn’t want anyone to see you like that. But at the rate it was going, you wouldn’t have to worry about that for a while. She didn’t even know you were dead.

The Community Pool was nothing special, a lap pool with two diving boards on one end, a snack shack in a corner of the cement lot. But in the summers, it was the only place to be if you were in high school with even a grain of a social life. Isabella and you always claimed chairs near the boards, prime views of anybody taking the plunge. Sometimes Isabella would take a turn, but not you. You never went off the high dive. It felt too high, too precarious, and you always had the sneaking image of the water turning to concrete beneath you as you fell, a splat instead of a splash. You preferred to watch instead.

“You’re late.” Isabella didn’t look up from her phone, big sunglasses perched on her head. You knew she wasn’t mad though. She’d saved your chair with a towel.

“My apologies,” you said with mock formality. You peeled your tank top over your head, unbuttoned your shorts. “What did I miss?”
From across the pool, you could feel Mr. Gregson’s eyes on you. He had been the sole operator of the snack shack for as long as you could remember, and he’d never been shy about looking just a little too long at girls’ chests, just a little too hungrily. Sometimes you and Isabella joked about flirting with him for free food, but you never actually did.

Isabella adjusted her top, blue with frills, definitely a push up even though she claimed otherwise. Her nail polish was chipped. “There’s a Barn Party tonight, did you hear?”

Barn Parties were notorious, though not true to name. They took place not in a barn but in a fallow field about a half hour west. Apparently, there used to be a barn there a long time ago, and the name stuck long after it rotted. Current high schoolers and graduates alike went to those parties, and they were said to get wild. One of your homeroom friends went last month, and she said there were college boys there. You had never been. Neither had Isabella.

“I didn’t know.”

“We’re going, right?” She swung her legs over the side of the chaise, leaned over. “It’s probably the last one of the summer. Jason said he could give us a ride.”

Her brother was a few years older than Isabella and you. He’d always been nice enough, if kind of awkward.

“Are we going to know anybody there?” you asked.

Isabella nodded a little too hard, her sunglasses slipping from their spot on her head. “We’re almost sophomores, anybody who is anybody starts going now. If we want to meet people, this is the way.”

She looked at you expectantly. You looked over at Mr. Gregson. He was looking at one of the lifeguards, her hip cocked, whistle in her mouth.

You turned back to Isabella. “Barn Party here we come.”
After you’d been dead for about three weeks, the police still weren’t looking for you.
Your parents had been worried. Very worried, in fact. When you hadn’t shown up at the party,
Isabella had tried calling you, but you didn’t answer. The next morning, she went to your house.
Mama ran up the stairs faster than you ever remembered her running before, throwing open your empty bedroom door. She called your dad. Then, she called the police.

They told her that in all likelihood you had run away and would show up again soon either back home or at Dad’s, and that they should just be patient. In any case, they had to wait forty-eight hours to file a missing person’s report. As soon as the time allowed, your parents filed a report. Nothing came from it.

There were over a hundred missed calls on your phone. You don’t know where he put it.

If you had enough energy, you could stir up interest in your case from the dead. It was called giving a nudge. You could target anyone, parents or detectives or reporters, to renew interest on the case. The more energy you had, the more nudges you could give your investigation, but you got all your energy from the effort being put into your case. A snake eating its own tail. At the moment, the police just considered you a runaway. You wanted them to care.

Everyone said that a girl named Caroline was the best person to talk to if you wanted guidance on how to give a nudge. Considering she too was still in the no one knows you’re dead yet room, you wondered how helpful she could actually be, but Trina swore by her. Apparently, two of the girls she had given guidance to got their cases featured on podcasts, so she sounded reliable enough to you. Elizabeth also offered you opinions because, you know, she was on so many TV shows, but you didn’t want her advice.
You sat down with Caroline. She looked pretty enough; occasionally she would glitch and you caught a glimpse of a nasty hole in her head, but she seemed to keep it under control pretty well. Someone told you that she was killed by her boyfriend. He was older.

You told her you wanted to know how to get the police to really look into your case.

