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# Based on a True Story

Amanda Niehaus-Hard

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**BASED ON A TRUE STORY**

A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Faculty of the Department of English and Philosophy  
Murray State University  
Murray, KY

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by Amanda Niehaus-Hard  
May 2018

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## INTRODUCTION

*What do young girls dream of? Of the knife and of blood.*

– Alain Robbe-Grillet

### Flashback

After my second unsuccessful exorcism that summer, both my grandmother and Pastor Jimmy came to their own conclusions as to what to do about my nine-year-old soul. In my memory, the pastor is an elongated figure, holding out arms capable of a more extensive reach than any human as he pulled me up out of the baptismal water bath, where I'd again been immersed backwards, screaming in bubbles as the healing water of God filled my nostrils and throat. Behind him on the wall of the church was an immense oil painting of a sandy beach, shaded by a finger-like cluster of dark palm trees—trees I would forever after associate with God's wrath and displeasure. Trees which make their appearance in most of my adult fiction.

Catholic exorcisms are performed rarely, and in accordance with a strict order of rules. Baptist exorcisms are created on the fly. Abuse, molestation, and child neglect were private issues, a game of shameful secrets played with denial, disregard, and withdrawal from the sinful society responsible. Bad children, like me, weren't victims. We simply had the devil in us. And if the devil couldn't be beat out, he might be prayed out, eventually.

My grandmother wanted to try again, with a different preacher. Pastor Jimmy preferred to let the state intervene, so my next appointment wasn't with the baptismal

bath, but with a child psychologist who gave me a notebook and a fat purple pen and told me to write. So I did. I wrote compulsively, at home and at school, enough so to attract the attention of my school librarian, Mrs. M., whom I loved beyond reason because she wore a four-inch gold ankh as a necklace and could read Egyptian hieroglyphs. If she took notice of the stacks of devil books I took home each week, she withheld commentary. I was reading above my grade level, so whether it was ponies and princesses or witches and wyrms, she had no reason to question my choices.

One Friday she slid a book across the counter as she fingered the golden ankh hanging between her breasts. The book, *The Egypt Game*, was my introduction to the mythology and religious beliefs of ancient Egyptians, and it sparked a passion for Egypt in me that would last for decades. I read all of Zilpha Keatley Synder's novels that year, devouring the stories of weird secret cults, ESP, murderers, Gypsies, witches, pagans – every waypoint on the devil's path, according to my grandmother. Most of the books got a second or third reading, but it was *The Egypt Game* I kept going back to, demanding more information from Mrs. M. about the curious characters of Anubis, the judge of the dead, and Ammit, who ate the hearts of the damned. Egyptian religion was straightforward, with the weight of the dead soul measured against a feather. To my dismay, Mrs. M. retired before I could learn the story behind her necklace. To no one's real surprise, I ran away more than once and disappeared for most of what should have been my junior year of high school. Alliances were forged. Adventures were had. Eventually, I returned home and managed to graduate from high school. I still checked out devil books, and I still went to church, but in my pocket or tucked down the front of my dress was always a blue jay feather, to remind me of my true loyalties.

## Setting

Despite the constant journaling into my twenties, I still didn't think of myself as a "writer." A dance career had been thrust upon me, so if I was to have an art form, the assumption was that I would have to self-identify as a dancer. My failure to move beyond the "back line" and into a well-paying soloist position was its own kind of exorcism, freeing me to stay mediocre, dancing for local repertory and regional touring companies without the pressure to succeed on a larger stage. I married the first boy who was nice to me and enrolled in a small liberal arts college, where I proudly announced my intentions to study the archeology of Egypt.

"None of you will get jobs," the professor told us the first day. "Most of you will fail. Maybe one of you will go on to graduate school." The class was fabulous and impossible, requiring an encyclopedic knowledge of pottery fragments, ancient kings, and city plans. A year or so into it, the director of the department, a kind man who was less an Indiana Jones and more a Mr. Peabody, took me aside and suggested that my grades were not high enough to continue in the program, and perhaps I could pursue a different course of study.

I had a memory of a different, weirder time, when I had shared the company of a man because of his books—long stacks of them piled against the walls—double-shelved rows of conspiracy theories, ancient mysteries, pop culture, semiotics, books about books that never existed, books purporting to be those non-existent books. I fell in love with his library, and by extension, the man himself, the curator of a pre-internet Wikipedia of weirdness. (A re-imagined version of this library appears in the story "Ephemera," included here, as well as the impossible love of a woman for an imagined man thirty

years her senior.) Thinking of the colored spines, aligned so neatly and precisely, I changed my major to English literature, eventually graduating with both a BA in literature and a BFA in creative writing. Other than a handful of short stories, a truly terrible novel draft, and various résumés, I did little creative writing for the next few years.

My time with ballet and modern dance ended with *Nutcracker* season in 1999. Not entirely convinced my dance career was over, I transitioned into ethnic and Oriental dance, and spent the next decade traveling, performing, and teaching. Eventually, under the guidance of a mentor, I was able to both study and research region-specific dances in my beloved Egypt. My target was the oasis community of Siwa, in the Western Desert, where the women's dances had never been cataloged or even seen by non-Siwan eyes. Political tension with Libya made traveling the singular route to Siwa problematic. For four years, I chased, bribed, and begged, with no success. Towards the end of what would be my last visit, I received word that our transportation to the oasis had been canceled, our privileges revoked.

In Cairo at that time, public zar houses were still legal and women could gather together, pooling their money for the best musicians, to participate in the zar—a pre-Islamic ritual best described as a passive exorcism. Stunned, angry, and depressed, I joined a roomful of women I didn't know, speaking a dialect I couldn't understand, in a public ritual I had only witnessed as an outsider. We squashed together in a room heavy with incense and natural body odors. Some stood and swayed, others rocked in their places on the floor. I sat, numb, letting myself be moved by the shoulders and thighs of those around me. I had a headache. The drumming was too loud and the tura player had

stationed herself too close, so that the banging cymbals were right beside my head. The clang of metal on metal was all I could hear. The noise went on and on, so damnably loud, and for so long. I wanted to scream at her, but when I opened my mouth, the noise stopped. I heard nothing but the susurrus that accompanies a snowfall. Heavy arms gathered me into an embrace and what followed was a feeling I can only describe as release. I felt my demon expelled, returned to the place where Arab women release the djinn beleaguering them.

A few months after I returned to the States, my mentor called to let me know we would not be attempting a return trip to Siwa. Egypt was under conservative control. The zar houses had been closed. My research was finished. I sat in a Cheesecake Factory in Chicago and watched it snow. I had just turned forty and had no more idea of what to do with my life than I'd had as a teenager. A few weeks later, I received a polite rejection email from a Swedish dance company I'd hoped to tour with. My demon gone, my dance career over, I went home and wrote a story.

### Allusion

To say that H. P. Lovecraft was an early influence on my writing would be appropriate only to a point. His nihilistic concept of “cosmic horror” reflected the godless chaos of the universe as I had experienced it, but his prose can be tedious and his characters eye-rollingly ignorant. One thing that appealed to me about his work was his use of a fictional book to tell an equally fictional story.

Lovecraft's *Necronomicon* is arguably one of the most famous books that never existed. Of course several versions exist today, as a book that doesn't exist simply begs

to be written, but like the Tao, the *Necronomicon* that can be read is not the eternal *Necronomicon*. Much like Robert Chambers' *The King in Yellow*, the fictional book is a minimal feature in Lovecraft's work, but was amplified and expanded by others inside his literary circle. Lovecraft was not at all the first to do this, and his appropriation of the technique isn't as skillful as that of Italo Calvino's *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler*, (a novel that so intrigues me I slip a mention of it into every story I can), but Lovecraft was my introduction to this strange literary culture bridging fiction and meta-fiction, incorporating Borgesian hoaxes, pop culture enigmas, and deliberate misdirection.

Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* was the first book from the literary subculture of "weird postmodern" I can remember reading, and I won't pretend I understood it or *V*, but somewhere inside the endless sub-referencing loops I knew there was a mystery to be solved, a meaning to be uncovered—even if only existentially, in the search itself. I scoured books like *The Magus* and *The Illuminatus! Trilogy* for their hidden secrets and cultural references, diving down an eventual rabbit hole of Blue Oyster Cult lyrics, the Publius Enigma, *The Necronomicon*, the Process Church, the *Musaeum Clausum*, Colin Wilson, and Philip K. Dick. I won't argue that any of this made me a better writer, but the street credit of recognizing the reference of "YoYoDyne" landed me my first "legitimate" job as a runaway—play-testing an alternate reality gaming interpretation of Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game*.

It is to this kind of magical and "weird" literature that I have always been drawn: the intellectual poetry of Borges and his endless *Book of Sand*, the alternative history of Haruki Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore*, the conspiracy within a conspiracy of *Foucault's Pendulum*, and the strange cults of book lovers and devil-worshippers in Arturo Perez-

Reverte's *The Club Dumas*—a book I would study intensely over the course of two years, in the hopes of understanding the intricacies of plot.

### Structure

The birth of my son, in 2011, was freeing. I won't stretch the metaphor so far as to call his birth an exorcism, but it gave me an answer to the question that had been nagging at me since college: what are you going to do with your life? I had an answer: I would make my son proud of me.

Dorian was an easy baby whom I wore around my neck in a sling and read to from whatever book I was reading, usually paperback anthologies of horror short stories. These anthologies were all over the board in terms of quality, and I wondered if I could do better. Many of the authors were personal friends collected over the years, so I sent emails and made phone calls asking just where a person might get started in the industry. After workshopping a few stories with an online critique group, I wrote a short piece that garnered a good deal of praise, along with a few market suggestions. I tinkered with the story for a few more weeks, picked the highest paying of the professional markets recommended, and hoped for the detailed and personalized rejection everyone said the magazine provided.

I did not receive a personalized rejection, but instead received a purchase offer for six cents a word, a low but professional rate that qualified me for membership in the Horror Writers Association, the professional guild for writers of horror and dark fantasy. I was a pro, albeit technically a "pro-lite," since I had only one magazine sale and no Amazon presence. I wrote compulsively for the next three months and sold first one

story, then others, to magazines and print anthologies, before being asked to work on a graphic novel series with very specific and unusual requirements that gave me the opportunity to revisit Oulipo. In college, I had discovered Oulipian fiction, an unusual variant of formalism that constrained the author to specific numbers of letters or words in a line, or excluded certain letters. (Jeff Skinner would present an Oulipian technique known as N+7 during my first MFA residency, although none of us brought a physical dictionary so the experiment was less than successful.)

The HWA offered a number of learning opportunities including a mentorship with a working writer. I was paired with a dear friend, Tim Waggoner, who taught me that horror wasn't a "genre" in the strictest sense, that it was an emotion. He introduced me to "literary horror" writers Laird Barron, Robert McCammon, and Dan Chaon and told me to study and analyze what they did. Barron's work was cosmic horror, McCammon's was beautiful but straight-forward in a Margaret Atwood way, but Chaon's work captivated me. I read him. I reread him. I wanted to be him.

To qualify as "horror," a story typically has to have a lingering sense of dread or tension from the beginning, which amplifies as the story progresses. (There is no one "defining" quality of horror, but based on an informal survey of horror writers I've shared drinks with, this is at least the most agreed-upon requirement.) There are no specific passages I can point to with Chaon's work, where I would say "herein lies the dread!" but I would argue the overall tone of a story like "The Bees" exemplifies good horror and how incredibly difficult it is to write.

I wanted to improve upon my story-telling and writing skills, and an MFA seemed the logical next step. I was wholly ignorant in what this entailed, as the authors I knew

with MFAs had earned them from schools like Stonecoast, and Seton Hill, where the final thesis was a novel in the author's chosen genre. I had always preferred reading short stories to novels, but had no idea what the "literary fiction" category was, or how it was different from the rest of Borders' inventory. On a whim, I submitted a story to a *Glimmer Train* contest and earned an honorable mention, which gave me the courage to apply for the MFA at Murray State. I did not expect to be accepted into the program, as I'd been told a person often had to apply three or four times at Seton Hill before making it to the "short list," so when I received my acceptance letter I thought, incorrectly, I was more "literary" than I was.

Residencies were difficult, to be honest. Some of the stories held up as exemplars seemed incomplete. There was no anticipation of "what happened next"—what a younger Neil Gaiman had once told me was the most important factor in story-telling. Determined to learn whatever I could, master whatever I learned, and sell whatever I'd mastered, I put aside what I had learned about publishing, high-concept, and horror and tried to understand what was being yelled at me.

### Resolution

What I eventually learned from my exposure to "literary fiction" was a methodology closer to that of writing poetry than I'd ever used with fiction: precise word choice, a careful repetition of similar words to create motifs, and a focus more on the relationships between people than in the plot unfolding or ultimate character realization. While I do think my story-telling skills improved over the past four semesters, in addition to learning the craft of creating beautiful and meaningful sentences, the skills I have most

been able to improve upon are word choice, simplification of structure, and the act (and art) of revision.

Many of my readings and annotations for this degree were focused around language choice, such as Kate Braverman's use of color to imply mood in "Tall Tales of the Mekong Delta," Doris Betts' and Caroline Gordon's use of a single phrase ("Mica shines like that," and "accidentally, they said," respectively) to change the tone of "The Ugliest Pilgrim" and "The Last Day in the Field." Some of the fiction I produced during the program experimented (usually unsuccessfully) with an unusual structure, a technique I realized was much more difficult than it looked. Despite my failure to master any other than a straightforward structure, I believe I have learned what does not work, allowing me the skills to explore in the future the techniques that do actually advance the story meaningfully.

