

Leave the Gate Open

By

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Introduction

Most communities in South Florida are gated. I don't know why, but they are. Living in a gated community isn't a sign of wealth or social status like it might be elsewhere, they're just part of our landscape like a palm tree or a strip mall would be. I think often of the gate to my grandmother's 55+ adult community and how sometimes it is just open, and you can breeze right in without having to tap a key fob to a scanner or use the call box in the visitor lane. The reason for the gate being left open depends on the status of the gate, of whether it is just open, or if it is cast off to the side of the road. An open gate means that someone in the community has died and the family is expecting guests to sit shiva call, which is a Jewish period of mourning in which guests are welcome into the home to pay respects and cry with one another. A gate cast on the side of the road is up to interpretation, but I usually interpret it as a badass elderly woman whose keyfob just won't work, so she rams through it with her Toyota Camry.

I decided to name this collection after an open gate because I was trying to think of one concept that could unite all of these stories aside from the fact that they all take place in South Florida, and I realized that in each story, the gate could feasibly be open. In Pickleball in Paradise, a college student spends the summer living with her grandmother in a gated community that I modeled after my real grandmother's community, and unfortunately, shiva calls are fairly frequent in a 55+ community. Next of Kin takes place during a shiva call, where the gate is left open two days after a stepfather's death for his biological family to claim his belongings while his step family tries desperately to mourn. In Boca, a man is lent a sex robot by his neighbor eight months after the death of his wife, where we can assume the gate has been opened for her mourners as well. There's no mention of a gate in The Sweepstakes, but it's fine. I think the open gate concept is justified. Just use your imagination for that one, because gates are everywhere, and sometimes they're open.

My influences for this project are whatever I was reading while I wrote these stories (and George Saunders) because I find that reading inspires me to write and the style of whatever I am currently reading usually finds its way into my work (And George Saunders is just my favorite). I read Jhumpa Lahiri's short story collection "Unaccustomed Earth" while writing Pickleball in Paradise, which inspired me to write a more delicate style of prose where small details can reveal a lot about the characters. After reading Lorrie Moore's collection "Self-Help," which is written in the second person, I found myself thinking my thoughts almost entirely in the second person for months afterward. It made sense, then, to write Next of Kin, which is a second person, future tense account of what a man's family will do in the days following his death. The George Saunders influence shines through the most in Boca and The Sweepstakes. I look to Saunders' writing as a prime example of how to write absurd humor without sacrificing heart or genuine feeling. He also writes a lot of satire about consumerism, which is what I've done with The Sweepstakes, taking on the absurdities of the airline industry.

Home is a prevalent theme in this collection. My goal with these stories was to write homes that wouldn't be considered traditional; a husband, wife, and two kids living in a two story house. I wanted to write widows, divorcees, and characters who don't necessarily know where home is, because home isn't always an obvious, stable place. The concept of home can be loosely defined, and I hope that is apparent in this collection.

I haven't yet written a story that includes the elderly woman who rams down the gate, but I promise I'll write it later.

Pickleball in Paradise

I find out that it is my half-birthday only when Grandma hands me the card with the monkey on it. The card, blank on the inside, has been pulled from the box of half-birthday greeting cards that have been sitting in her closet since before I was born. When she realizes that she has forgotten to write inside of it, she snatches the card back from me and digs frantically through the dish of receipts on her kitchen counter for a pen, whispering what I can only assume to be yiddish obscenities under her breath.

Mom has always said that there are two surefire ways to calm Grandma down, alcohol and Leonard Cohen. Since I can't legally purchase alcohol for another half of a year, as I've just been reminded, I search Leonard Cohen's name in the computer Grandma only uses for Skype calls with our Israeli relatives and before he reaches the chorus she has pulled me into a waltz. I can feel the vibration of her voice beneath the stretch of her tennis shirt as she hums the tune, taking a break to proclaim, *we can claim him! He's a Jew!* She dips me, her bones shake. She is seventy-five, but she is able for it.