*Were you a cheerleader?*

*No.*

*What about an animal lover?*

*Not particularly.*

She pouted a bit. *Did you ever win a science fair or something? Anything to stand out?*

*I was pretty average, I guess. I didn’t like school that much.* What you didn’t say is that you sometimes did run away, though just for a day or so at a time, jumping from one parent’s house to the next. What you didn’t say is that you occasionally smoked with some older kids behind the 7-Eleven, but when they offered you anything harder than weed you refused. What you didn’t say is that sometimes you were tempted by the harder drugs.

*Did that matter now?*

*Well, what about your parents.* She crossed her skinny arms. *Are they rich or important or anything like that?*

*Not really. They’re split up. My dad lives in Rockford now.* You realized that she probably didn’t know anything about Rockford, but just your tone of voice got the point across that it sucked.

*I don’t think I can help you right now.* She shrugged. *Maybe just wait and see if your mom or dad can get them going right now. I’d save your energy for when your case really gets underway.*
Anger felt the same dead as alive. So, you’re saying I should do nothing?

What I’m saying is that you don’t exactly look like a Miss Teen USA and there aren’t any photos of you smiling with a piglet in 4H club. Caroline looked down at her hands as if to pick at a nail. You realized then that she didn’t have any.

Look, she tried again, softer this time. Have you ever seen a crime show? The richer, the whiter, the weirder your disappearance is, the more people care, and we’re both out of luck in those departments. I wouldn’t waste energy trying to get police to reconsider your case.

Then what do I do?

They’ll think you’re a runaway until they find your body. She looked back up to you, cocked her head. I hope he didn’t hide it too well.

You learned that even if there wasn’t sex, there was always sex. It was just disguised as stabbing or choking or burning.

Saint Maria encouraged you to keep checking in on your loved ones. It helps you feel more connected, she said. It was easy to see the people you loved in life; it required little energy. If you had the energy, you could even check in on him. See what he was doing now. Where he was. What he had done with your things. You weren’t sure if you wanted to. But you kept returning to your body, watching yourself wither and wilt and melt and be devoured. Turn to dirt. To bone.

Why were you in his car? Where were you going? Why him?

Why you?

*****
The fight had been about something stupid. It always was. When Dad still lived with you, he’d always say that you and Mama were his “two strong-willed women,” though you didn’t know if that is exactly what you would call your frequent arguments, little ones that spilled and roiled and sharpened into screaming. This one may have started when you remembered that you were supposed to drop off a new year enrollment form at the school that afternoon. You’d forgotten.

In any case, there was no way in hell that Mama was allowing you to go to that party, but as you slammed the door to your room, you knew that wasn’t going to stop you. She went to bed early, she was eternally tired, and in the morning you two would act like nothing had happened as you always did. She would kiss you on the cheek on the way out the door, her scrubs always immaculately pressed.

The house was old, creaked when the wind blew, or it rained, or the sun shone. But if you stepped just so, foot by foot along the far edges of the hallway, arms spread wide to support yourself, you could minimize the creaking. Make it down the stairs, out the door. It wasn’t the first time. You knew she had gone to sleep once the TV in her room turned off, but that night it was taking longer than usual. You checked your phone. Isabella had sent you four texts, variations of, “Where are you?” You were supposed to meet her at her house a half hour ago.

Finally, you heard the low hum of the news fade away, a light snoring soon after. You made your break. Outside, the night air was crisper, wetter than it had seemed possible during the day. You made your way quickly down the quiet street, tennis shoes making a light, rubbery thunk with every step. The streetlights look like melted sunlight on the pavement.

*****
When North High started again, Isabella put up missing flyers around school. The bulletin boards, doors, the light posts outside. *Bring Gracie Home.* She’d chosen one of your favorite photos. It was taken during the school trip into the city, on the deck of one of the architectural tour river boats, your hair slightly wild around you, the background a mixture of water and glittering steel. Mama loved that photo, too.

In those first couple of days, the attention your posters got did increase your energy level. You could feel it, a hum of electricity under your skin that wasn’t really skin. You wondered what your classmates were thinking about you, if they really thought of you at all once they turned away from the posters. If they thought you ran away. If they hadn’t even known who you were, though they did not. *The missing sophomore, that girl, Graciela, Gracie.* You were more popular now than you had ever been. People parted the halls when Isabella walked past. It was the attention you’d always wanted. This isn’t how you wanted it.