Two years ago, "revision" was a word I equated simply with "editing." Before entering the program, I had written something on the order of fifty or sixty stories that I simply abandoned to the back of a file cabinet. I wrote them as practice, wasn't happy with the results, so I dismissed them. I didn't think of "re-seeing" them, of finding the core of a failed story, figuring out why it failed and what I really wanted it to do, and then starting over with a brand-new story. What excites me now is the possibility of going back over those older stories and looking for opportunities to "re-see" them and build a new and successful story from what I learned in the first draft process.

The stories ultimately chosen for this thesis are still works in progress, but each fulfilled a kind of catharsis for me as I finalized these drafts. "The Last Native Speaker of Manx" is probably the most "literary" of the three, and I used the writing of this story as

an emotional salve, to address my childhood sexual abuse and my rage at family members for not only failing to protect me, but also for denying any of it ever happened. This story appears in the collection because it is the most “realized” in terms of accomplishing what I set out to do—exploring abuse inside the dynamics of a family incapable of harnessing the language of apology, a family who doesn’t know itself, and a family in which everyone speaks but no one hears.

“Ephemera” is my exploration of revision, and it is what I consider a superior version of an earlier story I wrote during my second tutorial sequence, as it not only showed me how to properly “re-see” a story idea but also allowed me to make nice with people from my colorful youth whom I loved but who disappointed me. The pseudo-book is my own creation, from a time when the veracity of a book’s existence could not be determined by a simple two-second internet search. The fake Tanazaki (based on work by the real Tanazaki) represents what drew me to “weird fiction” in the first place—the magic and mystery of the unknown, that which is suspected but remains unconfirmed. I am proud of the dialogue in this story, as I feel it is the strongest “technical” element in a fairly plot-driven story.

“Weighed” is the most problematic of the stories included here, and it was only in the writing of this introduction that I realized why I insisted it be included. The black palms, the raven, the feather of Ma’at, the child lost on a (concrete) island – these are the memories that formed the writer I am today. The child Tyler is the adult me, trying to make sense of the religious pastiche I remember from childhood, cobbled together from random Bible quotes, a childish understanding of ancient Egyptian spirituality, Hal

Lindsey's eschatology of the 1970s, and the God-like power of parental and authority figures to dictate reality and define and assign "sin."

### Theme

I self-identify now as a writer, and more specifically a horror writer, or at the very least a writer of "dark" fiction. One question often asked of horror writers is some variation of "what dark thing inside you makes you write this stuff?" There is an unspoken assumption that we are broken people, capable only of seeing the evil in the universe. While some of us have come out as abuse survivors, that percentage doesn't seem significantly higher than can be found in other art forms, other genres. I would argue that we're drawn to write it not to exorcise demons, but to exercise morality.

In actual fact, what is sometimes sold as horror or "dark fiction" is an extremely moral variety of everyday fiction. Often underpinned by a theological code that the reader may or may not personally embrace, there is still, in every good dark work, a strong sense of right and wrong. Even inside Lovecraft's dismal and godless chaos, that which is not summoned needs no banishment. Chaon's characters deserve what they get, and the horrifying part of his fiction is that his characters are not only judged and found wanting, but also they are their own final judges.

What I find most compelling about morality in fiction is that the moral code may be black and white, but the way that code is expressed and interpreted can be seen in shades of grey, a subtlety I've tried to explore in this collection. In "The Last Native Speaker of Manx," an obvious moral transgression has occurred—the father has molested his own children. The mother has participated in this by ignoring the abuse, excusing it as

the imaginings of children. But the person I envision most haunted by the breakdown of this family's morality is the narrator's sister, Judith. The responsibility she feels toward the sister has disempowered her, muting her for years, until she finally performs the unspeakable act which ultimately destroys the unity of the family.

In "Ephemera," the protagonist is a thief, albeit a romantic one, but her moral code allows her to remove what might be a priceless manuscript from a stranger's collection simply on the basis that she believes she deserves it more than a potential buyer. But Lucy's quavering morality is tested, then her sin absolved, when she confronts the silver-tongued devil behind her fantasy library, and the true identity of the siren's voice in the annotations, leading her to her sin.

While "Weighed" is not technically a horror story, it is *my* horror story, a tale of a complicated and convoluted childhood religious quandary: per his understanding of divine justice, Tyler must forgive and pardon his father of his sins or face damnation himself. The Messianic fantasy is incomplete and reversed, fused inside a child's confusion of ancient Egyptian religion and Christian grace. My interpretation of the events of the story is an ultimately successful crucifixion sacrifice. Both father and son are redeemed, their demons dismissed.

One other question I've been asked about my stories is this: how much of the characters and situations are real, taken directly from life. My answer is always the same: All of them and none of them. As J. M. Barrie wrote, "All of this has happened before, and all of this will happen again."

Life, like fiction, is always based on a true story.

## THE LAST NATIVE SPEAKER OF MANX

When my father learned of Ned Maddrell's death, he locked himself in a small woodshed at the west end of the farthest acreage of our family land. My mother made countless treks to the shed, begging him from the outside to come back to the house, to at least speak to his daughters. His melodramatic expression of grief ended only when I toddled my way along the path to cry myself into fatigue in front of the door, where my father was forced to acknowledge his hyperventilating child. I remember him lifting me into his arms, singing in the old language, his strong voice rolling like a distant ocean as he carried me home. He called me his banana, a reference only he understood, but one he often whispered to me at night before bed. By dinner time he was speaking again, English to my mother, baby-talk to me, along with a few phrases in "Woolie," the language he had inherited from his own father.

Neddy, as he was known in our house, had been the last native speaker of Manx, an obscure Gaelic dialect spoken only on the Isle of Man. He and my father had exchanged letters over the years, comparing the dwindling use of Manx to Woolie, an even more obscure version of an extinct strand of a Finnish derivative of which my father, Morris Makkinen, was the sole speaker. Why he took Ned's death so hard was something of a mystery to my mother, since the two men had been only casual acquaintances at best — penpals, as my mother said — but she later confided that my father's fit of depression was a result of his equating friends to beads on an abacus, subtracting his age from Ned's.

“My banana,” he’d whispered to me that night after dinner. His inexplicable name for me had no logical reference. I was a squat child, more like a mango in body shape, and had no preference for banana-flavored anything. He said it again and rubbed his nose in my ear, making me giggle and squirm away to the kitchen. I want to remember the look in his eyes – approving, loving, smiling with possessive joy at the baby daughter who had teetered a quarter acre on unsure feet to call home her loving father, to break his silence with laughter. These are the things I wanted to remember, thirty years after Ned’s passing, when my mother, sputtering into a mobile phone held at the wrong angle so that I could only hear every third word the satellite connection passed between us, said “father,” “stroke,” and the phrase I never wanted to hear from her again: “come home.”

“My father, he’s non-communicative and probably won’t even know me,” I told my project director, a Norwegian biologist responsible for the post-docs working at McMurdo that Antarctic summer. We’d celebrated Christmas on the ice just a few weeks before, and I’d fallen in love with the frost-cold ocean, the fat seals lounging on already-cracking ice floes, and the aching, bright beauty of pale aqua and blue glacial ice, carved by nature into archways and keyholes. This was my home supposed to have been my home for five more months, but the director told me family came first. He had grown children of his own, he said, and knew how they would mourn any missed opportunities. “We don’t really talk to one another,” I’d argued, but my unspoken meaning was lost in translation, and nineteen days later he sent me back to Minneapolis by way of a C-130 full of exhausted French tourists. Within hours, I was in a rental car driving the streets of my old neighborhood, the snow and ice there gray from sand and dirt.

The distance between the youth and the grown versions of myself contracted as the miles to home diminished, while around me the distance in time became more pronounced. My parents had sold the back acreage years before, and now a strip of doctor's offices and financial advisers butted up against the rear of their much-truncated backyard. The woodshed was gone, as were many of the trees. The houses on either side of theirs seemed closer, more cramped. The kitchen window curtain fluttered as I pulled up, and a woman I barely recognized met me at the door. We'd never looked very much alike, but her glasses were as thick as mine now, her hair streaked gray in the same places.

"I wondered when you'd actually show up," my sister Judith said, holding the door open for me. "It's been chaos here. Mother's half useless. You know how she gets. Should have left him in the hospital. Give me your coat." She had the energy of a hummingbird and spoke in short, clipped bursts. "He's non-communicative."

"There's really nothing for him to say, is there?" I shook off my coat and searched my sister's face for signs of agreement, discord, some silent understanding. She was a stone. "Well at least mute and paralyzed he can't call me a communist." The house smelled odd, a mixture of disinfectant and burned popcorn.

"We're beyond that now, Kristin. Daddy's got something called aphasia. It's a side effect of the stroke. He's trying to find the right words to express himself, but they're getting confused and jumbled and coming out nonsense."

He was hidden from me at first by my mother, bent over his chest, adjusting the pillows. The seam on the back of her skirt had shifted sideways, as if she'd slept in her

clothes. I opened my mouth to greet her, but Judith took the opportunity to announce my presence.

“Daddy, Kristin’s here.” She spoke loudly and slowly. My mother stretched herself up and smiled at me. The head on the pillow turned away from me, lolling in a jittery way, as though searching for a cool spot. Without his glasses his face was bird-like, with a narrow brow and long nose. His open eyes searched the corner of the room, unfocused and unable to roost.

“I’m here, Dad.” I moved toward the bed. He groaned, the sound he always made when he was tired of something and wanted to quit, or when he’d given up trying to remember a word in Woolie. Judith recognized it as a by-product of a bowel movement and quickly rushed in to check under the sheets.

“All right, I’ll need to change him,” she said. “It’s easier in private, if that’s okay Mother.” She nodded toward the door; my mother seemed happy to take the hint. She offered to make a pot of coffee and sent me to the living room, the one place where I could at least feel nostalgic. The same books graced the same bookshelves as the last time I’d read on the couch, draped over by the same afghan my sister had knit for our parents’ anniversary. A framed picture of me kneeling by a penguin sat on the end table, taken over a decade earlier during one of my first trips to the polar ice.

“I love the expression on its face.” My mother handed me an over-sized mug depicting Cinderella and her cartoon bluebirds, a relic of our single family vacation. She picked up the photo, smiled, and placed it gently back down. “And the scenery is just stunning.” The blue-white glacial cliffs in the background had been receding over the

years, warming and melting, and a comparable photograph taken this trip would have revealed a colorless and sterile landscape unrecognizable as the one in her photograph.

“You took your time getting here,” she said, with a polite but bitter smile on her lips.

“It’s literally the end of the earth, Mom. It’s not like I can just hop on a plane.” The coffee tasted old – reheated in the microwave. Even on the station, we knew how to make coffee. I sat the cup aside.

“It took me forever to figure out who to call, how to get in touch with you.”

“And yet, here I am.”

“He’s aware of that.” She began answering my series of unspoken questions. “I told him you were coming. He knows what’s going on around him, even if he can’t articulate it. You know your father. He doesn’t like to show weakness, and he doesn’t want to worry me, so he doesn’t try to talk much. He squeezes my hand, though. Jude’s been working with him, trying to get him to use flash cards.”

“Can he write?”

“He got hold of a grocery store receipt and he’s been sort of scribbling on it. Nothing legible. When I asked him about it, it set him off. I think he’s trying to write something.” My mother winced when she sipped her coffee, her two spoons of sugar evidently forgotten. She couldn’t stand it black, the way the rest of us liked it. Mother always needed a little something to sweeten the bitterness. “He’s already gotten back a lot of motor function. But the language section of his brain — well, Jude explained the aphasia. Right?” She stood up quickly, smiling at my sister who held a glass bowl of popcorn under her arm.

“Kristin, he’s asking for you,” Judith said.

“By name?”

She just smiled an inoffensive but tightly impatient smile as I passed.

My father shifted in the bed when I came in. He lolled his head toward the nest of blankets in the side chair where my mother had been spending her nights.

“You’ll be interested to learn it was an unseasonably warm winter for Antarctica,” I said more loudly than necessary. “The ice floes are breaking and migrating earlier this year. It took me a while to get here because the ice was behaving erratically. So now that you’ve been inconvenienced by global warming, maybe you can accept that it’s actually happening?”

“My banana.” My father’s watery eyes stared straight at mine, his words clear despite being filtered through the loose drawl of paralysis. His thin frame was lost in the sheets.

“Yeah, Dad.” I placed my hand in his, my fingers in his grip. “I’m your banana. I’m here.” His hand didn’t move, but his eyes searched my face. He turned his cheek to the other side of the pillow. “And I’m sorry it took so long to get here.” A squeeze then, almost imperceptible, but also in conjunction with the arrival of my mother. I pulled my hand away and his fingers closed on empty space.

As children, my sister and I had shared our own secret language, a code of kitten meows that spelled out her frequently used messages to me: “No one’s looking so spit out the broccoli,” or the rare, “They left the cookie jar open again,” and the frequent “I’m sleeping with you tonight.” We each had our own rooms, but Judith, three years older,

preferred my bed to hers, her soft arms wrapped around my middle, holding me as we slept. At nine years, with longer legs and a more intense need for privacy, I'd kicked her out, banishing her to her own bed in her own room. She'd cried that night, loudly enough to make me cover my head with a pillow, oblivious to my surroundings until I felt my father's rough and hair-covered body slide into bed next to mine, his ink-stained fingers first on my mouth and then on my thighs.