We continue with Leonard Cohen in the car, my phone connected to the aux cord I've just bought for her, as she drives us to the country club down the road (The Margaritaville Estates & Country Club). We cross the big intersection at the avenue and then it is a straight shot. We pass the casino (Lucky Seven-tys), we pass the lingerie shop (Bras N' Things). We get

through one of Leonard's folk numbers, then a waltz-ier number, then Hallelujah. Her foot leans a little too hard into the brake, but that's just the kind of driver she is, evading the stereotype of the one-mile-per-hour elderly woman who can't see over the steering wheel, which is one I've learned to be quite prominent in this neighborhood. She honks twice when a Camry nearly swerves into us. The heat bounces off the road so hard you can see it. We lower our sun visors over the windshield as we pull into the country club entrance, a tap of a key fob opening the gates before us. *Buy or Rent now, 55+ Adult Luxury Living* signs line the sidewalk, parallel to the rows of palm trees.

Grandma made the switch from tennis to pickleball after she swung too hard ten years ago and had to get shoulder surgery. She says pickleball is an easier sport on her shoulder because the balls are lighter, and now she's a pro. She plays in the advanced league for the club (The Margaritaville Manatees), damn near undefeated. There's a photo of her on the Wall of Champions in the front lobby. When it slipped during our Passover Skype call that I didn't have plans for the summer, she said why don't I come down and work at The Margaritaville?

"They're looking for some well-abled young folk to shag the pickleballs, you know," she told me. So that's where I've been the past week and a half, spending my days shagging pickleballs and my nights next to Grandma on the couch, rubbing aloe vera into my sunburns, Dancing With the Stars on the television in front of us.

The gig itself is alright. I've learned that summer is considered the off-season in Florida because of the intense heat, so it isn't quite the tropical paradise pictured on train advertisements up north. On my first day they handed me a pocket-sized fan on a lanyard along with my uniform, which I assumed was for my own personal use, but I later found out that part of the job is to fan off the players between matches, as many have been known to pass out in the summer

heat. I've learned all I need to know about the physicality of growing old as the players lean into me for a fanning off, skin drooping, drugstore lipstick melting to the corners of the mouth, the smell of their sweat against the smell of my own. I'm as impressed by their agility at their age as they are impressed by mine every time I bend down to pick up a ball, often remarking that they haven't been able to bend like that in years.

“Enjoy the bend and snap while you can,” they'll say. “One day you'll bend and you'll just snap right in half.”

My fellow ball shaggers are grandchildren just like myself, but most of them are around the age of fourteen, the minimum working age in Florida, so it's been hard to find companionship. Accompanying the miniature fan on the lanyards they give on the first day is also a whistle, its purpose I'm unsure of, but my youthful co-workers seem to have developed a secret code by which they use the whistles to communicate, and I fear they've been using this system to talk shit about me. I often hear the whistles blow when they catch me taking my lunch break alone or when I sip on one of the Propel drinks Grandma gives me before work each day, which I didn't know they still make.

One of the young boys, constellations of acne formed on his cheeks, breaks off from the herd and asks me out on a date like he has been dared. It will be at the pinball arcade by the beach, and he will buy me dinner first with what is left of his first paycheck after his mom takes him to buy video games.

“Just no appetizers,” he tells me. The rest of our coworkers watch the exchange from the next court, some holding their hands over their mouths, some stuffing pickleballs into their shirts to make breasts. The young boy, whose name tag says Toby, looks into my eyes and scratches a

pimple on his face until it bleeds slightly. I kindly explain to Toby that he is a bit too young for me.

“I like older women,” he says. I tell him he’s probably never spoken to an older woman this way, let alone a girl his own age. “I talk to the ladies all the time. Kiss them too.” I tell Toby I would never kiss him. “Oh, come on. You know you can’t resist this tension between us.” Toby scrunches his lips and leans up to my face. I deserve to be treated better than this, on my half-birthday of all days. I guard my face against the approach of his lips with my palm and he falls swiftly against a cart of pickleballs, spilling it over.

The good thing about my manager’s office is that it is air conditioned. Mr. Perry lectures Toby and I long enough for our sweat to dry. Even the exposed blood from Toby’s pimple has dried into a scab, though his face is still wet with tears. Mr. Perry tells me that I should be better than this, that I have an inherent responsibility as the oldest non-managerial employee to be an example for these kids. Mr. Perry, perhaps wanting to avoid a sexual harassment conflict, chooses not to believe that Toby tried to kiss me. Instead he has me apologize to Toby so we can both get back to work. I go the extra mile and extend my hand out for a handshake, a truce. Toby spits in his hand before he sticks it against mine. Mr. Perry doesn’t notice, then asks me if I would go train Joey, a new hire.