But despite the attention, the weeks turned into months and then several. Your parents kept appealing to the police, but not much came of it. Isabella had talked to them too, showed them your last texts from that night, which they thanked her for. You felt even more buzzing after that, but still no leads. The longer you were in the “dead, not presumed dead” room, the more the skeletonized girls scared you; you didn’t want to become like them, disjointed wrists and elbows and knees, pits where eyes should be. A visual reminder of how little you were worth. Since Caroline wasn’t any help to you, you and Trina hatched a new plan.

As much as it pained you, you had to give Elizabeth some credit. You overheard her talking to another newcomer who hadn’t yet learned to turn away fast enough. She was going on about her movies, her shows, *did you know that there are internet sleuths now?* And that’s when it came to you.
It didn’t take as much energy to nudge Isabella, because she did love you. She was always on her phone, during classes, at lunch, and you knew if anyone could start a social media campaign, it would be her. You found Caroline again, and this time you asked her how to actually give a nudge. Your conversation was much more helpful this time around, now that she wasn’t reminding you how little people cared about you being dead. After your last meeting, you had wondered if it was possible to dye your hair post-mortem.

To give a nudge, Caroline explained, you just have to concentrate really hard on that person. Once you can see them, imagine that you’re speaking to them. Whatever you have to say will pop into their mind like their own thoughts.

You sat back. That’s it? You imagined something a little more complicated than that. It was pretty much the same as checking in on someone, only this time you spoke.

Yeah, that’s it.

Then, thanks, I guess.

You retreated further into the room, trying to find a quiet spot to concentrate. Two skeletonized girls who always kept to themselves waved at you as you passed. You called them Bones One and Bones Two. You were happy they had each other.

Once you had settled, you focused in on Isabella, sitting at her desk at home, her room still as pink as ever. Her assignment notebook was open with nothing checked off. You always joked that she liked writing her lists but never finishing them. Then, like Caroline suggested, you pretended you were talking to her. It felt weird, speaking to someone when you were utterly dead and they were still alive, but you tried. You couldn’t tell if she was hearing any of it, if your nudge was actually working. But you felt like you were slowly deflating, your non-breath getting
harder and harder, and you realized that you didn’t have enough energy to keep nudging. You stopped.

Trina asked you how it went. She was contemplating nudging her mother.

_I don’t know yet._ You hadn’t realized how wane Trina was getting. She looked almost translucent. _I guess we’ll see._

You vaguely recognized him when he rolled down the window. Jason was getting annoyed about having to wait, and he didn’t want to pick you up because your house was in the exact opposite direction of the party. Isabella said he was close to leaving without you. You were walking as fast as you could, bordering on jogging, when he pulled up beside you.

“Hey, you go to North High, right?”

You kept walking, not looking over, thinking if you didn’t, he would eventually go away.

“Gracie, Gracie, right?”

The sound of your name drew your attention. When you looked at him again, closer this time, you realized you did recognize him. Someone's cousin? You think you smoked with him once or twice. He was older than you, early twenties maybe. He’d hand rolled the joints and hadn’t made you pay for yours.

“Oh, hey,” you said. You stopped walking.

“Where are you headed in such a rush?” Some low volume indie crap was coming from his speakers.

“The Barn Party tonight.”

“Oh, no way, I’m headed there myself.” He paused, then, “You need a ride?”

“No, that’s all right.”
“You sure?”

You looked down at your phone. Jason wasn’t going to wait for you, Isabella had texted. She was going to go with him. You didn’t know anyone else you could ask for a ride from.

“Actually, if you don’t mind.”

“Hop in.” He leaned over the passenger seat and popped the door open.

Your jean skirt was uncomfortably short when you sat down, the fabric of the passenger irritated the backs of your thighs. It felt slightly crusty. You hugged your flannel closer to your chest.

He flipped open a pack of cigarettes and put one in his mouth, offering you the pack with a lazy flick of his wrist across the console. You took one. Then you texted Isabella. “I found a ride.”

When you met with Maria again, she asked if you had put more thought into your murder. A sprig of forget-me-nots sat in a small glass bottle on her desk. You wondered, if you grabbed it, if it would feel like anything at all. You had a sudden craving for an Arizona iced tea.