Even though it was only the one night, my sister and I never used the cat code again. By our twenties, we had abandoned even English for a shorthand of sideways glances, hesitant looks, and polite nods—the native language of our guilt and shame.

None of us understood Woolie, nor my father's obsessive desire to acquire and catalog it. He'd been an airline mechanic, both in the service and after, until my first year of school, when something in his spine snapped and he was granted permanent disability leave. He spent his new-found free time cataloging his mystery language on index cards he kept in a large shoe box. After school, before my mother came home to make dinner, he'd sometimes sing to me, tunes I remembered from my babyhood—the lyrics a mesh of sing-song words and, when he couldn't think of the right one in Woolie, its English equivalent. But these nighttime recitations and accompanying translation quizzes abruptly ended, coinciding with Judith's exodus from my room.

While my sister and I matured and grew taller, our father developed a stooped posture. As the curve of his spine grew, so did his anger and political rhetoric. By the time I'd finished my graduate research in glaciology, my father had become heavily invested in climate change denial. Despite having a shared language, we couldn't actually talk to one another, so we didn't try.

I went back to my research. My father told family friends he was busy writing a dictionary, and my mother picked up the financial slack by getting a second job. She and I kept in touch via text messaging and email. My sister and I shared a largely silent connection on social media, but I noticed she often “liked” a few of my Antarctic photographs and had shared one of my posts on the environmental effects of melting polar ice. My mother had forwarded a package to my apartment a few months after my fortieth birthday, containing a pair of Judith’s signature knitted mittens, embroidered at the cuffs with *Cold hands. Warm heart.* I forgot to send a thank-you note.

She was a strange bird, my sister, subsisting on a diet of microwave popcorn and black coffee. She handed me a cup the second morning after my arrival. I’d slept late, my body mourning all the lost hours in the air.

“What’s up, Doc? Used to sunlight all day?”

“Don’t you ever sleep?” I asked her.

“Not here.”

Her coffee was terrible. I grimaced, threw it down the sink, and made a fresh pot. “Jesus, use cold water, Judith. The colder the better.”

“It’s yesterday’s. Mother hates to waste it. Anyway, I’m at the Hampton across the road. It’s a three-minute walk.” She jiggled a Styrofoam cup at me. “Free Starbucks blend. And chicken fingers on the dinner buffet.”

“All the dishes are the same.” I opened one cabinet door and drawer after the other. “Curtains. Silverware. Butter tubs for storage. Nothing’s changed. It’s weird.” Time stood still in the rooms of my parents’ house, and the familiarity of the setting

seemed uncomfortably alien. When the coffee finished brewing, I made my sister swear she wouldn't recycle yesterday's dregs and took my cup back to the room where I'd been staying, what had once been my bedroom. Long ago, my father had turned it into his study but hadn't replaced the thick carpet, the scratched wallpaper, or even the horrible avocado-colored curtains I'd insisted on as a teenager. Packages of unopened index cards were stacked on the nightstand, and in the corner of the room, where my over-sized stereo once sat, was an enormous tool box — bright red, with deep shelves and swinging side doors.

Brushing my hand across the glossy surface of the drawer fronts didn't really feel like snooping. I pulled open the top drawer too forcefully, and it slid smoothly and too rapidly out towards me, so that a dozen or so white index cards tumbled onto the rug. Each one featured a single word or phrase printed on the blank side, its definition on the reverse, in my father's elongated, stick-like handwriting.

IRINOL - (n) Winding river or stream.

I gathered the fallen cards and shoved them in the front of the drawer before thumbing through the remainder and yanking open the other drawers. Perhaps a thousand cards filled each of the drawers of the tool box. Each was a single entry in my father's dictionary, all organized in neat rows, some flagged with sticky notes — files of adjectives, verb conjugations, nouns for all manner of deer, birds, plants. Six cards paper-clipped together gave various synonyms for walking, each numbered in my father's cryptic decimal system.

"I don't know that he would want you poking around in that." Judith's hummingbird-nervous voice came from the hallway outside. She held a bowl against her

chest and swiped a hand inside before cramming a handful of popcorn in her wide open mouth. Although she ate like a starving monkey, not even a kernel fell from her lips.

“This is my room,” I said.

“You haven’t lived here for years.”

“Mom put me here,” I spoke slowly and deliberately, “since Dad’s in the guest room. QED, it’s my room, if just temporarily.”

“The tool chest too?”

“Do you know what’s in there?” I pointed at the chest.

“Wasted time.” My sister shrugged. That’s what you told Mother, isn’t it? Thousands of hours of wasted time?”

“So that’s his dictionary?”

“Mother thinks so. Did you know Woolie has eighteen different ways to admit failure?”

I stared at her. Judith shrugged again.

“That was written on one of the cards. He didn’t list all eighteen. And the same number of expressions to ask forgiveness for those failures.”

“He only needs one,” I said.

My sister looked away, at the red tool chest in the corner. “Two, actually,” she said. She wouldn’t look at me. “And maybe I need—“

“Maybe there’s a blanket statement in Woolie that covers all of us. Or maybe there’s one really great word that embodies the innate human desire to do something fantastic and well-meaning but still screwing it up utterly and completely.”

“English already has a word that conveys that,” my sister said.

“And that would be?”

“Family.”

They were all three at the table. Judith had her popcorn, my mother nibbled on toast, and my father was using his spoon like a pickaxe on a hard pack globe of ice cream.

“There’s a cobbler cooling on the stove,” my mother said. “I made it fresh this morning.”

I pointed to my father. “For breakfast? Really?”

“Oh you know your father. He loves his sweets.”

“You want some scrambled eggs, Dad?” I asked. I made them the old-fashioned way, browned in salted butter, with bacon bits inside. The way my mother used to, when she’d had time.

“Agaraja” he said, looking up at me.

“Avocado?” I suggested. “On toast?”

He glared at me. “Agaraja,” this time louder.

“Avgolemono? You want soup?”

Judith leaned into the conversation, brushing me aside. She brought out a plastic binder from the counter and placed it in front of my father. “Daddy, point to the picture,” she said to him, then to me, “It’s the aphasia. He’s searching for the right word. The pictures help him communicate. We need to be patient.”

“Agaraja.” He pushed the binder away and sighed. His left hand held a notecard, which he dropped on the table. My mother picked it up and flipped it to the blank side.

The writing was illegible, just black pen marks in his stick script. Whatever it was he wanted to say, he couldn't.

From across the table he watched as I ate a bowl of cornflakes, his abandoned ice cream softening into vanilla liquid. Judith looked impatient as she checked her phone.

“Can he type?” It seemed too basic a concept to overlook. “I have my laptop, maybe he could try?”

Judith smiled knowingly. “Of course we've already done that. We tried working with letters on a magnet board first thing. The aphasia affects the brain's ability to process language, not just speak it. He gave it a good effort though.” She beamed at my father who responded with an eye roll.

“I just thought the layout of the keyboard might trigger something, make a different connection or something.”

“Today's the support group meeting,” my mother blurted out. “Jude agreed to go with me, so we thought it would be nice if you two got the chance to spend some time together.”

“Here's my number.” Judith handed me a laminated list of emergency contact numbers: *Ambulance, Doctor, Banks, Judith cell, Poison control*. “You can text or call if you need anything.”

My father stirred his melted ice cream with his hand then flicked his fingers across the table at me. He wanted something different to eat, even I could translate that.

“I'll get him situated back in his room. The north light is wonderful this time of day.”

My mother motioned me to the front door, where she faked a lengthy search for her keys. “He’s different now, Kristen. Even before the stroke, I mean. He’s mellowed over the years.” She spoke confidentially, as if respecting a domestic code of patient privacy. “If you talk to him, about anything, he’ll listen. You know your father. He rages for a day or two and then it’s like nothing ever happened.”

She had placed herself squarely in the middle, as she always had, the eternal family moderator, separating each of us when things got tense. And yet now she was shoving us together, unsupervised, as if the chasm between us could be bridged by a polite brunch.

“Go on,” I said. “I promise not to kill him.”

Judith had put my father in a new electric wheel chair he could control with his finger. He hadn’t yet gotten the hang of it and several times that morning he’d sent himself into slow circles, unable or unwilling to flick the little joystick to the other side to even out his path. He could feed himself, with mild assistance, although sometimes he let the food fall out of the corner of his mouth. Most of this, I suspected, was affect, pretending and testing me to see when I would call him on his charade. He could use a napkin, wipe his own damn mouth.

“Nadra.” He held up a spoon and raised his eyebrows—his nonverbal question mark. He looked down at the large bowl I’d placed on the serving tray snapped to his chair.

“Mom made it. It’s peach cobbler or something.”

He shook the spoon at me. “Nadra.”

“You don’t need me. You can do it.”

His eyebrows dropped down into a scowl. “Nadra,” he shouted.

“Fine, you don’t want it? I’ll eat it.” I reached for it, but with a single flick of his wrist, the bowl flew off the edge of the tray, skidding upside-down across the floor.

“Dammit, Dad. Why’d you do that?”

“Na-dra,” he said slowly. “Na-dra, na-dra, nadra.” The “r” sound cost him great physical effort. A thought flickered, an image in my consciousness. A recent memory, fleeting but distinct. *Nadra*.

“Hang on.” I picked up the bowl and dragged a napkin along the spilled trail with my foot. “And stay here. I’ll be right back.”

In the guest bedroom — my room — the chest hulked in the corner, but this time I opened the drawer gently. After thumbing through the fallen cards, which I had replaced haphazardly, well out of their original order, I found what I expected to find.

#### NADRA

1) (n) a large bowl, used as a singular serving dish for family dinners.

2) (n) The shared meal itself, served in the bowl.

Back in the kitchen, I prepared a fresh bowl of cobbler and brought along an extra spoon, to test my theory. My father scowled when he saw me, but I held up the two spoons in defense.

“Nadra, right? A shared meal?” I placed the bowl on the tray, dug in to the warm fruit, spooning a chunk into my mouth. “Eat.”

His eyes widened as he reached for his own spoon. “Mabannadra,” he said softly. He drew a healthy mouthful to his own lips, carefully, so as not to spill. He might have smiled.

“I’ve forgotten most of it.”

He didn’t respond, just wiped cobbler on his bottom lip. His hand trembled, but only slightly.

“The language. Of the songs, I mean. What you used to sing to Judith. I could hear you, you know. The walls in this house are paper thin.” I sat back, exhaled, and studied the far wall. “So which of those eighteen failures describes you as a father, Dad?”

He didn’t respond, but the hand holding his spoon shook significantly.

“I could probably come up with eighteen words to describe me and Jude, but English has a good one: *victim*. Maybe even *prey*. You know, *innocent* would have been appropriate once, but you kind of disqualified us for that one.”

Something of a gurgle tried to escape my father’s throat, and I wondered if there was a word in Woolie for the satisfaction a victim might get from watching her assailant choke on his own peach cobbler.

“So the thing about living on the ice is that we have our own language too. Our own culture, really. Did you know we measure temperature assuming a negative? That means when I say it’s ten degrees out, I actually mean it’s negative ten, Celsius of course. Are you getting all this?” He wasn’t looking at me. He hadn’t moved, as though the hand and the spoon had been caught on tape and paused just before the climax of the film. “We have our own words for each other, too. ‘Fidlet’ for first-timers. Then you graduate up to ‘fid,’ once you’ve wintered on the ice. There’s also a special term, ‘epischer,’ that

describes people who wash out on projects because of the cold. Scientists, photographers, journalists, whatever. People who get down there and can't take it. But when they get home, even to plus ninety degree temperatures, it's like they're frozen from the inside and can't ever get warm again."

"Agaraja." He'd heard the door open, the fluttering footsteps in the hall, but his hand remained in the air, the spoon vibrating rapidly now.

"I mean, I sympathize. I've felt that way since I was nine years old. That's kind of why I don't mind the cold, because I don't ever expect to feel comfortable."

"And how are we doing?" My mother's nervous voice floated in from the doorway, enthusiastic but hesitant.

"Having a nice conversation."

"He's speaking?" Judith asked as she came in and frowned at us.

"Oh yeah," I said. "He's speaking quite well. Not English, of course. Just random shit in Woolie." I stood up, allowing my spoon to drop and clatter on the tray. My father threw his down in imitation, uttered more of the nonsense syllables and let the juice from the cobbler roll down the corner of his mouth. Judith rushed to clean his face. I left the room, left my mother standing surprised in the hallway.

"Why did you have me come here?" I asked. "He can speak. He can feed himself. He's faking ninety percent of this and you're both going along with it. He doesn't have aphasia, dammit. He's talking in that stupid, made-up language."

"Kristen, you know your father. Woolie isn't—"

"Can we please stop pretending any of this is real? That his eighteen different ways of saying he fucked up has any relevance to anyone outside this family?"

“Don’t you use that language in this house.”

Judith moved between us. “Well what language would you prefer, Mother? Spanish? Swahili? You sure as hell didn’t listen when I tried to talk to you in English.”

“You were children. With active imaginations, both of you.”

“Did she seriously just say that?” I reached for my sister’s elbow, suddenly five years old again, remembering the heat of her body, her arms crossed over my chest, as we lay together under the sheet. But she pulled away from me, down the hall to the room where we’d both slept safely for those years. I tagged along behind her, the sudden rage giving voice to what I’d wanted to say to her, to both of them, since we’d shared that shitty microwaved coffee.

