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WEEDS

A Short Story Collection

By

Tamar R. Mekredjian

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Masters in English

in

The Department of Arts and Sciences

School of Graduate Studies

Rhode Island College

2011  
THESIS APPROVAL SHEET

WEEDS  
A Short Story Collection

A Thesis Presented  
By  
Tamar R. Mekredjian

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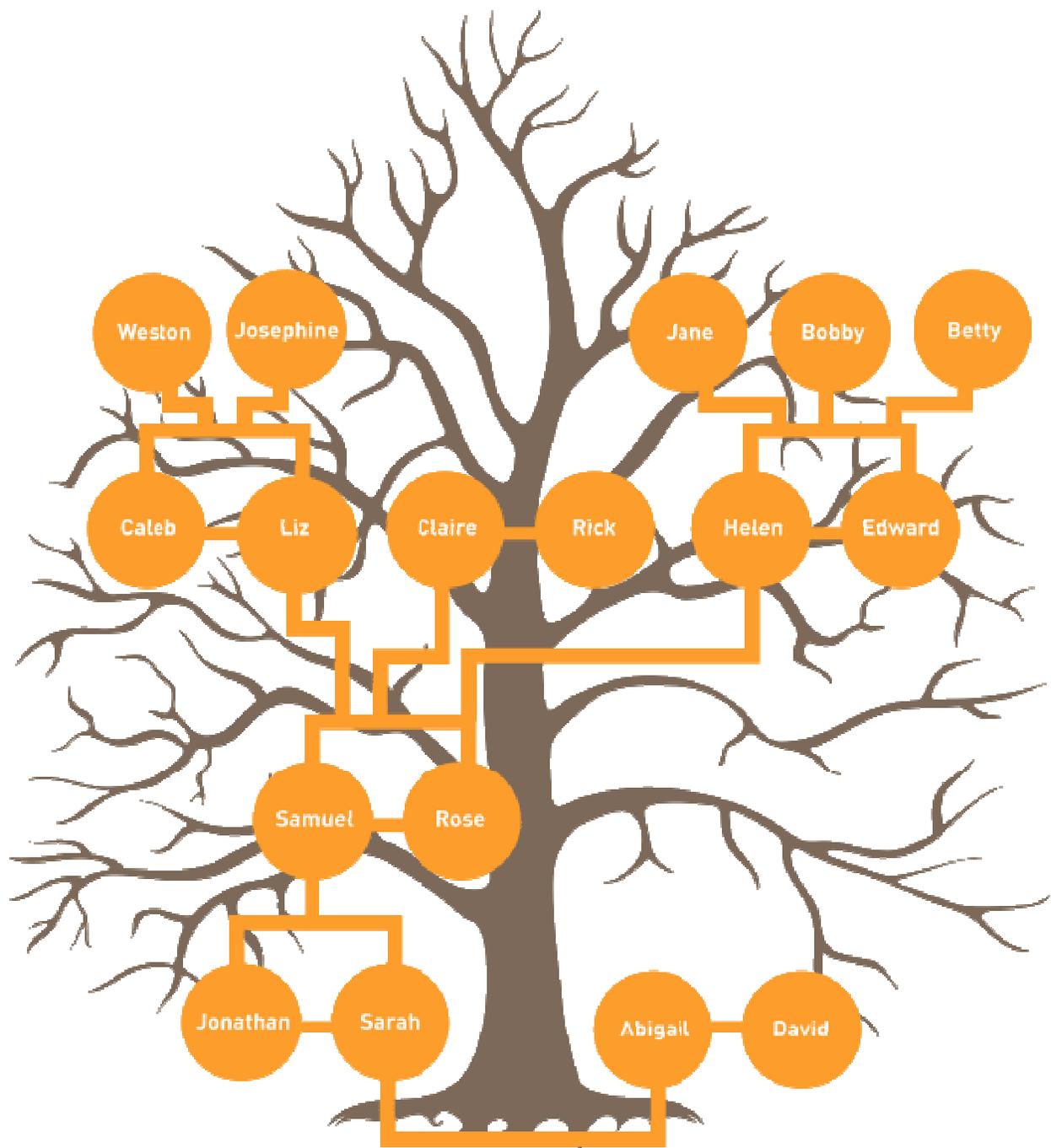
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*To Mgo  
For Lori, Cara, and the rest of my crazy, wonderful family*

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# Mohr

**September 8, 2010**

It was windy today, and Rose insisted on sweeping the leaves that blew into the shop. I had to repair Mrs. Mott's shoes for the third time this month. Oh, I complained alright. To Rose. I regret it. I regret unloading my frustrations on her. I regret not doing a better job with those purple heels. I could've done a better job. But I couldn't help but think that Mrs. Mott would find a way to break both heels again. It was my fault. I left the door open all morning. I should've swept it myself, but she didn't let me. She made a pile and carried the dead leaves back out into the garden. She brought that garden to life with her own two hands. Honestly, I didn't like this place, but I bought it for her. I won't forget how she marched right through it without looking around. While I measured the counter space for my tools, she went straight through the back door. She had a strange smile on her face as she looked around at the tall grass that covered the whole lot. It grew over the back fence and hugged the tree trunks. She said we had found it. And like a good husband, I bought it. I bought it for Rose.

## Sinking Soul

I forgot what it was like to die. It had happened before, but that was long ago. I didn't expect to have such a living memory of death. But the morning mist slipped into my skin, making me alert, urging me to recollect. I had this bad feeling in my stomach every time my uncle called to invite me over. On the ninth call, they told me that they needed help. I told them I would think about it.

At Union Station in Los Angeles, the 8:00 a.m. train zipped past me, and I inhaled the early fog mixed in with the exhaust. This was not my train. I picked up my small brown bag and walked into the station. My sandals flapped on the glossy wooden floors, and the echoes of my own steps greeted me from all directions. I nodded back, like I was welcome there. Like the place was expecting me. There was a roller coaster going up and down the tracks in my stomach, and as nervousness escalated, I hoped that working overtime at the grocery store for this ticket would prove worth it.

The train station looked majestic that day. The sun began to trickle into the large lobby through the long windows on the walls that connected to the eaves, throwing rectangles of light on the floor. Travelers walked in and out of them, lit up when they crossed over each pocket of gleam. I sat on a bench, and closed my eyes. A few moments later, I opened them to a full and busy spectacle. A small boy whined. He tried to pull his grandmother away from the line at the ticket booth. A man in a suit walked past me to the refreshment stand. He bought coffee and *The Los Angeles Times*. He sat down on the bench next to mine.

“What’s it say about the weather?” I asked.

“I’m sorry?” the man asked, leaning his upper body in my direction.

“The paper. Is it going to rain again today?”

“Oh,” he said looking nervous. He looked down at the front page. He smiled, and without looking up at me, he said, “Guess I haven’t gotten there yet. But it looks like Kennedy’s off to a good start.”

I think my jeans and casual sweatshirt might have scared him. I hadn’t bothered shaving that morning either. I ran my fingers over my face. Not quite as rough as I thought, but much worse than this newly shaved and after-shaved gentleman that licked his damn fingers each time he turned a page.

“No, no Grammy, please!” A little boy’s complaint was heard throughout the room.

“Honey, I’m sorry, but you have to go back.”

“Nooooooo,” he cried.

She smiled nervously at those of us who dared to stare before turning back to the boy.

“You have to go home, honey. We had a great time together, but....”

He screamed.

“I’m sorry, little guy. That’s just how it’s supposed to be,” she said.

I looked down at my ticket. I suddenly felt like ripping it into pieces. Shredding it and letting it sink to the bottom of the trash bin near the coffee kiosk. But my fingers didn’t move. My train would depart, and I would be on it.

The train smelled like fish. It was the daily special. I hate fish. To my dismay, the man in the suit boarded my train, snatching an aisle seat from a young boy.

“Excuse me, young man. Do you mind if I take that seat? I get claustrophobic on these things.” The boy’s mother whispered something in his ear, and the child moved to the middle seat reluctantly. The next few moments were spent in harsh undertones between the mother and the boy. He got a piece of candy and the window seat. He won. An hour later, he was drooling against the window. I wanted to draw in the fog he was creating.

The ride was a bit bumpy. I ordered the cheapest beer. It had a cold, sour taste on my tongue. I touched my window. It was cool. I wished I could roll the window down so that I could smell the ocean that zipped past us throughout the ride. The California coastline was something that would always put my restlessness to ease. It would fill my senses with infant wonder. The type of wonder that mesmerizes your mind into believing that there is a purpose, a reason, a hope, a creator, that outside the city, real quiet and solitude exists, where you can listen to what your soul is saying, and that this vast, glittering, blue sea is what the human soul needs to survive the insanity and cruelty of reality.

A woman was strapped to a wheelchair a few seats in front of me. She must have had some kind of muscular disease, because her body was still and limp. A nurse sat beside her, using a tube once in a while to drain her mouth of saliva. I heard it from my seat, and I saw it when I got up to use the restroom. I don’t usually stare at people, especially people with these kinds of ailments. But this time, once I spotted her, I couldn’t look away. This woman was miserable. It seemed like her sickness had begun only that day, as if the illness had come upon her suddenly, that morning, or even that very hour. She moaned and tried to speak. I didn’t understand a single word she said. Her nurse did. She talked with her. Soon, I had to close my eyes because her affliction upset me in a way I’ve never felt before. It was the only way to pull out of her wretched world. It wasn’t the fact that the nurse had begun to feed the woman through

a tube attached to her abdomen. It was because I knew there was no way out. She was trapped. Each day. Every day.

When the beer made its journey through my body, I traded my empty glass for a ginger ale for my nausea. It wasn't the bumpy ride that made my stomach turn. It was the snoring businessman. I chuckled because the boy threw peanuts at the man's open mouth and pointed, guffawing, until his mother nearly suffocated him with her hand over his face. I put my own hands over mine, touching the sharp edges of the hair that dove into the open air. As I watched the endless blue, feeling like we were driving on the water, I thought about my destination. Only a couple of more hours until I reached San Luis Obispo.

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“Sam, my boy!”

I turned just in time to see my uncle galloping towards me like an overexcited horse. His yellow shirt shined brightly in the afternoon light. His teeth didn't hide behind his lips for a moment. His cheeks were flushed, and sweat peered out of every crevice on his face. Uncle David hadn't changed a bit.

“Sam, I thought you might've changed your mind! But you're here!”

“Hi, Uncle.”

He gave me a large, sweaty hug.

“Here, let me take that for ya,” he said, grabbing my bag and turning away any retorts.