Joey Hansen stands before me, so tall he shades me from the sun, and I’ve stuck the greater part of my arm down the barrel of a ball launcher, trying to fish out a jammed pickleball. He’s twenty-two. You can see the evidence of his age in his build and hear it in his voice. His adult body is groomed with over a decade of experience, and when we introduce, he is quick to point out the biblical undertones in my first name.

“It’s nice to not be the oldest non-managerial employee anymore,” I tell him. My arm jolts out of the ball launcher, no longer jammed.

“It’s nice to not be the youngest person in this town anymore,” he tells me. He’s been living in the residential part of The Margaritaville with his grandparents since he graduated from FAU over in Boca just last month. He was born and raised in Palm Beach County. I can’t imagine anyone being born and raised in Palm Beach County. It seems more like a place people go to melt into their graves after they’ve done everything else they could with life.

Joey and I must both be in need of each other, because I’m sitting in the passenger seat of his car, our shifts having just ended for the day, and we’re on the turnpike, the car passing under a silver alert sign. He asks me to fish quarters out of the coin jar in his glove compartment to feed the parking meter once we arrive at the beach, and we lie on gym towels we snagged from the bin by the pickleball courts. The towels are small. Joey sits on six of them, I sit on five. We remove our sneakers and dig our toes into the sand so that they will itch later.

“East coast sand is rougher than west coast sand,” he informs me like a tour guide, then kisses me, and I realize that this is exactly what I thought my summer among Florida’s elderly would be missing. He invites me to his brother’s twenty-fifth birthday party the next night. I nod yes, sand falls out of my hair. Fireworks set off from the ocean like it is the Fourth of July, but it isn’t. He wonders what they’re celebrating.

“It’s my half-birthday,” I tell him.

Joey doesn’t drop me back at Grandma’s until ten P.M., which means I’ve missed the new Dancing With the Stars. Grandma hands me the monkey card, now complete with her words in unreadable cursive, and she asks me where the boy lives.

“They really shouldn’t call it The Margaritaville Estates, they’re more like trailer parks, the size of those houses,” Grandma says. She isn’t one to speak, with her one bedroom townhouse where I sleep on an air mattress on the patio. “And he can’t be Jewish if he lives there. The community’s full of goyim.” Grandma always complains about the lack of Jews at The Margaritaville, but she sticks it out because it’s the only country club in town with clay pickleball courts, which she prefers to hardcourts. “I’ll play there, but I’ll never live there.” Grandma’s complex is Ruby Isles. They leave the front gate open for shiva calls and for animal control to remove the alligator from the lake sometimes.

It does not occur to me until we are making out in the car down the block from his brother’s house that Joey is a virgin. I assume that the Jesus figurine dangling from his rearview mirror is meant to be ironic, so when I ask him to fuck me so the lord can see, I don’t get the reaction I’m hoping for.

“Please don’t use the Lord’s name in vain,” is all he has to say. I’m too stunned to apologize, but he pleasures me anyway, using his fingers well enough that we might as well be unholy. I stop myself from trying to convince him. I don’t think I’ve ever personally known someone who believes in god enough to not have sex. The most religious person I’ve ever known is Grandma, and she doesn’t even go to Synagogue.

It also did not occur to me when I accepted the invitation to his brother, Paul’s, birthday party that his entire extended family would be there. I’d expected a gathering of twenty-somethings, friends of Paul who I’d fantasized the night before of playing volleyball with on the beach, becoming my friends as well for the summer. The only other twenty-something at the

party is Paul's wife, Christine, whose engagement ring cools a spot on my shoulder when she pulls my face into hers for a kiss cheek greeting.

"They're newlyweds," Joey whispers to me. I congratulate Christine, and it feels more like I am congratulating her on finally losing her virginity. Who could blame Paul and Christine for marrying so early in their twenties. I can't help but feel like how an unmarried observant Christian must feel, jealous of a married woman for her sex life.