“It’s manipulation. He’s got everyone right where he wants them— you, Judith, and now me — all here to take care of him so he can obsess on this ridiculous, pointless language nobody cares about and he’s making up as he goes.” I followed my sister into my old room and pointed at the tool chest. “Send Dad to a home and get rid of that thing. Let’s move on with our lives.”

Judith dropped her elbows on the top of the chest and rested her chin on her interlaced fingers. My mother, shrunken in age now to just over five feet, towered over us both as she drew together her remaining strength and authority.

“That language you’re so dismissive of? That language is important to your father and it should be to both of you.”

“Why?” I shouted. “You don’t speak it, nobody speaks it.”

“He wanted you girls to learn it. There were things – things he wanted to say. You know your father. He has—”

“You keep saying that, but I don’t know him. I don’t understand him. And I don’t want to. I don’t get this obsession—” I motioned to the tool chest, “—these cards, this singular meaningless purpose. I don’t.”

“This was for you girls.”

“A tool chest of index cards, great legacy. ‘Thanks Dad,’” I shouted to the other room.

She shoved past me then, her mouth a line of fury. She went to the bureau and pulled out first the bottom drawer then all the rest. As the individual drawers dropped to the floor they revealed long rows of index cards packed next to each other, paper sardines in a wooden tin. She walked over to the closet and removed two stacks of plastic tubs, larger than laundry baskets, and flipped open the lids to reveal additional neat rows of cards, easily another thousand definitions, verb declensions, and snippets of poetry, song, and prose. When she turned to face me, she was sweating, and minute tears trailed down her powdered cheeks. Judith just watched, her face empty.

“Not just a tool chest. A lifetime,” she said. “Did you ever, even once, ask him about it? Where it came from?”

“Finland.”

“No, Kristen. It was a village language, from what was left of an island culture. It was traditionally passed down from father to son. Your grandfather taught it to your father and it was his intention to break tradition and teach it to you.”

“I never wanted to learn it, Mom. It doesn’t mean anything to me.”

“It did to your father,” she said. “That should have been enough for you.” She turned away from me and re-stacked the plastic tubs in the closet.

“You’re right, Mother,” Judith spoke up, turning around with a fake smile stretching across the already tight line of her jaw. “What’s important to Daddy should be important to us too.” She turned to me. “Hey, Doc. What’s the word in Woolie for *incest*, do you remember?”

My mother lunged for Judith, but I held her back.

“We should learn this as a family, Mom.” I said.

The tool chest behind my sister rocked uncertainly when she mule-kicked open the side door. A flood of white cards spilled out. She grabbed up a handful of them. “Fine. We’ll start with ...” The first card in her fist: “*Massat*.” She flipped it over for the definition. “*Massat* is a noun meaning summer. Should I use it in a sentence? And next we have *Dissat*. Winter. Wonder what’s up next.”

“Clean up that mess,” my mother said, between clenched teeth. My sister threw the cards down at her feet. Beside the bed, the top drawer of my old bureau hung out at an angle, resting on the others like a tired dog’s tongue. Judith went to it, lifted out one of the long boxes of cards and launched the entire box across the room towards the tool chest. Cards fell in a heavy rain, and the tool box wobbled on its wheels. She grabbed another box and another, one for each hand.

“Give me a match, Mother, and I’ll clean the whole room. As a matter of fact—”

Paper dust exploded upward as the white flutters of hundreds of cards dropped in their slow fall. At first gently teetering, the tool chest finally groaned and crashed to the floor, scattering white fragments of itself throughout the room. After a microsecond of absolute and perfect silence, another sound followed, this one a wet moan, mournful and helpless, accompanied by the foul odor of a body’s relaxed gasp.

“Oh my God, Morris,” my mother screamed and ran to his collapsed form in the hall, the electric wheelchair humming beside him. When she turned him over, his vacant eyes faced me, his jaw loose, breath deeply ragged.

My sister stood frozen, one arm cocked back, still aiming a carton of index cards — verbs according to the hand-written note on the side of the box. She gave me a kind of half smile of apology before dropping the cards and rushing to my father’s assistance.

The noise and activity in the hallway shrank, fading around me as they bundled my father back into the chair, out to the kitchen, into the ambulance. A sudden quiet from the siren’s dissipation brought awareness of the snowy landscape around me, white cards in drifts, the last tiny fragments of Woolie covering the floor of my childhood home. I sat there for an hour, then another, remembering, trying not to remember, feeling the cold spreading throughout the room.

A drift of air and then a tiny post and lintel card house flattened itself by my feet. I reached down and gently gathered the cards.

The first, a verb, marked v.113.05:

GAR- v - to be (singular)

Agar - I am

Tuagar - You are

Layagar/Loyagar - She is/ He is

Another, written with a different pen. Marked “derivation”:

WUL - (n) - story, narrative

WULAD - (n) - history, the passing of time

AWUL- (v) - recite a story, lit: “to speak history”

“Woolie” I said aloud. “From the noun, Wul.”

Around me, a dozen piles formed. Nouns, verbs, adjectives. I couldn’t remember all the parts of speech, so some of them landed in “miscellaneous.”

A bent card: *Maban*—*First person singular possessive form of v. to be. “I am”*

A card with a stain in the corner: *Jikkat* - (n) - *field rabbit*.

I needed to pack, find a hotel. I needed to go to the hospital, be there for my sister, if not our mother. Fortuitously, the next card read *Aja* - (adj.)—*Apology, 4 of 18, literally, “sorrowful.”*

Streetlights flickered on outside. My phone rested quietly in my back pocket. She would have texted or called. Or at least Judith would have. I still had time.

A slightly dog-eared card: *Schrim* - (n) - *frost*.

And then, a surprise. A yellowing card written in faded red ink, one of the oldest in the batch; sudden fuel for anger and energy for tears.

ANA - (n) – shame, apology. Also,

MABAN ANA - (n) Apology 18 of 18.

Complex expression of apology, literally, “my shame is mine.”

A request for unwarranted forgiveness.

Maban Ana.

My banana.

“Dammit, Dad,” I said aloud, all the words I needed.

“I assume you’re flying out today?” Judith didn’t want to make eye contact, but I could tell she wasn’t ready to let me go after just a week and eleven hours home.

“There’s a narrow window of opportunity with the weather. I’d love to stay and catch up, but —”

“It’s okay,” she said. “I don’t blame you at all for wanting to get out of here.”

“Really, it’s not that.”

“Listen, Doc. I don’t have time to master some extinct language to describe the eighteen ways I failed you.” She spread her open hands in front of her. “I shouldn’t have let her call you. I shouldn’t have left you alone with him. I should have stayed in that damn bedroom no matter what you said. I could have —” I took her hands in mine, and drew her as close as she allowed.

“We were children. You don’t owe me any apologies. In any language.”

“To fuck up is human, and to forgive divine. Or something like that.” She tried to laugh but the sound rendered as a gagging cough.

“I’m over it. He’s in a home, and she’ll probably fake deafness. Again.”

“Nobody protected you.”

“That was Mom’s job, not yours.”

Judith walked with me past the kitchen table where we’d once broken bread together as a family, into the living room where we’d all watched Dan Rather aging gracefully on the evening news. When my cab finally arrived, she didn’t walk me to the curb, and I didn’t wave as we drove away. A fine coating of sleet embraced the car, leaving blue-white star bursts on the windows. A hill of dirty ice paralleled the sidewalks almost all the way to the airport, until the lanes doubled and traffic thickened, and the gray slush gave way to wind-blown mountains of pure and clean snow, almost a wintery glacial blue, a color that has no other name in the English language.

## EPHEMERA

Ben wanted another secret. Lucy-Anne recognized the desire behind his expression. He wanted her confession, her hidden moment. Something priceless and verbal. Something emotional to add “spice” to the routine of their thrice-weekly sex.

“Any interesting finds today? Gutenberg Bible? Lost Shakespeare folio?” He closed the cook book he’d been browsing and patted the empty couch space between him and the dog snoring next to him. She shook her coat down from her shoulders, tossed it on the chair, and cupped the old beagle’s snout in her hand before giving Ben a quick kiss. She settled down between them and both Ben and the dog nuzzled closer, exuding love through proximity.

“Nothing interesting,” she said, which wasn’t a lie. Ben wouldn’t have found the old man’s library worthy of comment, but she’d been delighted by the scope and quality of the books, many of which contained index cards with the old man’s notes in his accountant’s tiny and precise lettering. She’d been thrilled to order the library boxed and shipped back to the auction house, where she could leisurely sort and catalog the extensive collection.

“No Chinese porno drawings?”

“Sorry, no.” She let her head relax against the back of the couch. The dog inched his nose under the hem of her tweed skirt and she shivered. Ben wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her closer.

“You’d think at least once of those old farts would have some kick-ass porn stashed away. They’re always hiding something.”

“Everybody’s hiding something.” She thought of the list in her desk drawer. Just a list. Hardly worth mentioning. “But they usually they hide it in plain sight. Like those ‘toys’ you keep in your sock drawer.”

“You mean the toys you play with when I’m not around? You thought I didn’t notice.”

“I assumed the double-barreled ones were for me. Basic anatomy and all.” Lucy gently pulled away from him and back towards the dog’s nudging. Distracted by the library, she couldn’t work up any genuine physical interest. She went into the kitchen for a glass of iced tea.

“Why don’t you tell me one of your real secrets, one of your sexy secrets.”

“I don’t have any,” she said over her shoulder. “I told you when we met I was the most ordinary person you’d ever know.”

“Give me a fantasy then.” He got up from the couch, and the dog groaned but quickly followed. “Everybody has a little kink in the back of the daydream. One of these days you need to let me in on it.” He came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her hips, his warmth pressing against her, comforting but confining. Maybe if he touched the back of her neck just so—

“Fine, I fantasize about doing it doggy-style.”

He dropped his hands and stepped backwards. “We do it doggy a lot. That’s not a fantasy, it’s a preference.”

“Well then I don’t have a fantasy.” She emptied two bags of sugar into the glass before Ben could stop her.

“That’s a Prince of Wales and breakfast tea mix and I’ve already sweetened it.” He grimaced as she downed half the glass in one swallow.

“I’m starving.” She finished off the glass and poured a second, adding another two packets of sugar.

“Drink your hummingbird food and I’ll make dinner.” He moved away from her, over to the refrigerator. The absence of his body against hers left a shadow of cold, and she shivered.

“So was your dead guy anybody important?”

“He’s not actually dead. It’s a tax issue, I think. But no, nobody I’d heard of.”

He opened the refrigerator door and she thought of why she loved him, why she normally enjoyed their banter. Everyone called Ben a “genuinely good man.” Despite the years of calculating tax breaks for the rich, he never complained about what he didn’t have. Never developed the cynicism and jealousy so common among their conservative class peers. He’d wanted to be a chef but, as he put it, crunching numbers was less stressful and usually guaranteed work-free weekends.

“You want beef barley soup tonight? It’ll take the chill off. I can throw it together in thirty.”

“Make up a double,” she said. “I’ll be working on this project for a while and my office is freezing.” She watched the rippling muscles of his forearm as he lifted the cast iron pot. He caught her watching and flexed his bicep more than necessary.

“Give me a secret and we can talk about an appetizer.”

“I have. No. More. Secrets.”

“Yes you do. Everybody does, you said so. If you won’t tell me, whisper one to Darnell.”

“I don’t speak dog.”

“Whisper it loud and I’ll translate.”

For several years, this had been his favorite foreplay: grilling Lucy for a secret something she might have thought up that day. Something that made her exotic. She’d played along for a while, making up elaborate fantasy lives and alternative identities she pretended to confess. It had been fun at first, but these days Lucy thought it tedious. They had no real secrets between them. They had each shared the details of their early lives, and knew the other well enough to anticipate the other’s actions and finish their sentences. Real secrets balked against the open book structure of their relationship.

“I do have a secret.” She bent down to lift one of the dog’s floppy ears. “My secret is that I’m out of secrets. What will I tell my boyfriend?”

“Woof. Tell him he should start withholding sex from you until you give up a fantasy or three. Woof.”

“I’ll be in my office.” She shook her head as she turned away from him.

Her “office” had been Ben’s idea, after seeing the mess of folders and papers scattered across the kitchen table every weekend. He cleared out the guest room and told her, “Your office. My kitchen. And never the twain shall meet.”

She had thanked him for the effort, scolded him for the threat, and they’d made love on the bare floor, while a younger and skinnier Darnell snored beneath the window.

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There was always too much to do. Never enough time to read. She had been in the auction business for a decade, loved it despite the salary, and salivated over the volumes that passed through her hands, where she could page through first editions and limited printings others might only dream about, and classify and catalog the massive personal libraries that came to her office for authentication and valuation. She considered herself lucky that she could often work from home, bring some of the books here, where she might wake early and browse her favorites before they had to be sent to the highest bidder.

There were book collectors, and then there were *Book Collectors*. In Lucy's mind, book collectors bought what they suspected the market would support, treating books as investments to be cashed in at the appropriate auction. Their libraries had no logic to the selections of the books or their order on the shelves. She had grown to dislike these people very much, the Pretenders.