When we arrived at his cadillac, I spotted the man in the suit going into a Packard. Green like his suit.

“Can you turn the air conditioner on before I get in?” he asked the driver.

“Yes, of course, Mr. Nabal.”

Uncle David caught me sneering. “Get in, Sam. Your aunt has been very impatient. She’s been bugging me about getting here on time all afternoon!”

We drove with the top down. I could finally smell the sea. My Uncle pointed at things and told me what they were known or good for, like the grocery store with the best bananas and the ice cream parlor with the best chocolate ice cream, as if he forgot that I had spent all my childhood summers there while my parents helped him during wedding season at the shop.

When we arrived at their house, my aunt flew to the living room and squeezed me hard.

“Oh, honey, it’s been too long!”

“Let’s eat, Abby,” my uncle said authoritatively.

My aunt spoke as she came in and out of the kitchen with food.

“I was knitting today, and I thought about all the good times we had when you came here with your mom and dad.” She paused. “I’m just so glad you agreed to come,” she finally finished, her eyes glossy with grief.

“Abby, we’re going to leave Johnny and Sarah out of this,” my uncle said calmly, sneaking a nervous glance in my direction.

She stuffed a large bite of spaghetti into her moving mouth.

“I know, I know,” she said. “You must miss them. Oh, well, let’s focus on the present. Your dad would want us to focus on work. So, we really appreciate you agreeing to help us. We just can’t afford to hire much more help these days.”

February was to be the busiest, they explained, with Valentine’s Day and all. Their lively conversation about the sweetness of love, and their inquiries about my own love life did not interest me. I didn’t come in anticipation of chocolate hearts. Nor did I expect the sky to turn

pink upon the celebration of blind affection. I came because it was the only thing I learned from my parents. To cling to family. To help when there's a need. But most of all, I came for the shop. Because I had finally mustered the courage to go to the only place that was closer to my parents than the grass above their graves.

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We arrived downtown early the next morning. The mist that rolled in from the direction of the ocean hung in the air and painted the town gray. We parked in front of a bead store and walked for a time. My uncle's voice stopped only when he was asleep. Even then his mouth made music. It kept me up most nights. My aunt once told me that it bothered her when they first got married, but now she couldn't sleep without the loud sound in her ear. I listened to his familiar voice as we walked. We stopped in at a small coffee shop. My uncle made a huge scene when I took my wallet out of my pocket. I put it away to divert the gazes that seemed to stick to us like glue. My espresso left my teeth sandy. Just the way I liked it. We came to a stop a few moments after we walked out of the coffee shop. I looked up and saw the red letters through the mist: Abby's Flowers. We were here.

When we walked in, I was greeted by the familiar floral smell that I had inhaled throughout my youth. The wooden walls, floor and ceiling seemed to reflect the pungent aroma into my senses. The refrigerator, which my father used to refer to as the "flower fridge," beamed in all its exquisite glory. It was as if it was all dressed up for the holiday. It was packed with roses. Mostly pink, red, and ivory. There were also bunches of chrysanthemums and blue hydrangeas. There were large pots of white and green orchids. The fluorescent lights reflecting

off petals and leaves left me mesmerized. The fan spinning above caused them to wave at me in reminiscent splendor.

Aunt Abby came in shortly after us. She was in charge of taking down orders. They came in quickly, and I used the skills my uncle and father had taught me when I was just a boy. I arranged the roses carefully. I couldn't work as fast as my uncle, but I kept a close watch as his hands worked, like a machine. Each bouquet had to be unique. It was a small town, and everyone knew everyone. Everyone was related somehow. We had to give each bunch a touch of originality. I braided babies' breath through the pink and red and ivory, as memories slowly weaved through my mind. Coming to the shop before the sun came up on those cool, summer mornings. My mom making pancakes on the small portable stove in the back room while my dad and uncle received flower shipments through the back door. Watching my mom clean the leaves off the stems of the flowers, and helping her divide them into large black buckets filled with water. My uncle brought my mind back when he praised each bouquet that I created like I was that same child. Aunt Abby even took pictures. With each snap and flash, pictures of my past appeared in my mind. Ones that I thought were just visiting my thoughts, but ended up staying.

When the busy week was over, Uncle Dave closed the shop and insisted that I stay for a few days more. I delayed my return, for his sake. After church on Sunday, we stopped in at Applegood Farm to go berry picking. I wasn't too keen about walking through the field and filling a basket with raspberries, but before I knew it, Aunt Abby started running down one of the paths between the neat green rows. This had become a tradition pretty quickly. Something we used to do anytime we were in town on a Sunday. Actually, it was something my aunt insisted on

doing every Sunday. She loved picking her own fruit for the week. My father would steal berries from my mom's basket, and when she finally realized that they were missing she would push him, putting her large white hand on her face while she laughed. This time the raspberries left a tangy, bitter taste in my mouth. Bees greeted us, and Aunt Abigail waved back, shooing them off of the raspberries that she carefully chose. We picked for an hour and a half, and when the sun began to fall, we drove to the sea. My uncle's cadillac curved around green and brown hills until I finally caught a glimpse of the familiar scintillating blue dancing in the orange light. Pismo Beach had always been inviting. But today it invited memories that were as annoying as Jehovah's Witnesses at your door. We sat on the warm sand and Aunt Abby pulled out some cookies from her large yellow purse.

When I was a boy, uncle David and my father used to lie down and let me bury them in the sand. My mom and aunt Abby would sit near us, telling one another about their newest recipes. Sometimes Aunt Abby would cry. I never knew why, and if I asked what was wrong, my mother would tell me to "run along and play." When I turned back to my uncle, he would always smile and say, "Come on, son. Keep going." My aunt would cry harder.

I looked at them closely. My Aunt was stuffing cookies in her mouth, two at a time. The setting sun reddened her skin. My Uncle watched my Aunt close her eyes when the sea breeze made contact with her face and smiled. Their hands did a tender dance between them on the sand.

"Aunt Abby, can I ask you something?"

"Sure, honey. Spit it out," she said between bites.

"Why did you used to cry so much?"

Aunt Abby swallowed. "When, honey?"

“You know, when I was young. Mom never told me what was wrong.”

She looked down and played with the crumbs on her lap.

I was an ass. That was the bottom line. As soon as I asked her the question, I knew that curiosity had trumped common sense. It formed into pure insensitivity in our pocket of silence. But I was here. I had finally come. This was my moment.

“Well, we wanted children. So very badly,” she said.

“And you couldn’t have any?” I asked.

“Your aunt and I did get pregnant once,” Uncle David jumped in, squeezing her hand.

I must have looked stunned, because Aunt Abby spoke even though her eyes were filling. She looked disappointed at what my Uncle said. But she recovered quickly.

“He’s right. We were. It took us fourteen years to conceive. It was like waking up to a renewed disappointment each day. But I never carried the pregnancy to term. And then after that, we just didn’t want it anymore.”

Uncle David kissed her hand. I wondered what held them back from trying again. From giving it another chance.

“When?” I asked. I had to know. I had a bad feeling.

“When what?” she asked.

“When did you lose the baby?”

“Uh, well, it was a long time ago,” my uncle said. He cleared his throat a few times.

“How long ago?” I probed. I’m such a nosy bastard.

“Well, to be perfectly honest....”

“David,” my aunt said suddenly, looking at him. She didn’t divert her gaze from him for a long while.

He turned his face to me and his expression was a mixture of fear, bitterness, sadness, and a pinch of hatred. A recipe I should've left uncooked. The hatred was a combination of the slight pursing of his thin lips, the lengthening of the crow's feet around his left eye, and his unblinking, stone eyes. The realization hit me like a cloud of angry bees.

"The accident," I said.

"No, Sam," my uncle started.

"Oh my God."

"Sam, stop," he said.

"Samuel," my Aunt says with a loud voice. "I had the miscarriage before the accident. It has nothing to do with it. So, please."

I'm quiet because I know that it has a lot to do with it. Probably everything to do with it. I know this because my Uncle snapped his gaze back in her direction when she said it.

"I don't like this, Sam. I don't want that attitude," she broke the silence.

Aunt Abby stuffed two more cookies into her mouth. She cried. Again. Just like the old days.

"Your upsetting your Aunt. Let's end this," my uncle said.

"I want to know," I said, my voice strong.

My aunt's head ping ponged back and forth between us.

"Please, son," he said.

"I'm not your son," I said, angry because they weren't telling me the whole of it. I knew there was more.

This time, she gave me the look I knew so incredibly well from my boyhood misbehavior. Her eyes unmoving, hard like pearls brought up from the darkest depths of the sea. I saw the reflection of the waves in her eyes.

“It was my fault,” she blurted, letting me see her quivering lips.

What had I done? “Aunt Abby, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be meddling. It wasn’t your fault. Don’t say that.”

“Yes, Abby. Don’t,” my uncle said, grabbing her arm.

“I’m tired,” she said, looking straight ahead, her arms folded over her bent knees.

“Okay. Let’s go,” my uncle said.

“No, I’m tired of trying to keep it all inside. I hate secrets. David, you know I’m a bad liar.”

“Abby,” he said.

“I killed them,” she said.

“What?” I asked.

“Yup. I miscarried on the day of the accident.”

“Wait, I’m so confused. Did you miscarry because of the news of the accident?”

“No, Sam. I called them from the hospital. I was in excruciating pain.” The tears started up again. “I panicked a little bit on the phone. I’m such a damn wuss. Your mom was driving, and your dad was holding the flower arrangement we asked them to deliver for us. It was raining hard.” She stopped and buried her face in my Uncle’s chest.

“I don’t understand,” I said. What was going on here?

“It is not your fault, Abby. You were scared. You were in pain,” my uncle said.

“I heard everything. I heard them panicking when the car began swerving off the road. I heard it crash into the ditch,” my aunt said, her shoulders bouncing as she smothered her sobs with his shirt.

“Okay, Abby. You’ve told him. Now, that’s enough.”

It was quite enough.

I put my hand on hers and told her, over and over again, that it wasn’t her fault. I did this to mask what was really bubbling inside of me. To turn a deaf ear to my screaming, sinking soul.

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Despite our confrontation, Aunt Abby cried an ocean on the day of my departure. I kept assuring her that I would return again soon. She walked up to me at the front door. She put my ticket in my pocket, and gave me a gentle kiss on the cheek. The ride to the station wasn’t a quiet one. Uncle David rambled on, and for once I was glad. He talked about his love for the town. He talked about the walks he took on the pier. He said my father walked with him frequently. He said it was a feeling that weighed on his shoulders as he walked. He told me that my father is an excellent listener. When I stepped out of the car, he told me that I should come again soon.