Joey and I make the rounds arm in arm as he introduces me to his aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. They wrap their arms around me, they kiss my cheeks. They tell me it is about time Joey brought a date to one of these things. At one point he leads me out the back door to the patio, where his parents, smoking cigars, tell me I am like one of the family now. Paul throws his hands up when he sees us and challenges us to a game of black jack. The party is casino themed, Paul is wearing a green suit with a pattern of playing cards. Joey puts his arm around me as we gamble away our chips, which are nothing more than chips, no money at stake. I want to win the game, as though winning would somehow grant me the permission to take his virginity.

Once Christine has handed everyone at the party a piece of cake, a glass clinks and Joey's father stands to give a speech. Apparently this is a tradition at all Hansen family gatherings, his father's speeches. Joey leans in and apologizes for what his father is about to do.

"He's terribly dramatic," Joey warns.

"A birthday is a sacred thing," Joey's father begins. "My son, Paul, a blessed gift to me from the Lord, you have aged yet another year. And what a year it's been! A graduation from law school, and a marriage to the beautiful Christine, who has become like a daughter to us. I am so grateful that the Lord has brought all of us here today to celebrate another year of my son. My parents, brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, my younger son Joey, another gift from Jesus,

and his wonderful new girlfriend Sarah. I thank you all for coming, and may God bless our family.”

The room fills with applause, I nearly drop my cake.

“Your father just called me your girlfriend,” I tell Joey.

“I know! I called him up and told him the news right after I dropped you off last night,”

Joey tells me, then kisses me on the forehead with lips greened from cake frosting.

I think back to the night before on the beach, trying to recall any sort of indication I may have given him that we were dating. Neither of us had brought up the idea of it, the words *boyfriend* and *girlfriend* hadn't been tossed around. We haven't even known each other for two full days, and my cheeks are now stained with kisses from his extended family. Perhaps it is a cultural thing for relationships to move this quickly, a Christian thing or a Floridian thing. At this rate I'll be his bride by the end of the summer, Grandma shedding a tear by the altar at the loss of my Jewish last name.

I spend the rest of the party trying to rationalize this new relationship as we play more casino games together. We decide to pool together our chips and play as a team, gambling more than the rest of the party-goers. I've never been anyone's girlfriend before. I've been on dates and indulged in college hookups, but they were never as romantic as I would have liked them to be. It might be nice to go along with this opportunity for romance that Joey has presented me with, if only just for the summer. He's nice to me and he's good looking, and so what if we can't have sex? We can make out in his car before and after our dates, and that wouldn't be the worst way to spend the summer.

I give Joey, my boyfriend, a sloppy blowjob in the backseat of his car before he drops me off at Grandma's. When I come up for air, he grabs one of the gym towels from yesterday and wipes the saliva off my face with it, zips up his jeans without finishing.

"Probably best not to make a mess, the seats being fabric and all," he says. I wonder if he would have let me finish him had the seats been leather, or if perhaps he met eyes with the Jesus figurine on the rearview mirror and thought better of it.

"Not to worry, we have all summer to make a mess," I say in my sexiest voice.

"You're right. And all fall and winter and spring," he says, stroking the back of my neck, kissing my towel-dried lips. I realize that I never told Joey I'd only be down here for the summer. He knows so little about me, he doesn't even know that I go to school in a different state. I try to break my lips away from his to speak, but I don't have the heart to tell him. It might be easier, anyway, to just rip off the bandaid and break the news of my leaving when the summer is over, so he won't have to count down his days with me. His kisses wet my lips all over again. When I walk back in to Grandma's, I splash some water on myself in the bathroom so she won't question the dried saliva on my face and I join her on the couch, where I watch the infomercial that is on TV while she reads a romance novel on her Kindle.

By the Fourth of July, Joey has fallen so in love with me that he elects to lose his virginity to me while the fireworks go off. But before that, I invite him over to Grandma's for dinner, expecting her to dislike him. I have to start weaning myself away from Joey so that it is easier to leave him next month, and I figure Grandma's disapproval of him will help with that. She knows Joey from The Margaritaville, having been fanned off by him a couple times before while he worked her pickleball matches.

“My teammates and I call him the Handsome Ball Boy,” she told me one night during a commercial break from Dancing With the Stars.