*Why does it matter so much if I remember it?*

*Why do you think I want you to remember?* the old woman countered.

Her answer was so much like a teacher’s that you rolled your eyes, sparking a sudden funny feeling of your mother scolding you for disrespecting a saint. She probably would’ve melted on the spot.

*I don’t know, because it will somehow help.*

Maria gave you a small smile, unfazed. *The longer a case is open, the more narratives people create.*
You looked down at your hands. You were having a good day, they looked whole.

*If you know the truth of your case, no one can tell you differently. You don’t need anyone else’s version of what happened.*

*No one else has a version of what happened. No one has any clue at all.*

When you looked back up, the child saint sat in front of you. Her feet didn’t touch the ground from where she sat on her chair. *Just because they don’t have a clue what happened, doesn’t mean they don’t think they do.*

You let your impulse get the better of you and you reached for the bottle. It did feel remarkably like glass.

The old woman returned. *Just think about it.*

He wasn’t super weird at first. You hadn’t talked about much of anything, a few teachers that were still teaching back from when he went to North High, mostly. You confirmed that Mrs. Priestley, the European history teacher, was indeed “a real ballbuster.”

“You ever been to a Barn Party before?” he asked at one point.

“No, first one.”

“Got it, got it.” He tapped the steering wheel slightly off beat to the music.

You wouldn’t say the ride was pleasant, but it wasn’t uncomfortable, either. You felt like it could’ve been worse. Then you felt his hand on your thigh.

You jerked your legs toward the door. “What are you doing?”

He laughed, but it sounded forced. “My bad, my bad. I was reaching for the CD on the floor by your feet, can you grab it?”
You bent slightly and patted your hand around on the dirty floor mat, making sure to keep your face turned towards him. The carpet was slightly sticky near the console. You handed him the CD.

“Thanks.”

He put the CD in, even though the old one was only on track four. You tried to keep the conversation light. Your heart felt stiff in your chest. There was a crumpled paper birthday card laying on the passenger seat floor, crayon smiley faces leering up at you. “Who's that from?”

“Kid sister.” Then he grabbed one of your upper arms, crossed over your chest, and rubbed his thumb over it. “What is this, flannel?”

“Don’t touch me!” Your voice came out higher than you intended. The car started to feel like it was shrinking around you, being crushed by one of those car compactors.

“All right, all right. Relax, would you? I’m not a creep.”

When he finally turned off the road, you were relieved. You shot Isabella a text saying you made it, but it didn’t go through. The service wasn’t great out here.

He parked in a small clearing, but there were no other cars. There was no music, though you heard that the parties were often busted by the cops because of noise complaints. There were no other people.

“You said you would take me to the Barn Party.”

“It’s right up the road.” He turned the car off. The doors were still locked.

There was a news crew in front of your school. Isabella and your parents were holding pictures of you, some of the missing posters they had put up. In the background, other students cried for the camera.
Your parents didn’t fight anymore. They were just sad.

The scene was easy to see. You could feel the energy of all their thoughts, buzzing. It was the most alive you’d felt since you’d been dead.

The crew focused on Mama’s tear-filled eyes. “My daughter has been missing since August 10th, and the police have done nothing but file a report. Please help us find Gracie.”

The reporter turned to Isabella. You could tell she’d curled her hair, put on the sparkly pink lip gloss you’d always borrowed from her. “Now, you’re Gracie’s friend who started the campaign, ‘Bring Gracie Home,’” the Facebook page that has been shared more than forty-thousand times since you created it, asking people for any information they may have. How does it feel to think that you’ve done more investigating than local authorities?”

“I know Gracie didn’t run away. She was on her way to meet me when she disappeared.” Isabella was holding a photo taken earlier in the summer, the two of us sitting on her patio, cups of lemonade on the side table. “She said she had found a ride, but she never showed up.”

The reporter turned back to the cameras. “The police declined our request for comment, citing the ongoing investigation.”

After the interview with Isabella and your parents, the reporter stuck her microphone into a bunch of your classmates faces.

“We were in summer school together. I always asked her for help on the homework, and she was super good at explaining it,” Ben Colson said.