The Book Collectors, on the other hand, were the lovers. Real Collectors had specific goals, measurable by the titles in their possession. Their shelves were organized, sometimes by a personal code that Lucy enjoyed trying to track. Every Book Collector was his or her own mystery, every collection a hidden secret waiting to be uncovered. She'd shared this with Ben one evening as he was trying out a new orange sauce, but his fascination with Lucy's secrets didn't carry over into those of other people.

"You can't really know somebody based on the books they have in their house. I mean, what if they were gifts? You can't just decide someone's gay because they have a lot of Oscar Wilde, can you?"

“I just think it’s interesting what people read, and more interesting what they decide to keep and collect. Anybody who came to our house could see that a chef lives here.”

“Because of the cookbooks? Come on. My mom collected cook books and never made anything more challenging roast chicken.”

“No, because the books you use are dog-eared, they’re written in, you’ve crossed things out and stuck post-its all through them.”

“Research.”

“I’m just saying it’s clear that someone here loves cooking.”

He came up behind her with a spoon. She touched it gently to her tongue. “Needs salt,” she said.

“Barbarian. It’s perfect. So what would your library say about you?”

She had gone on at great lengths about the books she would own, assuming money was no object and her options limited only by market availability. Chaucer, Boccaccio, a few modern firsts of books she enjoyed in college, and volumes of poetry of course. He had faked a huge yawn, demanding what she *really* would collect. The stuff she wouldn’t display on living room shelves, but rather hide away in a locking barrister bookcase or tuck behind another book to avoid casual detection. He didn’t want to hear about the *boring* stuff. That had been the night of their first intense argument.

Lucy hadn’t kept a diary since her teenage years, when her brother stole it from her purse and read aloud on the school bus Lucy’s musings on the quarterback, the band director, and her friend Lynn’s unexpected pregnancy. After that, she never trusted a

secret to words. All of hers remained images in the silent and private parts of her consciousness. All but one.

Taped to the back of her desk drawer was a handwritten list. She'd been compiling the list for three years, less out of a desire to actually collect the list items and more to see them all written out together, one after the other, the way they should be. The list was only about 30 items long (no need to be greedy) and was well beyond her budget, but Lucy slid the drawer forward and removed the list once or twice a month, chanting the titles aloud before re-taping and hiding it again.

The collection arrived at the auction house several days later, and when it came, it came in pieces, one room at a time. Lucy had them sent to the receiving room and sorted through the basics first: common dictionaries, coffee table history books, then the same biographies and business volume every CEO or executive enjoyed displaying on the shelves. She stacked them by subject and covered them with a drop cloth, despite their low value. Then, the following Wednesday, the really interesting items arrived.

She opened each of the last boxes with blunt scissors, to avoid accidentally cutting the un-papered books. She made a mental note to complain about the packing job. Books slid sideways when she picked up the boxes, and there seemed little care to how they were arranged. The boxes in front of her were all poetry collections, small press short runs of academic poets who were remembered mostly by their students and colleagues, but a few had earned mainstream notice, but not popularity. Almost all were limited, both in quantity and demand. Nearly valueless for auction purposes. Whoever collected these did so not for financial gain, but for a more intellectual desire. But here

was an oversized and leather-bound *Decameron* that she remembered got a high four-figure bid at an auction the previous spring.

“We would have had much to discuss,” she whispered to the absent owner of the books, thinking of him as a friend and cohort—someone with at least some of the same secret desires. Of the thirty items on her list, she found three in the boxes so far opened. Inside this carton was a packing slip with a bar code and the simple description: *Declan Mallory. 78 of 79*. Many of the books were marked with now yellowing index cards. In tiny cramped letters of the brown ink of a fountain pen were the old man’s notes: page numbers, quoted passages, comments.

At the bottom of the last box, *79 of 79*, was a silk-bound book, clearly hand-made, Japanese characters painted on the spine. She opened it carefully to prevent the glue from cracking. The frontispiece was in Japanese, opposite an engraved photograph Lucy knew very well. She felt a warm prickling down her spine as she examined what she held in her hand. The text was Japanese, but Declan had been kind enough to insert a sheaf of papers in front of the back cover, a translation, probably of the whole book, in those tiny cramped letters of his: *Tanizaki. The Last Letters*.

Lucy exhaled loudly. A fake, of course. She would have heard if an actual copy had been discovered. She’d seen more than a few fakes during her years as an evaluator, but as she turned the pages she admired the care taken with this one. But why fake a book no one believed existed?

She touched her fingers lightly over the stacked spines, picking up a book here and there to inspect. Interspersed among the mass market and inexpensive paperbacks was the occasional signed first, which she pulled aside for examination, and inexpertly

printed chapbooks she would need to scour for famous names and previously unpublished work. She walked the length of the tables, imagining the books upright and shelved properly. Imagining the man who had collected them.

The library's owner had a fondness for poetry and literary criticism, but not the obscure books of theory only a college professor would bother keeping on his shelves. This was popular criticism, writers discussing the art of the written word—an internal, private conversation by writers between themselves. Had Declan ever written a novel, and would she find that leather-bound hand-penned manuscript among the books?

And then there was the Tanizaki. But that was another matter altogether.

Clearly a Book Collector, Declan's acquisitions were specific and purposeful, and it saddened Lucy to think that the old man was about to lose what amounted to a lifetime's work. Had he no relatives to help bail him out? Or was his tax debt so substantial that any assistance was a grain of sand in the desert?

As she walked, the stacked books revealed an outline of the man behind them, and she began to see the categorization of his personal Dewey Decimal system. What she categorized as CEO Required Reading and valueless mass-market books were from front bookshelves, possibly a common area, like a parlor or foyer where business guests would gather. These were books a housekeeper dusted, put there as ornamentation for the kind of people they would impress, or at least the kind of people who would expect to see them there, displayed for all.

There would have been a formal library, certainly. A room dedicated to the great span of years between the oversized and illustrated *Decameron* and the histories. A room with a heavy leather chair, wingback of course, possibly a fireplace? She picked up the

*Decameron*, sniffed it. There it was, the trace odor of burned wood, charcoal. She closed her eyes and could almost feel the leather of the chair, the aroma of decanting brandy. An antique clock ticked on the mantle, or maybe it was a Black Forest cuckoo clock, with pineapple shaped weights and a tiny chocolate house encircled every hour by the spinning Hansel and Gretel and Witch. She sniffed the book again and imagined cherry tobacco. A pipe would make sense. The kind of man who would own these books? From an older, more civilized time, where each kind of liquor had its own crystal container.

Despite the library appearing the height of sophistication, Lucy knew the heart of the man's passion was shelved in his personal office, with the poetry and books of literary criticism, their top edges slightly dusty not from neglect, but without the ministrations of the housekeeper. If she came to that room, it was most likely only to vacuum. He wouldn't have let anyone touch the personal collection.

This is where the Tanizaki had been hidden, she knew, pushed back behind a set of chapbooks, invisible to any accidental or curious eye. Unseen by any camera lens, absent from any manifest. Fake and valueless, but fascinating to Lucy. That book, not one of the thirty on her list but still a legend she was familiar with—that book would not make it to the valuation list. She decided the moment she held it in her hand. That book was a secret, hers alone now, and she wasn't about to share it.

The collection, in number, was astounding. Five hundred books, nearly all in very good to excellent quality. All well-cared for. A collection thoughtfully cultivated but unfortunately, nearly worthless for auction concerns.

“Mass market, for the most part,” Lucy explained to her boss. Marty was a sympathetic and compassionate Navy man who considered himself something of an art collector and whose expertise was with Flemish photo-realism. He sat with his hands folded under his chin, arms propped up on his elbows, his distress obvious in the wrinkles of his forehead.

“There’s just no market for most of the individual books,” she continued.” And the set wouldn’t bring in enough to make it worth sending to auction. But there are some individual books that I think we can get a bit for. Rare ones. A nice *Decameron* and some others.

Marty sighed and let his chin drop further into his hands. “Get me what you can, but I need an estimate pronto. You have three days and then we have to wrap this up. If you can get ten grand they may agree to take it to auction.”

The Tanizaki hidden in her briefcase, if authentic, would get that as an opening bid.

“Has anyone sent the inventory list yet?” she asked in her most innocent and unassuming voice. “There were no itemized packing slips in the boxes.”

“This has been a mess since the get-go,” Marty said. “There’s no inventory. You’ll have to draw one up.”

“*And* do the valuation?”

“You’re always asking for overtime.”

“No, I mean it just seems like a security conflict.”

“I trust you, Lucy.” He looked up from his hands and smiled. “You’re not the embezzling type.”

When she got up, she wanted to say something clever that would make him think twice about his evaluation of her honesty, but the thought of the Tanizaki kept her silent, secretive.

After work, she drove nearly thirty minutes to the Office Depot across town. She took the stolen volume in her briefcase to the do-it-yourself print center, where she made photocopies of the pages and the hand-written notations. Ben texted her twice and she apologized, claiming a highway wreck caused the delay. She took the book and copies upstairs to her office, hiding them in a file drawer before joining Ben in the kitchen. He stood over a saucepan, stirring slowly, his gaze hypnotically following the wooden spoon.

“Whatcha sneaking around for? I heard you come in.”

“I didn’t want to disturb you if you were timing something.”

“Ancho pepper and red wine reduction sauce.” He motioned her over.

“It looks like velvet,” she said.

“Somebody called from your work.” He might have punched her in the stomach, she was so shocked. “They didn’t leave a message. It was that girl, the one with the Minnie Mouse voice.”

Angela. Useless, persistent, annoying Angela, Marty’s assistant. She knew. She was always listening in on conversations, watching as you put your PIN into the keypad at the ATM or the Starbucks in the lobby. She knew about the Tanizaki, that it had gone missing. She probably had made a master inventory list and went through and counted the damn books herself.

“She’s after your job, that one.” He dipped a spoon into the sauce, brought it to her mouth. She licked the spoon obediently but tasted nothing but a sour anger. “They say it’s always the squeaky ones.”

“Delicious,” she said. “I’ll take care of her later.” Take care of her? What was she now, a mafia hitman? “I’ll deal with it tomorrow. Do I smell pork chops?”

“For the sauce. Unless you want to eat it with a spoon? I know you sneak into the cabinet and eat the Nutella that way. I’ve watched the level drop.”

“Aw, you found out my last secret.” She willed herself to breathe slowly, to be calm. Ben couldn’t suspect anything, and at this point she hadn’t actually committed any crime, though she was about to. But that was her secret, hers alone. Well, hers and Declan’s.

Later that night, she slipped out of bed and went down the hall to her office. She thumbed through the photocopied pages, squinted at the tiny handwritten notes. A magnifying glass pulled from the drawer enlarged Declan’s enigmatic commentary.

*Isolation, eventually desolation. The soul’s overwhelming desire to know and love itself, to find a like-soul. Ultimately destructive. Nothing gold can stay.*

And more like that, interspersed among the pages of criticism, acknowledgments of beautiful phrasing, and the odd abbreviation or punctuation mark signifying something personal and private to the old man, his own secret.

Lucy sat back in the chair, her finger tracing a line of verse copied into the margin, a line from an extant and familiar Tanizaki poem, rendered in a translation so elegant that she felt the copyist’s pain even through the thin twenty-pound bond paper.

*This heart of mine cannot be known by anybody but myself.*

Declan was a romantic. She now considered his situation all the more tragic. A romantic with no one to love, and nothing left to give the object of that love except another man's words. She wondered how many failed and abandoned love poems he had written in his life.

She closed her own eyes and pictured the woman—women?—Declan might have chased in his youth. A dark-haired beauty with pale skin, eyes the color of glacial ice, and just as cold. He had not inscribed the book or the pages with anyone's name. Had he intended it for Her? A gift from a Collector to the one being Collected?

Lucy ran her fingers through her own dark hair, stopping at the back of her neck just above her shoulders the way she imagined the owner of the Tanizaki would have. He would have read to her from the book, ending the reading as he just touched her shoulder blade.

“Sleepwalking?” Ben's voice startled her and she dropped the hand from her hair, letting it fall to the photocopied pages and spilling them off the edge of the desk. “That's new. Or have you been doing this a while and haven't told me?”

“I told you, I don't have any secrets.” She was annoyed by the interruption. What was he doing up? He slept like the dead after a full meal. Had he seen her touching herself, that way? Ben yawned, shrugged, rubbed his eye with one fist.

“Well, are you working or you coming back to bed?”

“No, I'm coming. Go on, I'll be there in a sec.” She bent down to retrieve the fallen papers and noticed the bottom sheet had slid towards her. At the bottom was Declan's familiar handwriting.

*How can she love a man without she also love his books?*

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Despite her private wish list, Ben and Lucy's home was nearly devoid of real books. Cookbooks, certainly, in stacks in the kitchen. Rare book lists and pricing guides, of course, lined up neatly on shelves in her office. Those of Lucy's college accounting textbooks she had been unable to sell back to the school still remained tucked on the back shelves of the closet, and strategically placed in the living areas of the home were three coffee table books with vivid glossy photographs of mountain landscapes, Thai noodles, and a folio of Hokusai's *36 Views of Mt. Fuji*.

There was the shelf of modern first editions Lucy intended to read but hadn't yet. And a few collections of short stories by authors whose books had retained their value even long after the writers had spent their fortunes. But their library was sadly lacking, and Declan's question made her uncomfortably aware of her own literary inadequacies. She rephrased it in her mind: *How can he love a woman who doesn't read?*

When she stopped by the office the next morning, she found a note on her desk, in Angela's loopy, childish handwriting. "Mallory estate representative called. Again. Needs the estimate pronto." She'd also scribbled, "CC'd Martin."