Joey and I have been going strong the past few weeks, getting to know each other piece by piece during work breaks and on the dates we take turns treating each other to. I’ve grown accustomed to his mannerisms and his sense of humor. His Al Pacino impression guides us down the streets of Miami when we take day trips. We’ve spent enough time in his car zooming up and down I-95 that the passenger seat has molded to my shape. After our dates, we find a dim spot in the Publix parking lot across the street from The Margaritaville and fool around until it gets late. We never spend the night together since we’re both living with our grandparents, so he drops me back at Grandma’s, where I join her in front of the local news.

“So many car robberies in this neighborhood, it’s a wonder they haven’t installed security cameras in the carports,” she vents to me until we both get tired, and then I collapse onto my air mattress. It’s gone limp at the edges, but I never have the energy to fill it with more air.

The first time Joey told me he loved me was in the breakroom of The Margaritaville, about two weeks into our relationship. Our young co-workers’ blew their whistles when they caught us sneaking a kiss during a lunch break.

“They can blow their whistles all they want, it won’t stop my love for you,” Joey said. He slipped this profession of love into a rhythm of conversation that didn’t provoke a response back, which I was grateful for because I didn’t have one. I’ve told him since that I love him only after he says it to me. It feels like a task I must complete as his girlfriend, though it is not something I feel for him. Joey is a great guy, and though I’ve grown warm to much of him, there are things I can’t shake. Things that make me feel better about the temporary nature of our relationship. Sometimes he takes his etiquette so far that it is insulting. We had our first fight on a narrow

sidewalk, where he constantly adjusted his placement beside me to ensure that he was walking on the outer side, closest to the road, something he says a man must always do.

“I don’t need you to protect me from the road, Joey,” I told him. “I’m not a child.” Our music tastes are so different that we can never decide on a radio station for our car rides, so we drive in silence. He prefers his blowjobs clean, wipes my face with the gym towel as soon as saliva starts to drip from the sides of my mouth like he wants to get rid of a part of me. I’ve never known anyone to not like it that way.

The entire house smells of Grandma’s chicken cutlet by the time Joey knocks on the door in his best button down. He is dressed like he is going to church, which is exactly how I want him to look, and far nicer than Grandma and I, who both happen to be sporting denim shorts and t-shirts. Grandma’s movements are frantic in the kitchen, operating the stove, oven, and toaster at the same time to make our meal a golden brown.

“I should warn you, she stresses over the little things,” I tell Joey before we enter the kitchen.

“Not to worry, I brought something that should help with that,” Joey says. He pulls a bottle of pinot from the wine bag he is holding, which happens to be Grandma’s favorite. I tell Grandma to try to relax, that our guest is here, and when she turns around she can’t help but laugh at the sight of Joey in slacks and dress shoes.

“If I knew he’d show up like this, I would have done a lobster!” Grandma says.

Joey pulls out Grandma’s chair before she sits and grabs the wine glasses from the top shelf in the cabinet, which she can’t reach. A wave of hot air rises from the food and reddens our cheeks as we sit before it. Grandma reaches for the green beans with a serving spoon and I put a hand out to stop her.

“Joey usually likes to say grace before a meal, don’t you Joey?” I say. It’s true, Joey does like to say grace, though he usually doesn’t inflict it on me when we eat together, silently making the sign of the cross with his finger. Grandma would most certainly roll her eyes at the idea of saying grace, not one for much of any traditions, let alone one that isn’t Jewish.

“No, no, it’s fine,” Joey says. “I wouldn’t want to impose that on both of you, I can just do it for myself.” Joey starts to make the motions with his hands, and Grandma looks at me before she stops him.

“Nonsense! If you want to do it, then do it. Who knows, maybe it’ll give the meal a little extra kick. I was running low on salt!” Grandma says, laughing. Her enthusiasm and openness is almost out of character. She hasn’t even touched her wine yet, and now she’s interlocking her hands on the table with Joey as he thanks Jesus for the meal she just spent hours making.