At the window, I took the ticket out of my pocket. There was a yellow piece of paper clipped to it with some writing on it.

*Sam,*

*We stopped trying because I didn’t want any more deaths. I hope you can forgive me, and come back soon.*

*Love,*

*Aunt Abby*

I stuffed it back into my pocket, because it caused my chest and throat to tighten.

My escape machine smelled like chicken. Good. I liked chicken. No businessmen. Good. I liked no businessmen. I sat as far away from the window as I could, ordered my beer and reminisced. I thought about flowers. I thought about Applegood. I thought about tears on the beach and the cousin I never got to meet. I thought about the phone call and about my dead parents. And I knew that I would stay put in L.A., to prevent my soul from dying again for as long as I could.

**October 28, 2010**

It was a slow day at the shop today. I polished a pair of shoes for Mr. Smith and took a call from Mrs. Joan about rushing the paint job on her husband's boat shoes. She's very pushy. At noon, Rose made us sandwiches. Tuna for me, a grilled cheese for her. She couldn't finish it. We sat on the deck most of the day. She didn't do much gardening today. She pointed to each group of flowers and told me how much they needed to be watered each day. When I told her that the avocado tree was useless, she got mad at me. She told me not to talk about her tree that way. She smiled at it, then said it just didn't want to give us any avocados. That's just the type of tree that it is. But apparently the lemon tree is much more comfortable with us. That's why it gives us so many lemons. My wife is a funny lady. Her garden charms her in a way that I don't think I can. But she charms me in a way that nothing else can. When she finally got up to go into the garden, she asked for my help down the steps. She held onto my arm tight, and panted like she had just run around the block. When I saw her wince, I asked what was wrong. She told me it was nothing. Just that her legs were hurting today.

## Unmovable, Together

Claire is awake with her eyes closed. Her lids are heavy, and she knows that even if they lift, her body will remain still for a long time. She tries to relax her body, beginning with her neck, down to her toes. She has an itch and when she jerks her arm up to scratch it, she feels pangs in her bones with each movement. She forces her stubborn lids open and turns to look at Rick's side of the bed. The sheets are wrinkled, his pillows bunched up. She takes one and squeezes it to her chest, curling her legs around it. She wonders how long he's been gone and then her thoughts are interrupted by the pain, like sand in her bed. The sooner she pulls herself out of bed, the sooner she can brush her teeth. The sooner she brushes her teeth, the sooner she can make coffee and have breakfast. And the sooner she eats breakfast, the sooner she can take her pain killers.

In the kitchen, Claire makes coffee and melts butter in a saucepan. She pushes the eggs around the pan until they come together, fluffy and golden. She dresses the eggs with salt and pepper and spreads them on toast. She takes her breakfast out onto the porch. There is a warm, wet breeze, and she knows it's going to be a hot day. After she eats, she takes two Vicodins and gets comfortable on the yellow hammock. She holds a book in her hands, but as her eyes begin to move across the page, she is bombarded with all the chores waiting for her in the house. Sometimes sitting outside is a fair escape, but today, her chores are impatient. Today, Rick will come home to a clean house, a delicious dinner, and an energetic and happy wife. Just like it was before the arthritis hit.

Claire grew up in a Christian home, and sex before marriage was considered a sin. But she was a virgin, not because of that, but because she was too afraid of the unknown. On their

wedding night, Claire was too exhausted to put on the lingerie that her bridesmaids had given her. Rick helped her remove thirty six hair pins from her hairspray-crunchy hair, and she told him she needed her privacy when she showered and got dressed. In bed, Claire squeezed her legs together tight, and cried when she realized how afraid she was when Rick joined her. He sat up and used the sleeve of his white T shirt to dry her tears and told her that they had their whole lives to have sex.

When it finally did happen, Claire was relieved. This relief turned into determination to make love twice a day until the end of their trip. She loved it when Rick made love to her. Every time he did, she pictured their bodies fitting together like puzzle pieces. Her body knew what to do.

Now, sex is a dilemma. Sometimes, a mere hug from Rick is painful. She knows he doesn't look at her the same way he used to. When she was healthy. When she was happy.

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She slowly lifts herself from the hammock. As she opens the front door, she is surprised by the shooting pain in her lower back. She knows she will have to carry this pain around like a pebble in her shoe, rolling around and, from time to time, getting lodged in her toes. The house is cool, and Claire makes her way toward the basement to get a load of laundry started, stopping in the kitchen to take the chicken out of the freezer. She descends and ascends the stairs one step at a time, wincing with each movement. She gets on her hands and knees in the bathroom and scrubs the floor, making sure to pick up all the stray hairs that have accumulated over the past couple of weeks. Her knees grind against the floor, and shoot pain into her back and feet, making her wonder how she's going to get up when she's done. But she does it, slowly, pushing through the pain. By the time she leaves the bathroom, she knows she has already pushed her body to its

limits, but she drags herself to the kitchen and wipes down the counters and stove. As she finally lets her body sink into the couch, she hears the front door slam, and immediately, she is on her feet again, washing the skillet she used to cook her eggs.

“I’m starving!” Rick says. “What’s there to eat?”

“I bought bread and cold cuts yesterday.”

“You okay to make dinner, tonight?” he asks, making them sandwiches.

Claire nods. “Yes, I’m fine.”

“Because I can always grab something on my way home.” He takes a bite out of his sandwich and grabs his keys.

“I know that,” she says, “but I’ve got it covered.” She gives him a reassuring smile.

A few moments later, he is in his car.

It’s 1:47 p.m., and Claire dumps the remnants of lunch into the trash. As the humidity rises outside, so does her pain. Though she doesn’t want to admit it to herself, Claire knows that this will be a tough day. She sits on the couch and slowly extends her legs. It looks like she has sprained both ankles, each swollen to a purple hue, matching her knuckles. She bends down to massage them, but her back laughs at the attempt.

She goes to the bathroom and takes one more Vicodin, figuring that if she takes a nap, she can be alert enough to make dinner. She trudges over to the bed, ignoring the fact that the sheets are still in the dryer, and places her body under the thick comforter. She gets into a ball, her back against her jagged rock. She dreams that she is in labor at the hospital. Then she is in her house, taking care of twin baby boys. Something is off. She is level with the couch and she can’t reach the sink in the kitchen. She is in a wheelchair and the babies are on the floor. She bends down but can’t reach them. She starts crying. Then she’s in the hospital bed again. The

doctor cheerfully informs her that both babies are being born at the same time. She wakes up screaming.

Claire's nap doesn't make her feel better. She cries silently and wholeheartedly. She thinks about laughter, and ponders why people do it. What makes people laugh at all when life is an ongoing cycle of affliction? Her sobs become louder and the sound of it saddens her, and makes her feel deep pity for the pointlessness of her soul.

After a while, she raises herself from the bed, implementing what her occupational therapist told her about swinging her body up and off the bed in one slow motion. Rick will be home soon. Holding onto the walls, she makes her way to the kitchen. She goes to the pantry and picks up the ingredients she needs for the chicken marinade. The medicine has begun to wear off, as she knew it would. She takes the chicken out of its package and trims the fat off with a small knife, trying to ignore how heavy the knife feels in her hand. By the time she's done, her fingers scream when she uses them to open the large ziploc bag and toss the breasts in. She begins running her father's chicken marinade recipe through her mind and mentally checks the ingredients off her list by pointing to them. She stares at the community size mayonnaise jar and takes a deep breath. She puts her fingers on the large cap, her palm grazing the top. As soon as she puts pressure on it, she lets out a groan and frowns.

"Come on, kiddos," she says to her fingers. She takes another deep breath. "One, two," and on three she pushes through the sting and twists the cap open.

She puts her arm at her side and rubs at the pain radiating through it. She puts three spoonfuls of mayo into the bag, adds garlic salt, black pepper, and grimaces as she squeezes the bag to spread the marinade evenly. She stows it in the fridge, where she sees a tupperware containing

something questionable, something that should've been thrown out last week. She hides it behind the chicken.

She takes lettuce, a tomato, a cucumber and an avocado to a different spot on the counter. She kicks her slippers off, and the cool tiles feel good against her aching feet. But in a moment, even the tiles can't give her the relief that she needs. She takes everything to the dining room table. The large rock pushes against the knife. Like all of her oppressions are pressing on her hand so that lifting it up and down and across the romaine leaf is like fighting against her own body. Her right hand gives up reluctantly and passes the knife to the left. When her left hand gives it a shot, the pain shoots up her arm and down her spine. She puts the knife down, and looks out the window. It's raining. She can't do it. She starts to cry again, feeling sorry for herself, but recovers quickly. She can still put dinner on the table. She has to.

She tosses everything back in the refrigerator and stares at the thick stack of take-out menus magnetized to the fridge. She calls Boston Market, trying to rush through the familiar weekly small talk with cashier Janet. When she gets in the car, it is painful to twist the key in the ignition. She watches the rain hit the windshield, and imagines Rick telling her that it's "spitting out." This makes her smile, and she backs out of the driveway, determined.

On her way home, it is no longer "spitting," but pouring, and Claire's spine aches as she leans close to the wheel, controlling it with her palms, trying to give her fingers a break. The cars are going slowly, but she swerves in and out of them because Rick will be home soon. She cuts someone off to beat the last traffic light. Not only does her victim honk, but all of the cars in the intersection honk incessantly, and she realizes that the traffic light is blending in with all the brake lights. One horn is more distinct, getting louder and louder, and Claire realizes that a car is headed for her. She breaks hard, holding her knee so that it doesn't give out.

“Come on, come on, come on,” she cheers her knee on.

Her car stops just in time. Claire cries out when her back hits the seat, sitting against her barbed rock, her lower back being poked by its sharp edges all the way home. The rain stops when she pulls into her driveway.

She rushes to unpack the food. She puts the chicken and potatoes on plates, and dumps the vegetables into a pan on the stove. She sets the table. Black place mats. Red candles, lit. Cloth napkins. She goes to the bathroom to wash her face and put make up on, and practices a smile in the mirror. When Rick gets home, he kisses her, and she asks him to finish off the plates with the veggies. When he is finished eating, he helps Claire clear the table and wash the dishes. She knows that the next thing he will do is water the plants.

Claire met Rick at a Starbucks across the street from the community college she taught at. He walked up to her table and sat down. She was stunned at his forwardness, yet comfortable in the presence of his strangeness. He looked down at the mound of essays she was grading.