Bitch. Marty knew these things took time and she still had two days. But Lucy relaxed a bit. If Angela had an inventory, she would have stapled that to the note. Her secret was safe, at least in the office.

On her way home, she pulled into the parking lot of a chain bookstore. She watched the women coming and going, with a few men and a morose group of teenagers carrying oversized backpacks they would have to surrender at the door. She marched over to the section marked "literary" and browsed the patchwork of colored spines. In the

middle of the shelves was a point-of-sale display marked “Award Winners.” She collected a dozen of these and took them to the checkout desk.

The clerk, sensing a theme, inserted into her bag a copy of the store’s monthly newsletter and a list of prize-winning titles from the previous year. Lucy thanked the woman politely, but when she got to the car discovered she’d bought two copies of the same book, but with different covers. She did not want to face the clerk and admit her mistake, so she left with both.

The house was empty when she arrived. She dropped the books on the sofa and went upstairs to her office, where she took the Tanizaki from its hiding place. It was a beautiful volume with creamy paper, the calligraphy drawn by hand, possibly Tanizaki’s own. Its peach spine and gold binding bands shined in the glow of the desk lamp. It would have looked lovely on a shelf. It was a shame to have to hide it so, but she told herself this was only temporary.

On around the seventh page, Declan’s notes grew morose, sulky. He challenged the author’s assertion of true love, or of any kind of pure love, for that matter. *For what does it do a man to love? All is fleeting, illusory. Vanity of vanities.*

Lucy understood the sentiment and the frustration. Love was an agreement between two, but abandonment required only one disinterested or absent party. She thought of her mother, quietly waiting out her widowhood for a chance to die and be united again with her love. She thought of Ben, of their increasing distance and of his dissatisfaction with the orderly progression of their relationship.

Ben banged through the front door and into the kitchen, rattling paper and plastic bags as he called to her. She slammed the book closed, tucked it back in the drawer. She

realized then that she had never told Ben about her mother, never relayed how pathetic she found the old woman's self-imposed celibacy and withdrawal from the society she had once enjoyed. It seemed tragic in a petty kind of way, so she had kept that fact to herself. Another secret? Damn, she was surprising even herself.

Another note from Angela, this one printed in comic sans and with two misspellings, lay on her desk. Declan was coming, himself, to retrieve the estimate. Lucy had two hours to prepare the valuation and make the last decisions about the collection that needed to be made. It wasn't enough time. There was never enough time.

He was nearly as she had pictured him: slim and short, but his long neck and erect posture made him appear taller. A thick head of graying hair was meticulously trimmed in arches over his ears, and a few curls of gray peeked out from his collar, but his cheeks were smooth and cleanly shaven. He smiled with closed lips and his eyes took in the clutter of her office like an experienced evaluator. He took two long and graceful strides towards her, held out a narrow hand with long fingers and manicured nails.

“Miss Aarons, is it?”

“Lucy.” She shook Declan's hand with a much weaker grip than she intended. He was handsome for a septuagenarian, and his eyes seem to search for something inside hers—a secret. The secret. His book.

“I'd like to apologize for saddling you with the state of the collection. I hadn't intended to wait until the last minute to organize it all, believe me.”

“It was no trouble.” She took her seat and motioned him to the chair in front of her desk. “I enjoyed going through all of it.”

His eyes brightened and his smile now revealed a straight set of small white teeth. “Did you? Now that brings me a great deal of joy. Young people these days, I don’t see them reading like I used to.” He leaned back in the chair and smiled at her again, a dazzling smile that faded too quickly and made her want to say something funny to see it again. She would trade a secret for that smile. She could trade *the* secret for that smile, let him keep the book as a shared conspiracy between them. It was the least she could do, after failing him so.

“I’m truly sorry if you were unsatisfied with the evaluation estimate. I know you were probably hoping for a lot more.”

“Oh I know the market, Miss Aarons. I’ve always believed the real value was in having all the books together, in one place, wouldn’t you agree?”

“The intellectual value, sure—”

“The only value.” He smiled again, a curl of charm that elicited a goofy grin from her. “Imagine being a student again, surrounded on all sides by the sum total of the world’s knowledge. The Sibylline Oracles, within a hair’s breadth of your fingers.” He illustrated this point by drawing up his hand, and stroking his palm against a non-existent wall of books.

“I can’t imagine having to part with them. I wish we could have found another way—”

“Oh I don’t need the physical reminder. I do wish I’d thought to save the note cards, but they won’t be of much use to me now.”

Now? In prison? Did they still have debtor's prison? She was sure she remembered a celebrity doing time for tax evasion. She felt a constricting in her throat.

“Maybe someday I'll come back to visit. I do love that university. Spent more than my share of moonlit nights there, reading poetry to the ladies.” He crossed his legs and draped his hands casually over one knee. “I trust you're smart enough not to fall for the first boy to quote from ‘Dover Beach’?”

She wanted to look away, but his smile was so inviting. She should apologize. Offer to change the estimate. Give him back his Tanizaki. If she did, would he read to her? Could she stand it if he did?

“Ah love, let us be true to one another—” Her voice trailed. Outside, the persistent rain had slowed and between the dark clouds, small shafts of sunlight pierced the puddles. The gray water sparkled in the light. She felt her eyes moisten. That she should be witness to such beauty was a gift. That her life would contain so much poetry in such mundane corners was uplifting, even.

“I'd like to leave you with something, for your trouble.” He leaned towards her. “I understand you're a collector yourself. Did you come across any of the books that you thought deserved a more intimate home?”

The Tanizaki. He knew. He'd seen the inventory sheet, noticed it wasn't listed. She shook her head.

He tilted his, looked at her slightly askance. “A poet like yourself? You mean nothing in the collection even piqued your interest? My, I have lost my touch. Long gone are the days when I could seduce a woman with a book, I see.”

“I don't, I mean I wouldn't feel right. You need that money.”

Declan gave her a confused look. “The estimate isn’t for me. It’s for the university. And for my tax accountant, I suppose. Although he says he can’t write off the full value. Something about a cap for donations for the year.”

“Donations? But aren’t you going—”

“To Paraguay? Yes, but I’m only taking what fits in a backpack. It’s all the rage now. They call it tiny traveling. How interesting of our culture to encourage minimalism as fashionable.” He folded his arms over his crossed knees and gave her the smile of an old man’s remembrance.

“I thought,” she began, then gave a soft laugh. She hadn’t thought. She’d assumed. The man before her was about to set out on the adventure of his life but she felt at one with him and his library. How it must feel to abandon all your things, leave them all behind you like a pre-written obituary. And to leave those books he clearly cherished and notated, books in which he had inscribed his most private thoughts and secrets. Books left for someone else to read, everyone else, a library full of someone else’s, and yet he offered her one book, one of his secrets. Did he know she had taken the Tanizaki?

“You thought what?” he asked.

“I have to confess something,” she said. He would understand. He had to. “I read through the notes.”

Declan gave her a blank look.

“The ones in the books, and stuffed in the back of the books. I felt the same way, about some of them.” She sounded juvenile, a teenager incapable of articulate speech.

“Well I’m not surprised. Maddie had something of a gift for teaching, and she was always very loved by her students.”

“Maddie?”

“Madalyn, but everyone called her Maddie. My wife. She passed two years ago.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Lucy said, finally understanding. He hadn’t abandoned the idea of love. It had been taken from him. And like her mother, Declan had adopted the socially appropriate celibacy, even from his books, which Lucy found even more tragic than the death itself.

“Thank you. It’s taken me while to get used to the idea of letting them go, but I think she would be happier knowing her books were serving a community of scholars rather than a brooding old man.”

“*Her* books?”

“Oh yes, the library was Maddie’s. Well, apart from some of the histories. I was never much of a reader, but Maddie read two or three books a week. Some of them more than once.” He laughed and she saw in the triangle of his pink shell ears and brittle gray chest hairs the portrait of a man who bought books as investments. Received books as unread Valentine’s Day gifts. Treated books like unmatched socks, dumped into boxes without care or purpose. Read from books he didn’t understand to win over women. She wanted him out of her office.

Lucy reached down and pulled a file out of her desk drawer. She handed him an oversized spreadsheet, the pages clipped at the edge.

“This is the inventory, listed by rough category, with the valuation estimate on the right. Quality grades are in the second column.” She pointed to the first set of items.

“These are the most rare, but you’ll notice a lower grade, since they have visible marks on the interior pages.”

Not marks. It seemed too banal to refer to them that way. They were song lyrics. Poetic passages. Item twelve made her hesitate. It needed to be on the list, but it shouldn't have been. Declan didn't deserve it. No library deserved it. It could have been hers, her secret. The last one.

“The Tanizaki—I don't know if you know the book. Hand-drawn in Japanese. It's considered something of a myth because there aren't any surviving copies. I can't rate it because technically it doesn't exist.”

Declan waved his hand dismissively.

“That one I do know. It was one of her projects. Translating with a grad student, but its poetry in the style of, not the man's work himself. It's someone's dissertation, but if the university wants to sell it, that's their business. I trust your estimate.” When he leaned closer, she could smell bitter coffee on his exhale. “You're certain I can't tempt you with one of them? I'm sure she had a volume of the romantic poets in there. I understand all women have a secret love for Byron?” Lucy pushed the spreadsheet towards him and leaned back in her chair. He smiled again. She did not.

“I don't have any secrets,” she said.

“Tell me just one,” Ben said again. From his tone she knew he expected the same response he'd always gotten. They were on the couch, half-watching a late-night talk show, his arm draped on the cushion behind, not quite touching her. The dog snored beside him. The arrangement felt uncomfortably sterile to her now, as it must have felt to him for months.

“What would you do with it?” she asked.

He turned to her, grinned and shrugged. "Keep it. Or tease you about it mercilessly."

"That's what I thought. Maybe I don't deserve to give you one of my secrets."

His hand dropped from the cushion to her shoulder as his eyes searched hers.

"You mean I don't deserve it?"

"Sometimes I think I don't deserve you," she said. He squeezed her shoulder and pulled her toward him, but his warm and familiar embrace was distant. "But I do think I owe you a confession."

"I wanted a secret."

"I expect you to keep it a secret." She scooted sideways on the couch so she could face him, her legs criss-crossed in a barricade before her.

"Of course," he said. The playful tone evaporated into tension.

"I fell in love with someone. A woman." She realized Ben knew her well enough not to smile or make a joke.

"I've lost you," he said, more a statement than a question. Was he surprised? Was that surprise in his face? Shock? Or relief? They all looked so much alike and with Ben it had always been hard to tell. She took his hand in hers and gave him a quick shake of her head.

"I'm not lost. It was a while ago." Thirty hours. Less than a work week. Still, a while.

Ben nodded, as if he understood. "It's over, then?"

"It never really began."

"Do you still love her?"

The hardest question, the most philosophical. “Of course not,” she said. The tension in Ben’s face relaxed, allowing the corners of his mouth to rise into a broad smile.

“That’s a good secret, you know.”

She nodded, relieved.

“What was her name?”

*This heart of mine cannot be known by anybody but myself.*

“I don’t actually know,” she said.

## WEIGHED

The island is a crescent of white on the dark water, and Daniel has to blink and rub his eyes before he is certain of its reality. The *Libra*, their rented boat, approaches it quickly, and soon enough Tyler also notices and runs to the bow. Daniel relaxes when he sees the relief on his son's face, feels the lessening of his own anxiety. *You see*, he wants to say, *I didn't get us lost*.

Palm trees are dark pillars on the shimmering water. He can see dots of colored flowers and a bird in flight, both excellent signs. The island's interior is a lush green, ringed by brilliantly white sand.

"It might be Eden," he says to his son.

"It better be Cuba," the boy responds without smiling.

The small boat, propelled only by the current, runs aground on the white beach, fiberglass shrieking against wet wood and sand. Daniel hops off the bow and strings a line of rope from the boat to the closest palm tree. Something in his pocket rattles and he covers it with his hand. Anchored by the palm, the *Libra* rocks gently in its mooring under a sun already hanging halfway to the horizon.

"We should explore a bit, look for fresh water." Daniel says. "Give us something to do while we let the engine rest. I'm sure it's just flooded." He knows there is nothing wrong with the boat, but he needs time with his son. Quiet time, with both of them unoccupied.

Tyler clammers over the edge of the boat and jumps down onto the sand, falling to his eleven-year-old knees when he lands. He frowns at his father and slogs through the damp sand to the beach.

Despite the cold between them, Daniel wants to touch his son's face, run his rough fingers over the child's smooth cheeks –cheeks still rounded with baby fat over a jaw that already juts forward in defiance. He wants to touch him, to pull that small body towards his own and squeeze, until his own loss passes through him into his son and there is finally a kind of communication by osmosis. He wants to explain himself. His soon-to-be ex-wife has already explained her side, and now he just wants a chance to balance the scales. And of course, he eventually wants to ask forgiveness for this charade, for pretending to strand them here on the unmarked island.

Tyler kicks at the sand, dislodging a handful of large shells. He steps on one, tries to grind it into the ground but it will not break. He bends down and unearths a larger shell, mottled gray and white, the size of his two fists. He holds it up to the sun. A breeze from over the water blows in a fine mist of white sand and the woody smell of garden soil. *This really wasn't my plan*, Daniel tells himself, wishing he could voice the words to his son.