Joey gulps a heaping mass of chicken cutlet and vegetables and tells Grandma that the food is delicious with or without the salt. He asks Grandma where her accent comes from. She tells us about her childhood in Israel, about falling in love with a Jewish American man and moving to New York, retiring together in Florida, his death not long after that. I tell Grandma that Joey goes to the big church down the block from The Margaritaville, the one that Grandma always describes as an eyesore whenever we drive past it. Joey tells her about the volunteer work he does at the church, about all the ways they help the less fortunate in the community. Grandma acts impressed, and I’m not sure if it is genuine, or if she will have a laugh over it later tonight when we watch TV together.

Eventually, Joey and Grandma get to talking about me.

“I feel very lucky that our paths crossed,” Joey tells her, smiling at me. Grandma makes a point to brag about my accomplishments, the way I’ve overheard her brag about me with her

pickleball teammates. She mentions how well I'm doing in school in New York, and I nearly choke on my wine. "Yeah, it's a shame she's dropping out, but I suppose that's just the Lord's plan for her," Joey says, repeating the lie I've been telling him that justifies my moving down here.

"Dropping out?" Grandma asks, nearly choking on her wine too. Joey, realizing that he may have overstepped, mouths an apology to me from across the table. I explain to Grandma a corrected version of the lie, which is that I'm not dropping out, just transferring to Palm Beach State. "When were you going to tell me this?" she asks.

Joey jumps in and changes the subject, talking about the approaching season finale of *Dancing With the Stars*, which he also watches with his Grandparents every week. He tells her who he thinks will win, and she agrees. I want to chime in, but I haven't formed any opinions about *Dancing With the Stars*. I never got too invested in it, only took it as an opportunity to put time in with Grandma. I'm not sure what it is about Joey, but he seems to be bringing out a lighter side to Grandma that I haven't seen. I finish my glass of wine, run over to her computer, and play Leonard Cohen, eager for her to stop talking to Joey and dance with me like we love to do. But she won't. She is entranced by Joey like he is the Grandson she never had.

Grandma encourages Joey and I to go watch the fireworks tonight at the annual July Fourth Barbeque at The Margaritaville. Joey offers to drive her as well, but the wine has made her too tired.

"I've seen enough fireworks in my life that they don't excite me anymore," she tells us. Grandma says goodbye to us at the door. Joey plants a respectful kiss on her cheek and thanks her for dinner. She leans into my ear and tells me that I've done good.

We can smell barbeque fumes in the distance as Joey pulls into a parking spot at The Margaritaville. He parks towards the back, away from the other cars, which means he wants to mess around before we make our appearance. We go to the back seat and he tells me he has something for me. I worry that it is a piece of jewelry, something that will bind me even closer to him. He pulls a condom from the glove compartment and hides the Jesus figurine under the seat. I look at him, stunned.

“I talked to Paul the other day, and he told me that he and Christine didn’t wait until marriage. They did it as soon as they were sure that they loved each other, and it didn’t make it any less sacred. I couldn’t believe it at first, but then I thought about it, a lot, and I thought about you, and my love for you,” Joey says.

This speech he’s giving doesn’t exactly turn me on, but I don’t stop him from removing his pants, and when he struggles to put the condom on, I help him. At this point, sex isn’t something I miss from this relationship anymore. We satisfy each other enough with our hands and our mouths, the lack of traditional sex only making us better at it. Joey wants it now more than I do. I don’t stop him from unbuttoning my shorts.

He pulls the emergency flashlight from the glove compartment and shines it on his penis, asking me to make sure that there are no holes in the condom. He is so paranoid I worry he may lose his erection. When I finish inspecting it, he lays me back so my head leans against the door handle, not an ideal position, but his car is small and our options are limited. I don’t expect it to be that good, and it isn’t. My body is more of a tool for him to familiarize his body with sex, except he is in love with me, and he reminds me of his love with every other thrust. I say it a couple times too, and I try to make his first time good for him, running my hands through his hair, moaning into his ear. After a short while he finishes, and asks me if I’ve finished too. Used

to lying to him by now, I tell him yes, I have, and I've never felt so guilty about anything in my life.

When I return to Grandma's she is sitting at her computer, browsing beds on the Costco website.

"You'll need one of these if you're moving here permanently," she tells me, the blue glow of the computer's light seeping into the wrinkles on her face. Bracing myself for her disappointment in me, I explain everything to her, all of the lies that I've been telling Joey, that as much as I would love to stay with her longer, I will still be leaving Florida in a month.