“In fourth grade she said she wanted to be a zookeeper when she grew up,” Hema Patel commented. “For some reason that’s always stuck with me.”

Even Amy Cunningham, the girl who made fun of your legs in middle school gym class because Mama wouldn’t let you shave had something to say. She had a tear roll down her perfect
face as she talked. “We’ve been in school together since we were toddlers. It’s just so crazy to think something like this could happen.”

In a way it was sweet. All these people, who you were never really friends with, had at least always registered that you were around. You had some sort of presence in homeroom or algebra or study hall. But the part you focused on was the fact you’d be remembered on national TV for wanting to shovel elephant shit for a living.

You thought about visiting your body again, imagined all this attention reanimating your limbs, imagined crawling out of the ground to dust yourself off, walking the long road home. But you knew that in reality you were still laying there, perhaps a little scattered now; scraps of your flannel woven into birds’ nests like prayer flags, signaling X marks the grisly spot.

_Do all the rooms look like this?_ you asked Trina.

Being disappeared opened a cavernous waiting game. You were not dead in the eyes of the world, of your family, just in your own little bubble. Final. At the finish line waiting for the others to catch up, or to finally acknowledge you crossed the threshold. The sense of perpetual, purgatorial limbo, echoed by where they were, an empty room with empty girls, scant furniture that no one actually needed. The idea that this stretched on forever, over and over and over again until. Until what? You hoped the next room would look different, if you ever got there.

_I don’t know. Elizabeth will, she goes in them all the time_. Trina’s mother and her boyfriend moved out of the house where her body was. She didn’t have a lot of energy to keep up appearances anymore. You made a point not to look at her neck; you knew she was embarrassed.

_Why can she do that?_ You thought about Elizabeth, tripping through walls and over girls.
Because too many people are, like, obsessed with her death. It's too much.

People loved a dead girl. People loved a beautiful dead girl even more.

Did you know that they gave her a new name after she was murdered? Most people don’t even know that her real name is Elizabeth.

What do they call her?

The Black Dahlia.

Oh. You had heard of her, then. Not that you would let her know that.

It’s kind of sad. That has to do something to your head, don’t you think?

You wanted people to care about you. You’d felt pretty good ever since Isabella had made the Facebook page, since your parents had been on the news. People were interested in what had happened to you. But what would happen if people theorized and obsessed and fetishized for years. How could those narratives not cloud your head, make you drunk, make your murder not yours anymore?

Whose story was it then?

You’d sworn to yourself that you weren’t going to check in on him, that he wasn’t worth straining your energy to see. If you were being honest, you were scared to see him. But your campaign was picking up traction, your parents’ interview had been on the news last week, and you wanted to see what he was doing. You wanted to know if he was squirming. If he was scared.

When you focused in on him, he was in what you assumed was his living room, the TV turned to some game show, pillows and cans and plastic cups sprinkled around the floor. He was sitting next to a young girl on the couch, a light-yellow cap on her head. She had no eyebrows.
There was an orange pill bottle on the side table. His face, which you never really had a great look at, was pale and scraggly, ingrown hairs on his chin forming angry red bumps. You still didn’t remember whose cousin he was. He was drinking a beer.

Rolled up in the trash can was yesterday’s newspaper, turned to a page with big block letters. “Local Girl Still Missing.”

“My little sister is sick. Cancer.”

“I’m sorry.”

“My girlfriend left me. She couldn’t take it.”

“Please let me out.” You could feel your eyes fill with tears, despite your attempt to keep them back. You knew he hadn’t taken you to the Barn Party. The nervous energy around him choked you, he wouldn’t look you in the eye. This time when he grabbed your thigh, he leaned over the console, too, and kissed you. You let him. It was sour, but you couldn’t tell if it was him or the taste of your own fear. You wondered if he could feel your heart smashing into your rib cage, into his.

“I just want to talk,” he breathed in your ear when he pulled away.

“Can we talk outside?” you asked. You sat as still as possible, the passenger side door digging into your shoulder blade. The cigarette you had was no longer in your hand.

“You’re going to leave.”

“I won’t, I promise. I just need air. It’s stuffy in here.”