“Put it up to your ear,” Daniel says instead, “and you can hear the ocean.”

Tyler does so, hesitantly. After a moment, just a breath, his eyes widen and he pulls the shell away from his head.

“Did it pinch you?” Daniel asks. “There might be a crab in it.”

Tyler shakes the shell, pokes it with his fingertip, then gingerly puts it back up against his ear. It nearly covers the side of his head and Daniel is reminded of how small

the boy actually is, how tiny his thin fingers are. A child's hand, not a man's. How could he ever understand?

“What do you hear?”

The child stands, hand pressed against his ear, his eyes narrowed in concentration as if the connection is bad and he has to strain to make out the sounds.

“What do you hear, Ty?”

After another few breaths, Tyler raises his head and brings his attention to his father. His face is tight with an anger that belies his youth. He throws down the shell and turns away.

“I'm going exploring,” he shouts over his shoulder.

Light strobes through empty spaces between the swaying palm fronds, and the woody scent intensifies. The wind off the water brings in a sourness he can almost taste, that causes Daniel's mouth to water. He reaches down and picks up the abandoned shell. He runs his fingers along the interior, then presses it against his own ear. Inside the bowl of the shell is a warm, thick silence that fills his ear canal. There is no ocean, no whispering resonance, no hollow echo of ambient noise.

Tyler is fifty yards away, climbing the slope of sand to where the palm forest spread itself across the island, long and dark fingers of green and black.

“I don't hear it either,” Daniel says.

It is up to him to explore the island and look for water. His father will do what he would have done at home: fiddle with the engine, poke his fingers in the machinery like he has any idea what all the parts do, eventually figure out a way to call the Coast Guard,

and the whole way home complain about the fine he'll get slapped with for screwing around where he shouldn't.

It isn't even a nice boat.

He leaves the shell behind for his father to play with. Let him hear the voices. Let him try to concentrate with those voices in his ear, shouting and arguing. Let him try to sleep tonight with *that* in the background.

Of course the other one is there too. *Her* voice. The one his father forgot to delete from his phone. The one who calls when his mother is out. The one he wasn't supposed to know about. Tyler wonders how many messages she's left him with that voice. He wonders if she said she was sorry when his mother called her number, listened silently, went to the bathroom where she cried not so silently, and there was nothing Tyler could do to make her stop.

He can't decide which he hates more, the sound of his mother and father arguing, or the sound of that woman's nose-voice, holding on too long to the "N," making her words sound thick and stupid. He decides he hates her because she's stupid. He might just hate his father for being stupid with her.

If his father could just admit his stupidity and ask forgiveness, it would be given. Tyler's mother forgave him for breaking that figurine in the living room, and for spilling acrylic paint on the couch. He had agreed not to throw balls in the house anymore and to only do art projects at the kitchen table, and she had forgiven him. If he can get his father to admit his guilt, promise never to talk to that woman again, they can all three live together and neither he nor his mother will have to hate anybody.

The beach is a bust. If there's water, it's on the inside, behind the trees. There must be water for the trees to grow. He can dig a well if he can find the right kind of stick. He climbs over the rise and down another hill, steep like a cliff-side. His tennis shoes can't grip, and he stumbles. He puts his hands behind him as he pitches backward, and then he's sliding on his side and he thinks it's just like sliding into home plate but for the trees. Don't hit the black trees. Just slide.

The trees aren't black. They're furry. Brown bark with black fur.

*Balance.*

He can hear the voices again, not arguing now, but whispering.

*Balance.*

Whispering. A scatter of soft hushing whispers repeating from behind every furry palm.

Not fur. Spikes. The tree bark is spikes.

*Balance.*

The whispers are louder and more substantial the longer he slides. He tries to do it, to balance, to stay upright, but the angle is wrong. He slides, out of control, as rock and tree roots scrape and tear at the skin of his legs. A shoe slips off one foot and bounces its way down the slope where it startles a large black bird, which caws and flies away. In front of him is the spiny trunk of a wide palm, blocking the way, no detour, and his fingers claw at the ground, but he's sliding, sliding, and home plate has great big long black porcupine quills sticking out of it and goddammit Dad, the voices.

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The boy can't get far, Daniel thinks, watching the silhouette of his son diminish into the forest of palms. Not a lot of trouble to get into on an island the size of a football field, if it is even that wide.

He returns to the boat for water bottles and a book of matches. His pocket rattles again, and he sticks his hand in and gently wraps his fingers around the contents. He isn't planning on staying too long, maybe just until sunset, when he will "fix" the boat's engine and have the second hard talk with the boy, the one where he will discuss the every-other-weekend and two weeks in the summer custody arrangement.

Their first talk hadn't gone so well. Daniel had mentioned his living apart from them and Tyler immediately wanted to know why. A "separation," Daniel called it. He didn't want to use the word "divorce," a word which seemed too final and acknowledged the irreparable damage done to the marriage. He couldn't adequately explain love, and how it sometimes happens without your realizing it. How could he explain a promise to only love one person to a child whose understanding of love was only toward his parents – both parents? And how could he discuss his grown-up desires, his wife's lack of desire, with an eleven-year-old?

He sits down in the captain's chair and leans back. Scratched into the fiberglass frame of the boat's canopy, next to the broken remains of a mud-dauber nest is a single word.

"Sinner," Daniel reads aloud and closes his eyes. "Sinner" is what his son had called him. On the night he'd left them, his son, flesh of his flesh, had looked at him with disdain and called him a "sinner." Daniel doesn't even know where he might have

learned the word, but then recalls a memory from a lifetime ago, before his wife had turned away from him in their shared bed and shrugged his hands away from the back of her shoulders. It was the ninth-birthday party, he recalled with a certain amount of peevishness, when one of the cousins—without asking first—had given Tyler a children’s Bible tucked inside a Star Wars backpack.

They hadn’t raised Tyler in the church, hadn’t spoken much about religion, and both he and his wife had hoped their son would adopt their casual atheism. Tyler, however, had been entranced by the book. His class had just finished studying ancient Egypt and he was thrilled to revisit the country through the story of the Exodus and the magicians of Pharaoh’s court. He read through the first five books of the Old Testament in less than a week, and interrogated both of his parents with historical and theological questions requiring a greater knowledge of the source material than either Daniel or his wife cared to maintain. The book of Genesis had been especially problematic for them.

“If there was only two people, then where was Seth’s wife born from?” Tyler had asked. His mother had hedged the question and given it a dismissive wave of her hand, murmuring “just a story.”

“Well what are these Nephilim?” he challenged.

“Angels,” she told him, miming flapping wings with her hands. “Or more like, half angel and half human.”

He pressed on. “Like bird people?”

Daniel’s wife had given him an exasperated look before retreating to the bathroom. Daniel explained that most people considered the second half of the book to be more important, and encouraged his son to go ahead and finish it.

Tyler had frowned and dropped the Bible at his father's feet.

"I read what I wanted," he'd said in his child's voice. "You can have the rest."

Tyler closes his eyes against the impact but there is no pain, only the warm darkness to which he would happily surrender, but then—that derisive caw again.

The bird, a crow or maybe a raven, sits by his shoulder, close enough to touch. Its dispassionate black eyes are focused on him. He tries to shoo it away with his hand, but it opens its beak and hisses at him.

"Wait," he hears it say, only it's a bird, not really talking, it can't talk. Is this what a concussion feels like? He imagines a wreath of tiny stars circling his head, or cartoon birds. Something is holding him in place and this stupid raven is telling him to wait, but it can't tell him anything because it's a bird and birds don't—

"Weighed," it says distinctly, enunciating the word the way his English teacher does. Tyler realizes he is the butt of someone's joke, someone who taught the bird to speak. "Weighed," it says again.

His shorts are caught on the exposed roots of the palm. The corner of his pocket is torn and one of the belt loops has been ripped away, but the root has stopped his fall, prevented him from impacting on the spikes of the black palms in front of him. Their thin trunks sway back and forth in the breeze, crossing and uncrossing, hugging each other and entangling branches in each other's embrace. The palms look like people, a man and a woman standing, kissing. Acting like lovers, he thinks, like his parents did once, and under that canopy of long narrow leaves, the man tree is becoming his father with his crooked nose and his round chest, entwined around the unfamiliar shape of the woman

tree, rubbing against her, her leg across his, and together they're bouncing, bumping, and the tree which is not his mother is arching her back, and the raven is watching them too and Tyler knows what they're doing and he wants to look away.

"Weighed," the raven says.

"Fucking," Tyler answers, using the forbidden word. He says it again, but it isn't fun to say now because he's watching his father fucking that woman and suddenly he realizes fucking is another word for adultery and that word makes his mother cry. He allows himself to hate his father for the stupidity that cost them all their family.

The bird extends its wings, shaking them violently before relaxing them back into place. The motion loosens a long and narrow feather which floats gently to the ground. Tyler picks it up. Hollow, it is nearly as light as the air.

In school, during his favorite unit on ancient Egypt, he learned the soul of the dead person would be measured against a feather, and only those with unweighted souls would be allowed to pass into the afterlife. Suspecting the result, Tyler stands, arm straight out, releases the feather in his hand. It drops quickly to the ground.

"Weighed," the raven says again.

"It's because I hate him, isn't it? That's not really fair."

The raven unfurls its wings and takes flight, leaving Tyler to collect the feather and climb back over the hill alone.

"Let's try this again," Daniel shouts to the boy now appearing at the top of the hill. Tyler rubs the back of his hand across his eyes and Daniel notices the dirt on his

shorts, the missing shoe. He says nothing about this; clearly the boy is unhurt; no point creating any more tension between them.

“I’m going to pop the hatch and check the engine,” he explains. “Why don’t you go try the key. Just turn it to the right and let go when it catches.”

The boy sighs and climbs over the bow to the captain’s chair. Daniel listens to the thud of his feet on the floor of the boat and wonders how feet so small could make such noise. What did he weigh now? Was he a hundred pounds? More? Daniel couldn’t begin to guess.

Tyler twists the key, trying again and again for a start. “Nothin’. You sure that MOB thing is working?” He’d feigned disinterest when Daniel had explained the emergency shut-off keychain, how the engine would quit if a wave knocked the captain in the water, but Daniel could tell from follow-up questioning that the technology had fascinated his son.

“Ok, give it a rest,” Daniel yells. He pats his pocket and climbs up the short ladder to the main deck. “We’ll give it a few minutes and try something else.”

He takes the seat opposite his son, the navigator’s place, and gently drags his fingers over the powered-down electronics. “It’s kind of awe-inspiring that people ever managed to cross the ocean without all this stuff,” he says. “Those sailors must have had a lot of faith in their captains, you think?”

Without looking at him, Tyler snorts. “Faith? It wasn’t like some heroic quest, Dad. They did it for the money. They probably knew if they made it back, they’d make it back rich. And if they didn’t make it back, well better off dying at sea than of plague or something.”

“You don’t think what they did was heroic?”

“Heroes are over-rated,” his son says.

“So jaded, so young.” Daniel shakes his head, but his son’s words draw blood.

There had been a time not so long ago when he himself had been Tyler’s hero – fixing a slipped bike chain, rewiring a dropped and broken walkie-talkie, getting the boy past what had previously been an undefeatable level in his favorite video game. Did Tyler remember any of that? Couldn’t he give him some credit for the past?

“I’m just used to people disappointing me.”

Tyler makes an uncomfortable eye contact with his father. Daniel can feel him holding it long after he himself has to look away. His son’s face holds such scorn, such impatience with him, and he feels the boy’s disappointment as a pressure wrapped around his own chest such that every breath is an effort.

“We never wanted—”

“We?” Tyler’s look is fierce. Furious. “I didn’t say anything about Mom. Mom isn’t the one who got us stranded here on this stupid island. Mom would have brought a phone, or a map, or something. Or she would have just taken me skating or to mini-golf if she wanted to spend time alone with me to tell me her stupid reasons for doing whatever stupid thing she was trying to apologize for. I mean, that’s why we’re here, isn’t it? You’re trying to apologize?”

Daniel feels the pressure tightening, squeezing. He wills himself to relax. No good having a heart attack here, wherever they are. He meets his son’s gaze.

“Yes, Tyler. I am trying to apologize. I haven’t been the best dad, I know—”

“Well for that, you’re forgiven.” Tyler’s attention is elsewhere, on the island, on the white sand of the beach. He rubs at his shin, which is oozing small dots of blood. Daniel’s throat tightens with the grip of a memory. Gone were the days when he could soothe his son’s pain with a kiss and a band-aid, listening sympathetically as the boy described in gory detail the agony of his wound. Now he wouldn’t so much as wince, let alone cry, talk about his feelings, or talk about anything of any importance with the man who’d given him life.

“I have to forgive you. It’s not because I want to, but I have to. You know?”

Daniel doesn’t know, but he’ll accept what the child offers.

“It’s not good to hate people. Even Mom said that.”

He wants to defend against the accusation, reassure his son that he doesn’t hate his wife, that he loves her. But that he also loves someone else, someone warm and inviting, who doesn’t shrink away from his touch. It’s a different kind of love, he wants to explain, but then he decides the boy is too young and inexperienced. They don’t share a common frame of reference.

Tyler finds the inscription in the fiberglass and runs his fingernail across it as if trying to scratch it out. He manages to mar the first letter, but gives up, leaving *inner* behind for someone else to buff out. He turns his head shyly, sighs, and gives his father a weak smile.