“How is...” He focused on the page, “Jacob Quinton doing?”

“It’s a solid B paper.” Claire said. “He is great with his words, but totally lacking in context.”

“Hmm...” He looked at his watch. “Lunch break is over.” He handed her his business card.

“You’re a designer.”

“Correct,” he said, standing up.

“And what do you design, Rick Stevens?”

“Light fixtures.” He paused. “I like to see things clearly.”

“I’m not a big fan of the dark, either,” she said.

“My studio is overflowing with light bulbs. You might enjoy that,” he said, smiling.

“I would love to see your work,” she said, smiling right back.

“Though I don’t need much light to see how beautiful you are.” His face was serious now.

Claire was surprised at herself when his cheesiness charmed her. She called him as soon as she was done teaching for the day.

Claire grabs some beers from the kitchen and heads out the back door toward the garden that Rick planted a few days before. She stops at the garage to grab some chairs and makes a face at her blue bicycle that is covered with spider webs. The soil in the garden has come to life with the green baby buds that have spread upon it. It hugs and comforts each plant with hope for growth. The beach chair feels stiff, pushing against her sore back. She is cradling the boulder in her lap.

Claire takes a long swig of the cold, tart beer and watches Rick water the plants. She closes her eyes and imagines she is healthy again. Her mind paints a picture of a day in the past. She opens her eyes in the morning and jumps out of bed with ease. She is a newlywed and wants to make her husband happy. She dusts the bedroom and changes the sheets, pausing to smile when she remembers straddling Rick the night before under the sticky sheets and laughing with him because she couldn’t keep a steady rhythm.

She wiggles her dry and unkept toes in the long, damp grass and counts the number of leaves each plant has produced so far. The counting adds to her sleepiness, and she closes her eyes again. Sometimes the red in her lids turn black, and she pictures a cloud sweep over the

yellow sun overhead. She wonders what shade of blue the sky is today, but her body has given in to evening exhaustion, and her lids rest comfortably. The combination of the warmth, the leftover Vicodin in her system, and the beer soothe her body numb, and she enjoys this absence of discomfort. She hums to the plants, like her mother does to her own garden, and hopes they will grow quickly.

“Claire, come on!” Rick suddenly says.

The red in her lids turns black and she opens her eyes to see Rick above her.

“What’s gotten into you?” he asks, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

“Nothing.” She realizes that she, too, is sweating, perhaps even more profusely than he is.

“Why are you drinking in this heat?” Rick asks.

Claire’s fingers are going numb. She begins pinching them to get feeling back.

“You should know better, Claire. It says right on the label that you shouldn’t consume alcohol while on your medication.” He makes air quotes. “Where are you going?”

Claire is breathing fast. He is making her feel claustrophobic.

Rick grabs her arms. “Claire? What’s wrong?”

“I think I’m going to be sick,” she says, holding her stomach.

“Jesus, Claire. I’ve told you a million times. You shouldn’t be drinking with your meds,” he says and lets go of her.

Claire holds onto the walls as she makes her way to the bathroom, the house spinning. Her chest hurts, and she’s stricken with fear. *Am I having a heart attack?* She hears Rick behind her, but she slams the bathroom door and leans her back against it, her body tensing up and panic spilling out of every pore in her skin.

“Do you need me in there?” She hears Rick’s muffled voice.

She thinks she might be sick. She hugs the rock against her stomach, tight. Her body lurches over the toilet. Nothing. She closes the lid and suddenly she realizes what is happening. She tilts her head back and takes deep breaths like her therapist has taught her to do. In through her nose for ten counts, holds it, then out through her mouth for five. She does this until her chest loosens. The tingling in her arms subsides.

“Claire?” Rick says, and knocks on the door fiercely.

She wipes her eyes, checking the mirror for any blotches of mascara, then calmly opens the door.

“You okay?”

“Oh, yeah, much better now. You’re right. I shouldn’t have had those beers!”

“Told you. Maybe you should lie down,” he says.

While Rick watches his late night television, Claire gets in the shower. She shampoos her hair twice and carefully shaves her legs with a new razor. The soap runs over her warm, wet body slowly, and she makes sure every fold and crevice is washed. She blow dries her hair, and reapplies her makeup. She opens the medicine cabinet and drops a Vicodin in her hand, but changes her mind, and puts it back in the bottle. She wants to be able to feel Rick make love to her. When she hears him turn the TV off, she quickly slips into the bedroom and shuts the door. She rummages through her underwear drawer and finds a black lacy piece of lingerie and a pair of black underwear that almost match. She rubs Rick’s favorite lotion on her arms and legs and when he flushes the toilet, she slips under the white comforter and waits.

Rick goes to his side of the bed and removes his shirt. He takes a swig of water and fluffs up his pillow. Claire props herself up on one elbow and exposes her bare shoulder and the lace that covers her right breast.

“Oh,” Rick says. “What are you wearing?”

“Just a little something special.”

“Why?”

“Are you really going to make me answer that question?” Claire says, smiling.

“But, can you, I mean, are you feeling...”

“Shhhhh....” Claire cuts him off and kisses him.

Rick switches his reading lamp off and pulls her toward him.

“How was your day?” Rick whispers.

Claire kisses him deeply, making it seem like she is too passionate to wait for the inevitable. He caresses her gently and slowly.

*I take you to be my husband*

Then, the passion that Claire’s actions imply become very real and present for Rick. He is overwhelmed with her.

In the midst of his sexual impatience, he says, “Wait, honey, am I hurting you?”

“No,” she lies.

*To have and to hold from this day forward*

He starts kissing her fiercely, pushing her head back. The pain spirals down her back.

*For better or for worse*

Claire wants to tell him to stop, but she doesn’t.

*In sickness and in health,*

He squeezes her body against his and every bone in her body screams with pain. She is struggling to roll her boulder up this hill. To the finish line.

*To love and to cherish*

Claire weeps silently. Any noise that falls off the silence, she hopes Rick translates as pleasure sounds.

She gasps when he enters her. And when she moans, he asks, “Is this okay?”

*From this day forward*

Suddenly, she tries to push him off. “No,” she says.

“Okay,” he says, lifting himself off of her. “Is this better?”

He moves inside her gently, but each push and pull burns, stabs, and stretches her. Claire tries to relax, but she yelps involuntarily, and holds his shoulders to stop the movement. She buries her face in his neck, and her tears marry his sweat.

“Stop, stop, stop. Please,” she whispers.

“Alright. I knew we shouldn’t have done this,” he says, pulling himself off of her. “I swear I was trying to be gentle.” He wipes her face with his T shirt. He puts his hands on and leans against her boulder, trying to help her push it.

“I know,” she says. “But I can’t do this.”

“It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not.”

Claire looks at her husband, at his shadow in the dark. He turns his bedside lamp on. She knows he will never be able to understand what she’s feeling. She smells his sweat. It smells like hay and apples. Her knees are in intense pain, and she reaches down and rubs them quietly.

“Talk to me,” she hears him say.

The sentence looms in the air above them. She watches it float around. It's unsettling.

"I'm tired." Her tears flow easily. Like practice makes perfect.

"Come on," he says.

She is senseless, despairing. She can't face Rick, this world outside of herself.

"It hurts when you touch me. I can't even make love to my husband!" She covers her face with her hands, wishing that her skin could suck up her tears like a sponge.

"I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry." Rick says over and over again.

"I'm the one who's sorry," Claire says. "I can't do it anymore."

Rick is silent.

In the midst of her violent grief, she says, "I miss myself."

She reaches over to her nightstand and takes her nightly dose. They stand with their hands on their boulder, unable, unmovable, together. Rick gently brings her toward him and wraps the blanket around her delicate, trembling form. He holds her until she falls asleep, naked, in his tender, sad warmth.

**December 2, 2010**

Liz brought Weston and Josephine in today. It's becoming part of our daily routine. 3:30 p.m. sharp. Lizzy tells us she will be back soon, but usually doesn't return until just before we close. Honestly, I hope they never stop coming. Rose's face lights up when she hears their voices at the door. She buys cookies and milk so she can give them a snack. But Rose was quiet today. She didn't go down into the garden. She gave the kids plastic cups to catch ladybugs and sat on the porch and watched. She told them not to take too many because they are good for the plants. We had a lot of customers today. She wanted to help. But Mr. Johnson had to wait a whole hour for his "quick shine." Rose shined them on the porch. She didn't get off the chair to make lunch. I put the cookies in a plate and filled the glasses with milk. She didn't eat. She told the kids to go next door and get her a ginger ale. She said it's probably a stomach bug. At home, she went to bed too early. It's been like that all week. I'm not stupid. Even though she insists she's fine, I know that something is wrong.

## Hiding Place

While Bobby counted to a hundred, I hid in Aunt Claire's walk-in closet. It was Saturday at my aunt's house. The boys and I were well into our morning games, and I was getting tired of them. I slid behind Aunt Claire's clothes, my back against the cool wall. My face grazed her beautiful blouses and dresses, and I couldn't help but raise a delicate purple sleeve to my nose. I breathed in slowly and my senses were filled with lavender and vanilla. Aunt Claire always smelled so good.

I went to the dresser and opened the first drawer. It was full of my aunt's undergarments. I pulled out a black bra, trimmed with lace, so delicate that I held it up with the tips of my pinkies, afraid that I might rip it. I took my sports bra off and put hers on. I didn't quite fill it up, and I wondered if Aunt Claire walked around in her underwear as she got dressed each morning. Maybe. I did as I examined each of her dresses. I touched each of them, flipping through until my hand stopped on a long, navy blue gown. I slipped into it, its silky material cool, caressing my skin. I took a pair of sandals from her shoe rack, and when I put them on, I pretended I was modeling for a photo shoot, twirling around. I spread the skirt out wide and took a low bow for my prince, then stood up tall, confident as I strolled down the red carpet as the star of the movie's premier. Looking at the mirror, I was surprised at how easily I had transitioned into her world. My hair curled like hers, my body well-proportioned. My pinkie toes even curled in like hers. I stood on my toes so that I could be as tall as her. I mimicked her smile, stretching my lips slightly more to the left. I turned my face from the mirror, so that it wouldn't capture this moment of my soul's pleasure and take it away from me. I felt like it could steal this alone time, and make the world aware of this cherished moment of sheer admiration of my own self.