"I don't know what I'm doing," I tell her. She removes her reading glasses and looks at me.

"I've been in your shoes before, Sarah."

"You have?" I know that Grandma has lived a whole life before she made the elderly pilgrimage to Florida, before she started playing pickleball, before she became heavily invested in televised dance competitions. But it is hard to picture her as anything other than who she is now.

"When I was around your age, I was involved with a young man who I did not love. But he loved me very much. And he treated me like he loved me, like I was royalty. There was just something missing. I couldn't unlock that feeling that he felt towards me. It wasn't until I met your grandfather that I got to feel it for myself. But, you know, I continued to lead the boy on because I didn't want to break his heart. And he just fell deeper and deeper." As Grandma tells me this story, I can't help but think that the ability to break hearts is a gene that she has passed down to me.

“So what did you do? How did you end it?”

“One day he gave me a beautiful necklace. It had a gold heart pendant that had been passed down in his family for generations. That was when I knew it had gone too far.” She tells me that she broke it off with him before he had the chance to fasten the necklace around her neck. “I couldn’t wear that thing, it wasn’t meant for me. He was devastated.” She shakes her head and puts her glasses back on. “You’re going to hurt him no matter what, Sarah. But you have to tell him, and sooner rather than later. That boy’s feelings move fast. At this rate, you’ll be his bride by the end of the summer.”

Joey and I have spent every day together since we started having sex.

“I feel closer to you than ever before,” he tells me when we do it now. Over the course of my last month in Florida, I try twice to leave him. The first time is in Mr. Perry’s office after Toby reports us for making out during our lunch break. He reminds us again of the responsibility that comes with being the oldest non-managerial employees.

“I’m all in favor of young love, but you can’t be sticking your tongues in each other’s mouths in front of the kids,” Mr. Perry tells us. “This is South Florida, their parents will sue.” I want to correct Mr. Perry and tell him that it isn’t young love, at least not for me. And then Joey will finally know how I feel, and it will be over. But then I realize that it won’t really be over, because I will have to face him, my ex-boyfriend, at work the next day, and the day after that, and every day until I leave. And it would be harder on both of us, I think, to be broken up while we are still so close to each other.

The second time is several weeks later at the beach, after he gives me a necklace the same way Grandma was given a necklace by a boy she did not love, except I do not stop Joey from

putting it on me. When we are in the ocean, I use my fingers to toy with the chain of the necklace until it slips off and falls in with the rhythms of the waves. I make my way to our things in the sand and fold up my towel, preparing to make a run for it. I will walk off the sand and run inland along Atlantic Avenue, past the highway, past The Margaritaville, past several Publixes until I get to Grandma's, and I will hide there with her until it is time to fly home. I try to find Joey in the ocean so that I can look at him one last time, and he is dragging himself through the shallow shore, the water up to his calves as he approaches me with something in his hand.

“This must have fallen off of you, babe,” he says as he fastens it around my neck again.

Grandma just shakes her head when I come home wearing it. When I take it off that night, the shape of the pendant's heart is imprinted on my chest, outlined by a sunburn.

On days when the temperature rises above one hundred degrees, The Margaritaville brings in an on-call paramedic to aid in case anyone faints on the court. Today it is Grandma. Toby, who is working her court, blows his whistle, which accomplishes nothing since everyone at The Margaritaville has grown immune to the sound of it. Joey walks past her unconscious body as she is being pushed on a gurney and runs through every court at The Margaritaville to find me. It is my last day of work. I am flying home tomorrow. Joey still doesn't know.

In the hospital waiting room, Joey says a prayer for Grandma.

“I know you don't believe in any of this, but perhaps you'd like to join me,” Joey suggests, extending his hand out to my shaking body. He's right, I don't believe in any of it, but I am lost, and I am desperate, so I take his hand and let him guide me to my knees into prayer. He says things, sacred biblical things, that I have definitely heard before in movies. He holds my hands tightly while he connects to something that I cannot see, something that must occupy the

empty space between us. Of all of the intimacies I have experienced with Joey, this is the most naked and vulnerable I have ever felt with him, on our knees in the middle of a crowded hospital. I stand back up and take a seat before he has a chance, at the very least, to make an agnostic out of me.