He looked at you then, so sadly that you almost felt bad for him, before he leaned back into his own seat. “Okay.” He took the keys out of the ignition, unlocked only his door. He
walked around the car and opened the passenger side, offering you his hand as if it were a date. You took it.

He put his mouth on yours again. You tried to push him, but he was surprisingly strong, and you were saying no, and his hands were under your skirt, and then your underwear, and his breath was shuddering in your ear as he pinned you to the car. “Please,” he said. “Please, please,” his pleading mirroring your own. The heat of unspilled tears gathered in your eyes as you went limp. You imagined you felt as TV static did, crackling but immobile.

As he reached down to unzip his pants, you knew that it was the time to go. To run. “Eyes, nose, underarms, groin,” that’s what they’d told you in health class. As he looked down, you swiped at his face, raised your knee as fast as you could, and as he stumbled back the few paces you needed, you ran for the trees. You didn’t think to scream.

There were no lights ahead and no way to know where you really were, but at the moment that didn’t matter to you so much. Yesterday’s rain had made everything muddy, and you realized too late that one of your shoelaces was untied. When you fell, your face collided with a protruding root, a thwacking sound that reverberated around your brain. The taste of iron bloomed in your mouth.

You could hear him behind you as you tried to turn over. You were crying now. There was mud in your eyes, caked in your lashes. He was repeating, “I’m going to be in so much trouble.” She could hear him crying too.

“I’m not going to tell anyone. I promise. Please.”

He didn’t believe you.

*****
Around the same time the police finally sat down with your parents to open a formal investigation, Trina left the room. The couple who moved into her mom’s old house had been shocked to discover the skeleton of a twelve-year-old girl in the spot where they wanted to build an in-ground pool. Her stepfather was arrested pretty quickly, at least in terms of the afterlife. You didn’t know where she was now. You didn’t get to say goodbye.

*Where do we go, at the end of all of this?* you asked Maria, remembering your conversation with Trina all that time ago. You imagined her there, at the end. You wished her there.

*That is not something I can tell you. You can only find out on your own.*

*And you can’t tell me where Trina is?*

*No.*

It didn’t seem to you that she could tell you much of anything, besides to figure things out by yourself.

*You’ve remembered your murder.*

*Yes.*

On her desk, the forget-me-nots seemed to glow, illuminate, a botanic neon sign that yelled, look at me, look at me!

*And how do you feel?*

*Pretty bad, really.* Whenever you got upset as a kid, Dad would bring you a cup of water to calm you down. The coolness was soothing. Take a deep breath, he would say. Your nose pricked and you knew that meant you were about to cry, which apparently you could still do in the afterlife. You wished you had a glass.

Maria didn’t say anything else, just peered at you with her old woman face.
It just feels so stupid, you continued, trying to push down the choking sensation in your throat. Like, what was the point of that?

The point of what?

Me dying. It came out a squeak, the tears you finally spilled constricting your voice. I died going to a dumb party. I got in the car with someone I didn’t know, and he killed me, and that’s just it. It makes everything leading up to it feel pointless too.

Do you really think your life was pointless?

You thought about Isabella, your parents, who would keep on being your parents even though they didn’t get to have a child anymore. No, I guess not.

Despite what people may claim, there often is no point to killing. They justify it to make themselves feel better. She pushed a glass of water across the desk towards you. You didn’t see where it came from. But it does not make the victim pointless, too.

When you took a sip, it was the sweetest thing you had ever tasted.

The woods he buried you in didn’t get many visitors. The orange of the hunter’s hat splashed violently against the muted backdrop of dead leaves and early morning frost; his footsteps, a light crunch, might as well have been a gunshot. His breath made specters in the air.

The doe he was tracking couldn’t have been more than a few hundred yards away from him when he stepped on an unusually smooth branch. His foot rolled over it, causing him to stumble. He knew the doe had heard him. He only really looked at the branch as he kicked it, noticing it was just a little too white, a little too round.

When the police descended, they sent a flock of cedar waxwings into flight, their whistling like a serenade.
You followed Saint Maria into the hallway, expecting to turn into her office to talk. But she brushed past it, walking further down the hall, yawning like a mouth before her.

*Where are we going?*

Maria reached another door, opened it. Full of girls. New girls.

Full of girls everyone knew were dead.