Between Jane and Jane. I sprayed some of her perfume on my wrists and then rubbed them against my neck. I looked through the drawer full of makeup that Aunt Claire had designated for my own personal use and applied blush, mascara, and lipstick to my face. We didn't tell my mom about this drawer. It was a secret privilege. Mom believed in brown sweatpants and daily untamed hair. At twelve years old, I couldn't wait to grow up and be just like my aunt.

I heard the boys calling my name, pleading for me to come out, come out, wherever I was. I wasn't about to let them find my successful hiding place. I carefully hung the gown back in its designated spot next to the black cocktail dress. I put my clothes back on, putting my ragged yellow tank top over her lace, deciding that she wouldn't notice if it were gone. I quickly wiped the make up off. Just as I felt ready to part with my haven, I heard the bedroom door open and slam against the wall. It was Aunt Claire and Uncle Rick. I crawled to the closet door and opened it just enough to see them walking back and forth in front of the bed.

"What are you talking about?" asked Uncle Rick.

"That's what they told me," Aunt Claire said, her arms crossed over her stomach.

"It's impossible, isn't it? Didn't you get this checked out months ago? I don't understand. We've been having a lot of sex!"

I put my hand over my mouth to muffle a giggle. Aunt Claire had told me what sex was.

"Honey, why would that make a difference? If I can't, I *can't*!" Aunt Claire said.

What can't she do?

"But, I don't understand. Where did this come from? I thought we were good to go," he said.

Where did they want to go?

My baby sister waddled into the room.

“Mama?” she asked, waiting at the door.

“Oh, sweetheart, not in here.”

“Hi!” Betty said, waving.

Aunt Claire scooped her up, and closed the door. She put her on the bed. Uncle Rick watched them for a moment, and then sat on the bed with his back to them.

“I’m sorry, Rick,” she said, lowering her voice. “I know how much you want kids.”

“Isn’t there anything we can do?” he asked.

“Ask my uterus,” she said.

“Why don’t you?”

“What?” She ran her fingers through Betty’s curly hair.

“Talk to your body. Tell it to stop rejecting me.”

“Rick.”

“Yeah, tell it to stop ruining our plans.”

My aunt turned away from him and put her hand over her mouth. Uncle Rick let out a regretful sigh and scratched the back of his neck. Then he left the room. Aunt Claire went to the window near the bed, and stood there with her hands on her hips. She didn’t move for a long time. I remember this moment clearly. How she opened the window and the breeze made her curls sway. How she tilted her head back, and tapped her left foot on the beige carpet. How I wondered what she was waiting for.

Betty was singing “The Itsy Bitsy Spider.” Aunt Claire put her in her lap, and cradled her, letting her finish the song.

“All right, little girl, let’s get you upstairs.”

When she left the room, I went to the window. Uncle Rick was in the driveway washing his blue convertible.

Aunt Claire and Uncle Rick's large basement became our playroom. Aunt Claire encouraged us to play as long as we wanted. Sometimes, Uncle Rick joined us for a soccer game, but mostly, it was just my brother, and our cousin, West, and I, using our imaginations to transform the room into dungeons, ships, castles, and forests. Their moving boxes still hadn't been thrown out, some of them full of light bulbs. On that day, we built a fort. Bobby and West crouched behind the boxes and pretended to shoot at their enemy, me. When I got shot, I had to play dead until one of them tagged me. This wasn't a new game, and it bored me more quickly than usual. I was growing more and more tired of them. As Saturdays rolled around, I stopped looking forward to playing with them. I stood up, ignoring their complaints and teases and went upstairs.

Aunt Claire was making lunch.

"Where's my mom?" I asked.

"Swimming lessons with your sis," she replied.

I stood in the doorway, wondering what I could do next.

And as if she read my mind, she said "Look. Just because you're all around the same age doesn't mean you have to stay downstairs with the boys all day. Let the boys be boys, and let us women be women."

I didn't quite know how to be a woman, but I did know that I couldn't wait to cross over to her side. She would teach me everything I needed to know.

Her tuna melts were divine. The tuna was mixed with just the right amount of mayo, cucumbers, carrots, lemon juice and dill, and the sourdough bread grilled just enough to melt the cheddar cheese. With it, ice cold iced tea. She sliced lemons and oranges for the tea. I bit into my tuna melt, letting my tongue savor each flavor.

We sat at the round glass table in the bright, silver kitchen, the sun shining through the large windows, and she probed me about my schooling and my friends and boys until I gave in to telling her the truth.

“The boy I like doesn’t like me back,” I finally said.

“Now that’s a bit unbelievable. Who wouldn’t like *you*, Jane?”

“Jeff. He likes Brigitte.”

“And who’s Brigitte?” she asked with a scowl.

“A tall, blonde that makes out with him in the boys’ bathroom during recess.”

“Oh, honey, I hate him already. You don’t want a guy like that.” She bit into her sandwich so delicately, like she was holding a newborn baby, holding it gently and nurturing it. I tried to do the same with mine.

“Yeah, well I want *someone*,” I said, without looking at her, embarrassed about this fact. These emotions, these desires, seemed to spring up in me, and they tended to take over my thoughts.

“Jane. You’re smart. Beautiful. They’re probably so nervous around you. Give it time. It’ll happen.”

“I know, I know, I know. Before I know it I’ll be walking down the aisle in a big beautiful wedding dress and have lots of babies and it will be the best time of my life,” I said, repeating my mom’s mantra.

Aunt Claire's smile faded, and she leaned back in her chair, sipping her tea that had way too many lemon slices in it. The citrus scent was suspended in the air along with the awkward silence. I took a bite of my tuna, fishing around for something to say. But then, she spoke.

"Jane, can I ask you something?"

"Yeah," I said, suddenly realizing that I was chewing with my mouth open.

She hesitated. "Do you remember what it was like when you were born?"

"Well," I started. "My mom says she was surprised to see me. She thought I was going to be a boy."

Her face lit up. "I remember that. That was a huge surprise," she said, her fingers grazing her cheek, smiling. "But, I mean, how did you feel?"

I put my sandwich down, and took a gulp of my tea. "What do you mean? I was just a baby."

She squeezed another lemon slice and dropped it into her tea. Then she slowly rose from her seat and started washing the dishes, taking breaks between utensils. She reached over to the counter with her soapy hand and took a sip of her tea, grimacing as she lifted the glass to her lips.

"I mean, are you happy to be here?" she asked.

Happy to be where? Happy to be at her house? Happy to be in the world? Happy to be? Happy? I wasn't sure what she was asking me, but I tried to understand, for her sake. She looked at me, intently, curious. She held this look and waited for me. I needed to say something. Just as I was about to assure her I loved being at her house, Uncle Rick walked in.

"Claire, will you stop overdoing it? Rosa's coming on Monday. Chill out."

"So, you decided to go with the red?" Aunt Claire asked, pointing at his shirt. There was paint splattered all over it.

“Yup,” he said, pouring himself a tall glass of tea.

“What are you painting?” I wanted to know.

“The garage doors,” he said.

Looking down at her fingers, Aunt Claire said, “I thought you were considering the yellow I picked out.”

“Well, I like red,” he said, glaring at her. “I want red doors.” He took the last tuna melt.

Aunt Claire stared at him, scrubbing a plate ferociously.

“I like yellow,” I said.

He threw his plate into the sink, surprised. I held his gaze, bravely. I took her side because I wanted her to win this one. This moment was just a consequence of their morning quarrel.

“Janey, you want to stay the night?” Aunt Claire asked quickly, with raised eyebrows.

“Sure,” I said.

I heard Uncle Rick mumbling to himself just before the front door slammed. Aunt Claire put the sponge down and rubbed her wrist.

“Are you okay? Do you need help with that?” I asked. Her fingers were swollen. “You look like you’re in a lot of pain.”

My mom hated it when I asked my aunt about her arthritis. She told me that it’s rude to pry.

“Oh, no honey. Don’t you worry about a thing like that.”

“Is Uncle Rick, okay?”

“Men are morons, Janey. He’s fine,” she said, waving her hand in my direction, soap bubbles taking off into the air. “He is fine,” she repeated, emphasizing each word.

She wrung the sponge until it was completely dry. I bit my tongue so that I wouldn't inquire further. I had never seen my aunt and uncle upset with each other. I had, however, walked in on them kissing several times. She filled a glass with water and leaned over the sink to water the small pots of miniature cacti in the bay window.

"Those are interesting," I said.

"Your grandmother insists that I keep flowers in this window, but these are the only plants that seem to stay alive under my care," she said, smiling.

Bobby and West ran up the stairs. They had their swimming trunks on.

"Auntie Claire, can we go swimming now?" West asked, excited.

She looked at me. "Well, you know I don't want you boys out there by yourselves."

"Aw, please! We're old enough," West whined. I looked at his puny ten year old body and smiled.

"Nope. You know the rules. We have to be out there, too," she said, nodding her head in my direction.

Bobby and West looked at each other and rolled their eyes.

"Aw, man!" Bobby exclaimed.

"She's *your* sister," West said.

"Yeah, wait til Jo grows up and you have to deal with a sister," Bobby whined.

"Okay, boys. That's enough, now. Come on, Jane. Get your swimsuit on," she said.

Outside, staying out of the pool was not an option. The cement burned our feet, and the boys scurried to the pool. I was grateful for the splash they made. I sat on the chair next to Aunt Claire. Just then, my mom and Betty came through the gate.

“I’m gonna put Betty down for her nap,” my mom said.

I stood up to fix my towel and took a sip of my tea.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” I said, when I realized that the condensation from my glass was dripping all over Aunt Claire’s feet.

Her long legs shimmered in the afternoon light, even darker than my olive skin. Her stomach lay perfectly flat. She looked so comfortable in her chair. She was a goddess with one flaw. Her ankles were swollen, and it looked like she didn’t have any heels. I was tempted to bend down and try to mold them into what they were supposed to be.

“No, it feels good,” she said. Her eyes were closed, her book face down on her lap.

“You’re going to get a funny tan,” I said, pointing to the book.

“Jane, why don’t you give your aunt some space,” my mom said when she took a seat on the other side of my aunt.

“Hush, Helen. I don’t need space,” she said winking at me. She carefully picked up her book and put it on the table next to her. She already had a funny tan.

“Do you sit out here often, Aunt Claire?” I asked.

“Oh, yes,” she said and smiled. “The sun is very good for me. It’s like medicine for my bones.” She rubbed her elbow.

They started talking about their menus for the week, so I picked up my magazine. The sun soothed the dull ache that came and went in my stomach. I read an article that highlighted

the pros and cons of the pill. I smiled to myself, secretly mocking the advertisement, figuring that the possible side effects probably scared girls out of using birth control.