“I wish I knew what you were thinking,” Daniel says, and risks a touch, reaching his hand out to squeeze the boy’s unabraded knee. From the island, a bird caws—a strangely strangled noise as of someone clearing his throat. Tyler jumps up, runs to the front of the boat, and launches himself onto the beach.

“I’m thinking we should make a sand castle,” he says, laughing as though released.

Daniel checks the sun’s progress toward the horizon. It hasn’t changed, still hanging just above the rim of the ocean. There might still be time.

The sand is sharp against his feet as Tyler sprints across the beach. He hears the bird, now somewhere in the dark canopy of palm leaves at the center of the island, its cry muffled, distracted. He feels relieved, lightened. Maybe now the bird will leave him alone.

Just ahead is a small peninsula of darker, wetter sand, and he runs to it, drops down, and begins scooping a trench with his cupped hand. A soft tongue of water laps against his feet, licking closer with each pass. His father’s elongated shadow encroaches. Tyler works quickly.

“You gotta fortify it,” he says. “The foundation’s gotta be solid or the walls can’t hold, right Dad?”

“That’s—that’s absolutely right.”

Tyler surveys the beach, frowns. “We don’t have nothing to make the turrets with. Let’s make houses instead. You make one over there.”

His father complies, sliding sand into low walls. He moves toward the center of the island, away from the approaching water.

“Hey kiddo, we might want to move up the beach a tad. Tide’s coming in fast.”

“It’s fine, Dad.” The walls of his house are tall, thick, and he’d like to think indestructible but he knows better. “Don’t bother with a roof. That way he can see everything.”

“He?” his father asks, piling the sand carelessly into a mound, as if what goes on inside the walls could ever truly be hidden. “He who?”

Tyler points to the black bird which has sidled up beside his father. Daniel waves it away.

An incoming wave brings a handful of thin sticks, pencil-sized drift wood, which Tyler swipes out of the water.

“People,” he says, holding them up and smiling. He presses three of them upright inside his house and tosses the fourth one back in the water. On its next approach the wave lifts the abandoned piece and carries it towards his father, depositing the stick in the center of the piled sand before receding.

“You can keep that one,” he says when his father tries to hand him the piece of wood. “It doesn’t belong.”

A more intense wave splashes up to them, strong enough to uproot the sticks in Tyler’s sand house, and washing the longest of the three up to his father. The two sticks rock gently in the water before resting side by side in the center of the pile. The receding water flattens the sand in levels, giving the beach a quilted texture. The next wave edits the landscape of the beach again. It’s a picture now, three ovals with smiling faces, arranged just so, like their family Christmas card last year. Another wave draws in the details: his mother’s short curls and glasses; his father’s crooked nose and high forehead; Tyler’s own skinny neck and small ears, a perfect smile but for that one tilted front tooth.

He notices his father watching him and Tyler wants him to share in the wonderful sand painting, but he suspects what the next wave will bring.

The water ebbs, taking the portraits with it. Up the beach, his father's pile of sand is smooth and flat, and when Tyler squints, he can see that crooked nose and another oval with long hair and big boobs but the faces are impossible to see, mashed together like that. The water will fix it, he thinks, scrambling to his feet, but the water animates their bodies, his father's hands on her boobs, her hand *down there*, pulling him toward her like he was a dog on a leash, and then the bumping and bouncing again, faster this time as the water moves forward and back, forward and back, demolishing what remains of Tyler's house, carrying off all the drift wood, until both father and son are ankle-deep in water. The beach is a cinema, the sand playing out the highlights of his father's shitty, shitty secrets.

He looks up to see his father frowning, and Tyler feels the potential tears burning his eyes. His father reaches out to him, but he yanks his arm away and runs up the beach to the dark cool of the palms. He hears his name, the confused voice calling him back. Isn't it enough to forgive, to not hate his father? Why is the stupid bird still bothering him? He stops inside the thick shadows of the palms, where on a fallen branch beside him sits the black bird. It tilts its head, beak closed. He hears his father panting, trudging up the hill behind him.

"Weighed?" he asks. The bird says nothing.

He bends down, rests his hands on his thighs, and catches his breath. It was a long, steep climb and he knows he's out of shape when he realizes the boy is breathing

calmly. For a moment he is silent, afraid to once again say the wrong thing and chase his son away.

The center of the island is dark and beyond the rustling upper story of palm leaves, noiseless. The air carries a loamy smell and the black soil makes Daniel wonder if the island isn't volcanic, if they aren't standing on the ancient edge of a caldera. Tyler turns to him, spinning a black feather between two fingers.

"I wonder if this is on a map anywhere," Daniel offers tentatively, touching his hand against his pocket. A slight rattle gives him the reassurance to go on. "Or do you think we're in uncharted lands?"

"Dragon lands," Tyler says almost under his breath. He doesn't look at Daniel, scratches the feather at his elbow instead.

"You think there are dragons here?" Daniel winces even as he says it. Wrong reference. Tyler would know. His son sighs.

"You know what I mean. 'Beyond this place there be dragons.' It's from old maps, before America was discovered. When they didn't know what was out there."

"Ah," he said. "For some reason I was thinking it was Dante."

"That's 'Abandon hope if you enter here.' And he's talking about Hell, not the ocean, Dad."

"That's right. Wow. You're actually very well-read for an eleven-year-old." Shit, what was he thinking? Such a condescending attitude. No surprise the kid hated him. "I mean, I know you love to read. It shows."

"Yep."

Despite the sun's last apparent position, Daniel knows the daylight has to be dwindling. If he's going to make an impression on the child, his time is running out.

"So, listen, I—"

"I don't want to go to Hell because of you."

"We're going to be fine, Ty. Once we get the engine running, everything will—"

"You don't believe in Hell, do you Dad?" Tyler shades his eyes with his hand so Daniel can't see his expression.

"I don't, I mean, I don't know that I've really thought about it."

"Yeah, you haven't. That's pretty obvious. You know, you kinda suck balls as a person." He speaks nonchalantly, passing judgment as easily as deciding what cereal to have for breakfast. He extends his arm, palm up and open, offering his father the black feather.

*How dare you, Daniel wants to say. How dare you judge me, with your child's eyes, your minimal experience of the world. You don't know me. You know more about the solar system than you do your creator, the body that made you.*

"Mom's divorcing you. And she made me come. She said I needed to talk things over with you this weekend."

"We haven't done a lot of talking."

"I'm trying to forgive you and not hate you, but it's a lot harder than I thought. I don't think I'm very good at it, but maybe it gets easier as you get older. I can practice now, on you."

“Well, thank you for trying. I mean, I appreciate that,” Daniel says. “I was going to ask what you wanted to do about – well, who you wanted to live with, but I can read the writing on the wall.”

“Do you know what that’s even from?” Tyler asks, with a sudden intensity. He turns to Daniel, steps towards him. Face to face they are almost the same height. Good Lord, how he’d grown in a season.

“It means—”

“I know what it means, Dad. I’m asking if you know what it’s from.” Thin tears leave pale streaks in the dust on his face.

“I don’t... I mean, a song, or—”

“It’s from the Bible. Your book, the book of Daniel.”

“I don’t know that I ever read that.”

“I can’t believe you never read it. I mean, if there was like, a book of Tyler, I’d be all over it.” He steps back and looks his father up and down, surveying. Measuring.

“But you’re not me, are you?”

“I remember now. It is from the Bible.”

“Daniel has this thing where people tell him their dreams and he tells them what the dreams mean. So the king tells him about this dream he had about a hand writing stuff on a wall. And Daniel asks him what the writing said and then he tells the king what it means and then he got presents and stuff.”

“The writing on the wall.”

“Yep.”

“What was written there?”

“Something Jewish, I don’t know.”

A large black bird flies past Daniel’s head. Startled, he drops the feather, which falls quickly and heavily to the ground. Tyler watches it fall and sighs. Daniel turns and watches the bird circle back around and into the trees. “Well do you remember what it meant?” he asks over his shoulder.

“You have been weighed in the balance,” Tyler says in an even, measured tone. “And found wanting.”

Daniel turns back around in time to see his son’s open hands shove against his chest, the child’s face dispassionate, even serene, as he watches his father tumble backwards over the edge of the hill.

The breeze from the ocean carries an unfamiliar perfume which he knows is hers. Their voices fill every shell half-buried in the sand or resting in the shallows; he sees their writhing bodies in every stand of palm trees, tastes the stink of their sex in every drop of mist falling from the overhanging leaves, feels their sweaty flesh in the ocean slime on the beach. The island tells him everything. It won’t let him close himself away from his father’s sins. It won’t make his father ask for forgiveness. It won’t allow Tyler to forgive, damning them both in this black island Hell. He picks up the feather and spins it between his fingers.

As he watches his father fall and slide over the black ground, the bird returns to sit beside him, pecking at the ground until it unearths a centipede. It offers a final caw before swallowing the bug whole and taking to the air.

“Weighed,” Tyler agrees.

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The trees hang upside down at first. He blinks the dirt away from his eyes and then feels pain rip through his torso as the palm trunks reorient themselves. He takes a breath and there is a sharp stab in his chest and throat, thick salt water in the back of his mouth, a taste of grapefruit, the smell of a dirty penny. Blood.

He spits. Blood.

Between the palm leaves are speckles of light, rays of a sun refusing to set. A spotlight. Illuminating.

He is on the ground, at the base of a tree. Something is holding him, gripping him against the trunk. He's hanging? No. Tied? No. Impaled?

His right hand won't move. His left responds, maneuvering through the leaves and dust up to his throat, which is stretched and tight and when he coughs, a bright agony of light bursts behind his eyes. Grapefruit-tanged saliva spills from the edge of his lip. The fingers of his left hand find the spikes protruding from his neck, feel the sticky spill of blood from the ring of cartilage connecting head to body. His tongue darts from side to side, collecting blood and bile and spit, and he can't make sense of it. Not the misunderstandings, not his son's disdain. Not the utter unfairness of a damned marriage. Not these damned trees.

Black palms, he suddenly recalls. Black palms have spikes for bark as a natural defense. He tries to lean forward but the pain won't let him move. Tyler will have to cut the spikes, saw them away, help his father to the ER where he will leave with a tetanus shot and a scattering of scars.

Tyler. Where is Tyler?

His right hand rests on his pocket. He remembers what's inside, groans, closes his eyes against the confession he will be forced to give.

The sounds of uneven footfall signal an arrival. A park ranger? EMT? Tyler? Yes, Tyler. One shoe off, one shoe on, Diddle Diddle Dumpling, his own, his only son. Daniel wants to laugh but the pain keeps him stoic, the only allowable movement a small trail of spittle from his lower lip. He becomes aware of another trilogy of pain, one around a kidney, one in his chest, one at his shoulder. Something protrudes from his middle, broken at the base, listing to port, sticky and damp.

He smiles up at the shadow that he knows is his son. He has already forgiven the boy for shoving him. Didn't he deserve at least that? Of course he did. The force of the push was cleansing, even apologetic. Now with the violence out of the way, they can talk.

"Ty," he whispers. He receives no response at first, just hears a rustle as the boy kneels beside him. He wants to beg forgiveness, to confess the deception, but the hands are quick on his chest, hands moving quickly on his legs, hands in the pocket, the pocket that holds the secret, oh no, not the secret, not yet, not until he can explain.

He tries to speak, a gurgle, a thin spatter of blood appears on the boy's pale cheek.

Tyler pulls his fingers from Daniel's pocket and holds out his palm. On the pink skin, flanking the black feather, lie two small disks. Batteries. The batteries from the MOB keychain.

"Fucker," Tyler says and sits down hard beside him. "You fucked it up on purpose."

“Not my plan,” he manages to say. He can’t take more than the shallowest of breaths without feeling a ripping in his chest. He damns himself, again, for trying to sabotage the trip, wishing he had just taken the boy out for pizza or ice cream.

“If I put these back in, and sit in the chair, it’ll be fine, won’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you sorry? I mean really sorry?” Tyler’s voice quavers, on the verge of childish hysteria. If Daniel could only bring him to his chest, hold him. His son leans in, his upside down face wrinkled with concern.

“If you’re really sorry, then I don’t have to hate you. I can forgive you and I won’t be damned. So I need you to be sorry.”

Daniel can’t answer, can only hiss a response.

Tyler sighs, sits back. He extends an arm. Daniel closes his eyes, expecting the feel of his son’s fingers on his cheek, the warmth of Tyler’s hand on the back of his neck, helping him off the trees, nestling him into the softness of the black dirt. But no touch comes. When he opens his eyes, Tyler is holding a feather. The boy opens his fingers and the feather floats, gently circling, spun by the breeze blowing in from the water. A rush of air takes it up and away, invisible now against the black trunks of the trees. He feels rather than sees, a bird rustling behind him. It coughs a sound that might be a laugh and Tyler nods.

“Weighed,” he says.

Daniel closes his eyes, breathes in and out shallowly, a thickness gathering on the back of his tongue. When he blinks his eyes open, both the bird and his son are gone.

Some time later he imagines he hears the sound of a motor, low in the water, pulling away from the sand shallows and into the depth of sea water, the engine groaning, passing its low growl of judgment. He imagines the flashing of white light from the beach on the fiberglass of the boat; imagines the sun, orange against a perpetual horizon of blue water, the *Libra* pulling away, balanced carefully on the silver tip of a wave.

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