“Claire, I thought you’re not supposed to be taking those anymore,” I heard my mom say, quietly.

Without moving my head, I saw my aunt fiddling with the same bottle of pills I had seen Betty using as a rattle that morning.

“Yeah, well, there’s no way I can get pregnant, so the Vicodin stays.” She took one and put the bottle on the table next to her.

“What? Are you guys okay?” my mom asked, bringing her voice to a near whisper.

“Yeah, we’re fine,” Aunt Claire responded. “It’s just taking a toll on us. Rick wants kids really badly. And once again, my body is...”

“Oh, stop it, Claire. Your body is not anything. It’s fine. Things like this happen. It’s normal,” my mom replied.

Claire was quiet. She grabbed her book and lifted it toward her face. Then she put it down on her lap. It fit into her tan like a puzzle piece.

“You know what? It’s not normal, Helen,” Aunt Claire said, suddenly.

“Things like this happen in life,” my mom said.

“Easy for you to say,” Aunt Claire said, rubbing my mom’s pregnant belly sarcastically.

“That’s not fair,” my mom said.

“You’re right about that one,” my aunt replied. “You never listen long enough to hear how I’m really feeling, you know that?”

“Oh, Claire. Stop being such a drama queen.”

“Yeah, mom. It’s true,” I blurted.

They both turned and looked at me. I realized that this wasn't a conversation I was welcome in.

"I'm sorry, were we talking to you?"

"Helen," Aunt Claire said.

"Okay, you know what? You're really hurting my feelings," my mom said, tears already filling her eyes.

"Okay, okay. Look, I'm sorry," Aunt Claire said. "I didn't mean it."

"Sorry," I apologized, because my aunt did.

My mom sat silent, her arms hugging her stomach.

"Liz is always late, isn't she?" Aunt Claire said, changing the subject. "Why can't she run errands on a different day of the week? West, honey, do you know when your mom and little sister are going to get here?" She shouted across the pool. "It would be nice to see our sister once in a while," she added, looking at my mom.

"I'm staying with Auntie Helen. My mom and dad are going to a wedding tonight," he said before he dunked Bobby underwater. There was a constant clamor coming from the boys.

"What about Josephine?" she asked.

"She's staying with Grandma and Grandpa," West said.

I think he was happy to be away from his sister. Figures.

"Bobby, be gentle!" my mom said. "So it's perfect that Jane's staying here tonight. Those boys tease her to death."

"Yeah? About what?" Aunt Claire asked looking at me.

"Well, lately it's my boobs," I said, pulling my towel over my chest. I hated being home with the boys and my boring mother.

“They don’t mean it.” my mom said.

“Oh, Helen, please. She’s not a child.” she said. “They are getting bigger, aren’t they?” she said, pointing at my chest. “Honey, boys are perverts. They love boobs.” She rubbed her knees.

“Really?” At that age, I wondered why boys were so interested in these odd-looking body parts that just seemed to get in the way of everything. “Then why do they make fun of me?”

“Because that’s what men live to do. If you take the attention away from them, they whine like little babies. But they love boobs,” she sang.

“Claire!” my mom nudged her arm. “Jane, breasts are what make us different than men. Better. More useful. We need them.”

“For what?” I asked.

“To nurse our young. “ She said, lifting her chin up and giggling.

Aunt Claire did not find this funny. She put her sunglasses on and leaned her head back against the chair. I looked at my mom sternly. With the same look she gave me whenever I brought up the arthritis. She stopped laughing.

“Come on, Jane, show us one of your awesome dives,” Aunt Claire said.

I welcomed this invitation. The sun beat down on me like it was angry. I was dying to get in the water. I removed the towel that was damp with my sweat, letting it slip down my body slowly.

I walked to the diving board without looking at the boys. The clamor stopped. I could feel their gaze. The warm breeze reminded me how much skin I was showing. I was wearing the bikini my aunt had given me on my birthday. I took the rubber band out of my hair, letting the

wind fluff it out, knowing that the boys were watching. I went to the tip of the board, my toes gripping the edge, and stood tall, my shoulders back, my hands on my hips.

I lifted my arms above my head and tucked my chin in. As soon as my body hit the water, I opened my eyes and slowly twirled myself, listening to the sound my body made as it swished around, watching the bubbles that floated to the surface. I wished I could breathe underwater. I wished I could stay there forever. I drifted, waves of light reflecting on my legs. I imagined that I was flying above a city. When I emerged, my mom and aunt were clapping.

“Great form, honey,” my mom said.

My feet touched the floor of the pool, and I walked to the shallow end. All of a sudden the boys burst into laughter.

“What?” I asked.

“Oh my gosh,” West said.

“Shut up. Don’t tell her,” Bobby said, laughing.

They were laughing too hard to respond to me.

“Jane!” My mom exclaimed, rushing to the edge of the pool. “Fix your suit,” she said in a whisper, pulling up her tank top.

I didn’t have to look down to know what was wrong.

“Look at Jane’s boobies!” West exclaimed.

“Titties, Titties,” Bobby chanted.

“Bobby, your sister has big boobs,” West said.

“Shut up!” Bobby said, splashing him.

“Do those make your back hurt, Janey?” West asked.

Bobby could barely breathe. They squeezed their pecs together with their hands and let their laughter loose.

I wrapped my arms around me.

“Alright, alright, boys. That’s enough,” Aunt Claire said.

I fixed my suit, and just as I began to cry, I stopped myself. I didn’t want the boys to think they had won. I composed myself quickly, and got out of the pool.

“Jane, you okay?” Aunt Claire asked.

I grabbed my towel and ran into the house as fast as I could, ignoring the questions and concerns yelled in my direction. I knew they would come after me, but I didn’t want to talk about it. I had to hide.

I ran through the kitchen, down the hall, and before I knew it, I was in Aunt Claire’s closet. I shut the door and slid down until I hit the floor. I covered my face and just plain cried my eyes out. They had seen me. They were never going to forget it. I knew they’d never let it go. I lay on the ground and soaked the carpet with my shame. My body heaved with humiliation. I heard my mom and Aunt Claire searching for me in the house.

I looked around at Aunt Claire’s things. Her dresses made dark shadows on the wall. The smell of her perfume was overwhelming, and it started to give me a headache. I touched her cold, hard necklaces that hung from a jewelry tree on her dresser. Then I spotted my sports bra lying limp on the floor next to Aunt Claire’s pink stool. I took my bikini top off and put my bra on. Then, one by one, I took her clothes off their hangers and threw them on the ground.

I heard their voices, then their steps, then their gasps at the sight of what I had done.

“Jane, what did you do to my clothes?” Aunt Claire said, completely bewildered.

When I didn't answer, she raised up her hands in confusion, then waited, her hands on her hips.

"Honey, I know you're upset but what is going on here? What have you got to say for yourself?" my mom asked, nodding her head in my aunt's direction.

I heard the boys splashing, laughing, playing outside. I longed to be with them, engulfed in our imaginary world. But in that moment, I realized that I could not go back there.

Humiliation aside, it wasn't where I belonged anymore. I looked at Aunt Claire, and noticed the wrinkles that formed when she frowned, and that her arms hung slightly too far from her body.

This wasn't the best time of her life.

I looked at my mom. She held her belly, on which I saw waves of motion. Of life.

"I want to go home," I said.

**January 30, 2011**

Claire came to the hospital to give me the papers. I signed off our shop to a young businessman reluctantly. How could I not? Fixing shoes wasn't going to bring my Rose back to me. I held her hand all day. I didn't give Claire my seat when she came. I signed with my left hand so that I didn't have to let go of Rose. She hasn't spoken for days. A few weeks ago she began writing in a notebook Claire gave her for her birthday. She kept it under her pillow. And now, just a few weeks later, all she does is keep breathing. Each breath seems like a project. A steep hill she must climb. I wish I could help her. The doctor came in to tell me that it's Pancreatic cancer. Gee, thanks, doc, I wanted to say. You're only a hundred days too late. Can't he do anything to help her? No, he can only make her comfortable. And what about me? I should've taken her places. I shouldn't have complained so much. Dear, God. I know she is going.

**Mambo**

With each step, I try to slow my breathing, and I tell my body to stay inside the lines. The parking lot is full of cars, and they are all familiar. I walk with quick, nervous steps, reminding myself to inhale, then exhale. To keep my blood flowing. To keep my body upright. But, I'm already wobbling, struggling to keep my balance on my stilettos. A warm California breeze blows through my frayed hair and encircles me as if I'm a package. A delivery. I stop at the foot of the stairs and turn around to look at the cab that brought me here from the airport. I think about walking back to it and telling the driver to take me back to where I came from. But as he drives away toward the exit, I know that he has already brought me there.

The moment I walk through the large, white double doors, I can sense them. The dead bodies that are stowed away in refrigerators that look like filing cabinets, that are being cut, sowed, painted, and dressed to look like they are in peaceful sleep. To look like they still hold the breath, the warmth of life. I can feel them. They are here. I know it. And at this exact moment, Grandma is primped, molded into something that resembles real. I am full of dread. Every inch of my body tingles with anxiety, but I force my feet forward toward the receptionist. She tells me that Grandma is in room 315. I stare at her and squint my eyes. I tilt my head to the left and try to tell her without using my voice or my mouth that Grandma is not here. She is in her garden.

I go into the elevator. This place has four floors. Oh, Los Angeles. You couldn't be discreet if you tried. Not that you would even care to be subtle about business. I press the number 3 button and wonder which floor the cremations take place on. I'm not alone. An old man is standing at the corner of the elevator, head against the wall, crying loudly.

“Are you okay, sir?” This is a stupid question.

He doesn't answer, or stop crying.

When the door slides open to the third floor, we both get off, and walk down the hall together. We walk at the same pace until we get to room 305. He stops, and I slow down. I hear crying and watch him enter the room, eavesdropping in full view, standing at the door. Guiltless. The white casket is no longer than my right arm. A tall woman with blonde hair approaches the old man and falls into his arms fluidly, like she's been doing it all her life.

“She's gone, daddy,” she says. “My baby's gone.”

While the old man holds his baby, I turn away and my legs drag along, my shoes bumping into one another. It feels like my body is turning into Jell-O and it moves forward in bouncy jerks, toward 315. With each step, I feel like I am getting closer to the ground. I try to take some deep breaths, but my head begins to submerge into my pool of fear. I am drowning.

“Jo!” My childhood friend, Kate, puts her hands on my shoulders.

“Hey.” I follow her eyes that drift from my face, down my body, and stop at my shoes.

“Wow, you look nice. I love the outfit. Very sophisticated. You look like a true businesswoman.” She giggles.

“What?”

“Nothing. I just never thought I'd see you without your Coldplay T-shirt. I'd always imagine you showering and sleeping with that thing,” she says with a grin.

“Oh, shut up.” I pretend to laugh with her, though I'm actually a little hurt and embarrassed. I'm an adult now. I'm different. I'm adventurous. I'm not still stuck in this mundane place.

“And those shoes,” she continues, “They're really nice, you know?” she finally says.

Here they come. The annoying “you knows” awkwardly plastered at the end of her sentences. I look down at my shiny, brown stilettos. They completely clash with my black lace top, black blazer, and black pencil skirt. When I look up, she’s still looking at my shoes. What was I thinking? I put one shoe behind the other and try to keep my balance. I quickly compliment her black cotton dress, then look at my watch. “Did I make it?”

“It just started.”

She says it, and, immediately, I feel my knees weaken. I’m nauseated. I take deep breaths away from 315, afraid that I’ll smell the body.

“I didn’t know it was going to be this hard,” I say.

“No one expects you to breeze through this, you know?”

“You say that as if everyone is expecting me,” I say, leaning back against the wall, wanting to run to the elevator and take it down to the exit. “Has she seen me?” I look around for my mother.

“She’s not here yet,” Kate says, sifting her fingers through her long, straight hair. “How have you been?”

“I’ve been good.”

“What are you up to these days? Do you like your new job? Are you still playing at all?” she asks.

I follow the conversation, knowing that it’s meant to calm my nerves.

“Working. Not playing. No time. I wish I could carry the piano around with me like West carries his books,” I say, then wonder why I did, thinking of my grand piano back east, the big elephant, my past, covered in magazine layouts in my apartment, untouched since I moved in close to a year ago. I don’t have to close my eyes to remember Grandma’s hands, with her long

dirty nails, pressing down the keys, her bracelet clicking against the piano as she maneuvered my fingers across the keyboard, filling her house with the sound of my musical adolescence.

“Oh. Well, I’m sure you’ll go back to it. I mean, you were the one who would rather practice her scales than play with us.” She looks down at her fingers. “Have you talked to him?”

“Who? Weston? He was supposed to pick me up from the airport,” I tell her. “He didn’t make it. He’s probably sitting in his car downstairs, determined not to get out of the car until he finishes the chapter he’s reading.” I smile.

She smiles back. “Or he’s just sitting there doing some plain old thinking. Like a true philosopher, you know?”

“Like a true nerd,” I say, and we laugh.

I hear my mother behind me. She is crying hysterically. I turn around slowly and see that she is being consoled by my Aunt Claire.

“I’m going to go in now,” I tell Kate.

I don’t want to see my mom, but I know that Grandma would’ve wanted me to say goodbye to her. She was the one who encouraged me to do it when her brother died. She wanted me to see how nice he looked in his suit. He was wearing his favorite hat.

I walk across the hall, grateful not to run into anyone, self-conscious about my wrong selection of shoes, the blister on my left heel calling out to me in agony. I adjust my hair and take a long, deep breath. I walk into a scene I have dreaded all my life. Everyone in black, heads bent down, silent except for the soft, old lament for Grandma. I walk on my tiptoes, so that my heels don’t touch the floor, my legs heavy as bricks, and slip behind the very last row of chairs, ignoring a few gasps and whispers at my arrival. I don’t want to look up, because I don’t want my eyes to see. I don’t want to know what color her coffin is or what she is wearing. I stand

completely frozen. Some people are seated. Others walk around or huddle, making clusters of stable, silent grief. My view of the casket is blocked until one of these groups disperses. I see a nose peering out of the large brown box, and I feel the weight of sorrow pushing me down into my shoes.

“Josephine!” my mother exclaims from the front of the room. Now, all eyes are on me.

I manage to dodge the nonchalant consolers and make my way toward her.

“Jo, I didn’t think you would make it,” she says, throwing her long skinny arms around me.

“I found a flight last minute.”

“Come. Let’s see your Grandmother,” she says, as if I have just arrived for Christmas dinner and leads me past family that gather around, toward the box that holds the old body.

She pushes me until my stomach touches the brown, cool coffin. Even at twenty-two years old, I am scared to look down. I don’t like the idea of examining a corpse, especially my Grandmother’s.

“It’s okay, Jo. Look.”

“No! Stop it!” I say trying to push her away.

I can’t. I look up. I look to my left. I look to my right, and there’s West, making faces at me, and smiling at me, pressed against a casket. I am frightened by the stillness of the coffin, half waiting for her to jump out and bounce about like the characters in the cartoons we used to watch with her on Saturday mornings. I look at her orange-painted hands, one holding the other. I am stunned at how clean her fingernails are. No dirt lodged underneath.

I hear my tears almost sizzle as they slide down my face. Mom has already got me cornered, trapped in her little bitter bubble. She is rummaging through her purse when West approaches.

“Mom, can I help you find something?” he asks, trying to pry her noisy bag away from her.

“No, Weston. I’m just trying to...oh, here it is.” She takes a tissue out of her bag.

“What are you doing?” I want to stop her, but I have moved away from the casket, and don’t want to go too close to the body again. Her white, slender fingers clutch the tissue, and she reaches into the coffin and wipes Grandma’s red lipstick off, starting at the middle of her lips, and wiping to the corners of Grandma’s cement-like mouth.

“Mom! Stop!”

“There, that’s more like her,” she says.

“Okay, Mom, I think you got all of it,” West says.

Then, in one swift movement, my mother slides the bracelet off of Grandma’s wrist, wraps it in the tissue stained with Grandma’s lipstick, and stuffs it in her bra.

“Hey!” I say. “What are you doing?”

“Will you keep it down, Jo? Everyone is looking.” She looks around with a nervous smile. “What is the matter with you?”

“What is the matter with me? I knew I shouldn’t have come!”

“Joey, just let it go,” West says, waving his hand at me.

“No. I’m sick of letting it go. I didn’t come here to let it go,” I say, annunciating each word.

My feet lift and fall in staccato jerks as I bravely move closer to Grandma.

“Josephine,” my mother says. She wears a nervous smile. “What are you doing?”

I walk right up to the casket and push the roses off. Slowly, the crowd backs away from my bright light of humiliation. Away from the loud spectacle that I can’t help but put on, and dance around in. I think about grabbing a bunch of them and throwing them at my mother.

“Joey!” West says, trying to grab my shoulders.

“Don’t even,” I say to him. “Stop butting in. I don’t need you.”

He stares at me hard. “Yeah. As if you haven’t already made that clear.” He walks out of the room quickly.

My mom stands with her mouth open, and I am tempted to throw roses at her face until I make one into the mouth that didn’t tell me about Grandma’s condition.

“It isn’t yours,” I say, pointing to the tissue that is sticking out of her shirt. “Grandma promised it to me, not you!”

“Jo,” she says, pumping the air with her palms, for me to slow down.

“What makes you think you can just take it from her? Don’t you remember me telling you about Grandma giving me the bracelet once I grew up?”

“Look where you are. Do you really want to do this right now?” she asks quietly, blushing.

“This is a great time to do this. I’ve been waiting my whole life to do this.”

My mother looks around, then at the floor, her face changing when she sees my shoes, which are beginning to squeeze my swollen feet. When she finally looks up, she stares into my eyes confidently. A confidence I don’t remember ever seeing before. “Fine. Let’s do it, then. You left,” she says aloud. “You left us all. You left me. You left Weston. You left Grandma and Grandpa. All because you wanted to start fresh,” she says, making air quotes with her perfectly

manicured fingers. “Because you wanted to get away from the horrible life that I set up for you. Because I wasn’t enough after your father left. What did you expect? Your father left, then you left, and all I had was *my* mom. The only one who put up with me. Who stuck around. She was my life. And now things are different around here, Josephine, whether you like it or not. So don’t you just show up here and expect it all to be just the way you left it. Just the way you want it!”

She takes the tissue out and in a swift movement grabs my arm and slams the warm bracelet into my hand. “Happy?” She stuffs the tissue back into her bra.

I am stunned. I don’t know what to say. She turns away from me and breaks the crowd. I realize that I am surrounded. The attendants have made a sort of circle around me, and I feel they are closing in on me. I’m claustrophobic in the mess I’m making. My shoes squeeze my feet and rub at my blister as I shift my weight from one foot to the other. At the back of the room, I hear my aunts try to contain her. I turn back to Grandma. Now my eyes are glued to the body. I reach in and frantically try to fix Grandma’s crooked lips, but her face is stubborn. Her lips stretch out across her face. Happy Grandma will now frown forever.

The bracelet turns cold.

I walk out before I get caught in the net of condolences. The third floor is quiet save for dim sounds of hopelessness that floats in the thick air. My body is numbing slowly, my fingertips tingle and I tilt my head back, breathing through my nose, hard. The room tilts and turns and I feel myself giving into my humiliation. To the smell of formaldehyde I’m sure lingers

throughout the building. I need a bathroom. I see a small orange sign with the familiar gender specifications for toilets and make my way to the women's restroom. It's occupied.

"Oh my God," I manage to say. There is West, undressing Kate, her legs wrapped around him like a jellyfish consuming its prey.

Kate quickly jumps off the sink and pulls her skirt down. "Shit."

"Oh, shit. Jo! Wait!" West says as he hurriedly buckles his belt.

I run out as he calls after me.

"I cannot believe you!" I say.

"Jo, I'm sorry. You weren't supposed to see that!"

"Yeah, well I did! What are you thinking?"

"Jo, I..."

Kate joins us in the hallway. "Jo, I don't know how to..."

"No, Stop. Both of you! How could you? West, we're at her funeral!" I say.

"Oh, come on. If you hadn't found us it wouldn't have made a difference," West says.

"What's going on, anyway? Is this your way of getting your mind off things?"

"Jo, stop."

"No, I want to know. I want to know why you..."

"Jo, she's my fiance."

Fiance? He's only twenty six.

"You're getting married?" I manage to say.

"Yeah," he says with a huge grin stretching across his brown face. He takes Kate's hand.

"You weren't supposed to find out this way," Kate explains. "We didn't want to tell you until all of this was over, you know?"

“You could’ve said something this morning!”

“I didn’t think it was the right time to tell you,” she says.

“When did this all happen? I want to know. I haven’t been gone for that long. What is going on here?”

“What do you mean?” he says.

I look at him with indignation.

“I mean, how long has this been going on?”

West puts his hands in his pockets. “Since just after you left.”

“Why are you getting married?” I say.

“I love her,” he says, running his brown hand over his hair, thick like a carpet on his head and putting his arm around her thin waist.

Kate smiles at him, then looks at my face apprehensively. “I’m gonna go see where everyone is,” she says and heads back toward 315.

“Come on. She’s my best friend, Mambo.”

“Don’t call me that,” I say, raising my voice and glaring at him. I turn my face away from him so he won’t see bitterness flooding my eyes. What about me?

He smiles big. “Hey, Mambo, Mambo Italiano....”

I continue to cry. I cross my arms over my chest.

“I mean, Mamblos Mambo, Bamblos Bambo,” he sings, mimicking Grandma’s awkward dance, singing her skewed version of the song.

“Stop!” I scream through my angry tears.

He looks at me for a long while. “Jo, can you tell me what’s going on?” he asks. “Why are you so upset?”

“No one told me,” I say, ignoring his question.

“Well, we haven’t really told anyone yet. It just happened.”

“No. Mom didn’t tell me that Grandma was bad. She lied to me. No one told me, not even you!” With this, my body heaves with sorrow.

West is quiet for a few moments. Then he says, “I thought Mom told you. I was wondering why you didn’t come to see her.”

“No one bothered to tell me that her condition worsened. You didn’t tell me that all of a sudden, out of nowhere, you want to get married. You’re so young, West. Why are you doing this? It’s too soon.”

“Why is it too soon?” he asks.

“How do you even know what love is?” I ask. “Last time I saw you you were focused on your Ph.D., and you couldn’t wait to travel, and....”

“I’m different now,” he says, slightly smiling.

I pout a little.

“What is this, Jo? You’re mad because I’ve grown up? Because I’ve changed?”

Yes. That’s it. But I don’t tell him. Instead, the room begins to spin, and I drop to my knees.

““What’s wrong? Are you okay?” he asks a bit frantically, holding me firmly by the shoulders, holding me up.

“It’s too much,” I tell him.

“It’s okay, Jo. I think you’re just having a panic attack. Take some deep breaths.”

I fall into him and soak his suit with my tears.

“I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry,” I say.

“It’s okay, Mambo. You don’t have to....”

“I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry....”

I stand up and walk toward the elevator, holding my hand up behind me when I hear him try to follow.

Downstairs, I walk past the receptionist and slip into the gift shop on the first floor, hoping that this will be a safe hideaway. I walk around the shop, quickly wiping at the flow of tears that I can’t control, pretending that I am interested in the merchandise being sold. Like the wooden crosses. Some with Jesus, some not. Or the magnets that read “Forest Lawn Mortuaries,” followed by the address and phone number. Who would buy this? Then I come to the largest section of the shop. The flower shop. It smells familiar. My hand lifts and touches the leaves and petals, and I remember.

When I was young enough to believe that life would never change, I played in Grandma’s garden. It burst with the smell of fresh, green grass and happy leaves swaying to the hum of the morning newborn flies. Four steps down, my hand in hers, we entered her world. The harmony of nature made my grandmother come alive. Her roses and daisies waved in the breeze as she floated by. She touched them all, her fingers gently caressing petals and leaves, and weeding with bare hands. Her fingernails collected the brown earth that welcomed her care. She favored the snapdragons that stood tall with pursed lips. She guided my fingers, and together we squeezed each one. They opened their mouths and I giggled. They spoke, but I didn’t hear. Grandma was in constant communion with the garden.

They don't have snapdragons, and I am fuming.

"I need a dozen," I tell the man behind the counter.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he says very cheerfully. "I'm not sure we have what you're looking for."

"What do you mean you're not sure? Can you check?"

"Absolutely. Was it a 'snapped dragon?'" He types on his computer with a huge smile on his face.

"Snapdragon."

"Yes," he says.

"Yes?"

"Yes. We don't carry those," he says, shrugging his shoulders, and clasping his arms behind his back.

"Do you even know what I'm talking about?" I ask.

He looks up, past me. Around me. Each eye looming in different directions. "Hey," I say, moving my head left, right, up, down, trying to find his gaze.

It is like he is looking at someone behind me. Listening to someone else. I turn around and see the large walk-in refrigerator that is full of roses and tulips and go in. Immediately my skin reacts to the climate. The hairs on my arms stand up as though I am someone important. There is a large fan against the wall and the flowers wave at me in its current, and it's as if I am being greeted by my childhood. It somehow frightens me so, I close my eyes and try to move away from my past, my aching feet squirming in my awkward shoes. I try to block out pictures

of West and Grandma in the garden with images of myself at my desk in New York, editing layouts and sitting in long business meetings with a large cup of coffee. Cream, no sugar. When I open my eyes, the fan is still spinning and I grab a large bouquet of orange tulips and walk back to the register.

“Great choice,” the man says. “I’m sure your loved one would have loved these beauties!”

“How do you know that?”

He hesitates. “It’s a beautiful selection.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about, do you?”

“Ma’am, I’m just trying to do my....”

“Yeah. You’re just trying to do your job, right? Well, you suck at it,” I say and look around the shop. “It is so L.A.. Don’t you people have any class? Do you have a grandmother, sir?” Why am I asking this man these questions? As if I am not a California native.

“Uh, yes, as a matter of fact, she is in a convalescent home.”

“Well, how nice for you. How very fucking nice for you. To still have her here, on earth, where she can see you, and hear you.”

“Well, she can’t quite hear me,” he interrupts.

I snatch the flowers from him and glare at his innocent gaze. I start to sob. I try to suppress it, but it’s too late. It has already begun, and there’s nothing I can do but let myself remember my summer twilight walks with Grandma, Grandpa and West. There was something about treading through the neighborhood in the dark, the warm California breeze, on our bare legs, shoulders, and arms, that thrilled my small tan body and wakened my mind. The june bugs were alive and flying free. Grandma warned us that they were blind and had a strong grip once

they landed. West didn't mind them, but Grandma and I squealed when we heard them buzzing by, bumping into trees and electrical posts along the road. I squirmed in my flip flops, forever feeling the light steps of insects crawling around on my exposed toes and feet. Grandma pointed at the shadows on the ground and the white clouds in the moonlit sky and helped me name the shapes they made.

I let out a loud sigh and wipe my face with the back of my hand. "This sucks," I say.

"I'm really sorry," the man says.

I look down at the bouquet I am clutching and see that his hand is on mine. He hands me a box of tissues. It has a picture of the funeral home on it.

"It's going to be okay," he says.

For a moment, I believe him. It's the only thing that brings my body back inside the lines. I nod and try to slow my breathing. "Okay."

"Okay," he says, nodding in rhythm with me.

I stop crying long enough to do what I came to do and get out of there. I buy the horrendous tulips. All \$22.08 worth of them. He puts the bouquet in a plastic bag that has a picture of a statue in one of their cemeteries. I look at the bag curiously and see something in the bag that I did not buy. I lift a brochure out of the bag.

"It's a Star Map," the man says.

"A what?"

"A Star Map. It's a map of the cemetery, to show you where celebrities have been buried." He takes the brochure from me and flips it over. "This tells you what time our guided

tours begin. It's ten dollars for adults, seven for students, and five for children. Of course, children under three are free, and there's a Senior discount."

I look up at the man's face. His lazy eye looks past me. I can see the reflection of gravestones peering out of the grass in this eye, coming from the window. His mouth is lifted high at each corner, like he placed a bent clothes hanger behind his lips to hold them in position. Like his face is dead and needs to be maintained for viewing.

And just like that, he switches back to a Los Angeles smile.

"Thanks," I say.

I make my way out of the place and up to the third floor. 315 is empty now, and I am glad to have a moment alone with Grandma. I walk right up to her. This is the last time I will be near her. I place the tulips on the coffin, arranging them carefully. I sort of smile, feeling that now she is comfortable, with her kind of flowers, wishing they could bring her back to life so she could use her magic hands to sustain them. I look up from the box and am immediately taken aback by a large, shiny black piano on the other side of the room. Without a thought, I go to it, and take a seat on the bench. I place my hands on the keys. For what seems like forever, I just look at the them. I sit there battling my own perception of life, of love, of my talent, of what I left behind and have now come back to. Of my regret.

I shake the shoe off my right foot and place it on the gold pedal.

As I stare at the piano, my mom comes in. I watch her walk down the aisle between the metal chairs. I imagine her in a white wedding gown, holding a bouquet of snapdragons, making her way toward my dad. She takes a seat next to me on the bench. We don't say anything.

Slowly, I slip my hand into my pocket and pull out the bracelet. I hold it in my hand for a moment, then gently slip it onto her wrist.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“You were right,” I say, and then look up at her. Her eyes are red and swollen. Mascara smeared under her eyes. It feels like I am looking into a mirror. “You’re exactly right. This isn’t mine. It belongs to you.” I look at Grandma, then back down at the keys, knowing that I have her approval.

“Jo, you don’t have to do this.”

“I’m only doing what’s right. It’s rightfully yours.”

Her eyes fill up, brimming, but not overflowing.

I lift my hands and place them on the cold, white keys. My blood runs hot through my body and the corners of my mouth stretch into the same smile I had on the day Grandma introduced West and me to the piano. My fingers begin playing “Mambo Italiano”, long and hard, without error. It feels so good to do this familiar dance with my past. My eyes fill with fresh tears with the memory of my grandmother’s long wrinkly fingers playing as my own fingers now play. My mom takes the red-stained tissue out of her bra and wipes my tears.

I kick off my other shoe.

**February 19, 2011**

Today was Rose's funeral. I didn't go. I didn't want to see her body. It's not her anymore. I sat home and looked at my watch all day, imagining what they were doing with the body. I ignored Claire's phone calls. I didn't want any of it. When my thoughts finally drifted to her body being lowered into the ground, I got up and started driving. I drove to the shop. I stared at the new sign above the door for a long time: "Grand Opening! Redwood Insurance." I went around the building to the back. On my way, I walked by the trash bin and noticed that Mrs. Mott's shoes were thrown inside. Broken again. Sorry, Mrs. Mott. It's pointless now. The garden was just like I thought it would be. The flowers drooped. The plants had withered. There were leaves everywhere. I had brought Rose's notebook with me. It wasn't a diary like I thought it would be. It is full of notes about how to take care of each plant in her garden. The most important thing is to weed weed weed, she wrote. Weed to keep my plants alive. So I made a promise today, and I got to work.