“She’s going to be okay,” Joey tells me like it is a fact, so sure of his words.

“How do you know?”

“Because I can feel it, spiritually. I know He is going to save her.” Joey has just put in a word with god to save my Grandmother, and in less than twenty-four hours, he will speak to god again with a broken heart, all because of me. He will ask god why he has taken his love away from him, to ask for relief from the pain of losing me. And all I can do now is let him hold my hand in the waiting room, a gesture he thinks to be out of love, but only I know that it is out of fear.

After many hours of waiting, after my last Florida sunset dims the sky outside the windows of the hospital, a nurse informs us that Grandma will be okay. That she has fainted out of extreme heat exhaustion, and needs to rest.

“See, I told you she would be okay,” Joey says, and he winks at me. The nurse leads us to Grandma’s hospital room, where she is awake in bed.

“She may not sound like herself,” the nurse warns, explaining that Grandma is extremely exhausted, and a little bit out of it.

Grandma’s face lights up when she sees us. I sit beside her hospital bed, holding her hand. Joey stands next to me. I play some Leonard Cohen on my phone and Grandma sways her head gently, humming the tune. This time it is Joey who pulls me into a waltz, dancing the way you do when you don’t know the music. When Grandma and I dance to this song, I can feel

Leonard Cohen's words in our movements. But it is still nice, and when we finish, Grandma claps her hands and asks Joey if he will drive me to the airport tomorrow.

I think Joey does it because he feels like he has to. It must be the same way that I've felt every single time I've told him that I love him this summer. I am once again and for the last time sitting in the passenger seat of his car, my suitcase in the trunk, passing under a silver alert sign. We drive in silence, having said everything we meant to say to each other the night before, all of my lies released into the wild. It feels like we are living in the epilogue of his heartbreak, like I am seeing the aftermath of something I have damaged but instead of walking away, I am sitting right next to it while it does me a favor. I think that this is torture for him, to drive me to the airport knowing that he will never see me again. It hurts me, too. The end of my first real relationship. The pain of breaking up with someone isn't talked about as much as the pain of being broken up with, but it hurts, very much, to hurt other people.

On the airport grounds, we reach an intersection. Veering right will take us to the departures, where Joey will drop me off on the curb. Veering left will take us to the parking lot, where, knowing Joey, we will fuck one last time. He blinks left, opting for the parking lot. We exchange a look, knowing it will be different this time. Knowing that neither of us will be making love.

Next of Kin

The chandelier is from Costco. You take the pieces home in a box and assemble it yourself. Over two hundred pieces, crystals, that you place one by one on a metal beam. It is a tedious task. Mindless, but tedious. You could listen to music while you do it; you could watch TV. It will take you several months, because you work for a living, and not as a chandeliersmith, which is what you call whoever designs the chandeliers they sell at Costco. That person is an artist, and you feel like their apprentice, bringing the prototype to life. You've paid for the pleasure. But it was a bargain, \$99, and it looks like a million bucks. That's why you're a proud Costco Gold Star Member, for the bargains and the quality goods. Once you're finished, you will hang it above the dining room table and the room will be complete. You will host guests for whatever holiday comes next on the calendar. It is Arbor Day. You will host a gathering on

Arbor Day! And when you indulge in your Arbor Day feast, you will look up at the chandelier, feeling the outline of the rectangular Costco card in your back pocket; you carry it there for good luck sometimes, and you will feel accomplished.

When you die and leave your dining room behind, unfortunately before Arbor Day, your father, in town to mourn you, will position the fiancée and two step daughters you also left behind under the chandelier and pull a disposable camera out of his pocket. He will ask them to smile. He will say they can do better than that. Your fiancée will say it is kind of hard to smile. She won't say why, because it is obvious. You have just died, and they will be sad. Not just sad; their world will have been turned upside down. That is a big thing. A thing that feels bigger than anything you ever got to feel, because you yourself have never experienced the type of loss you've just afforded them, the loss of a partner and of a stepfather. The loss of someone so immediate.

Losing you will have yet to sink in for your biological family, your mother, father, brother, and your sister-in-law, who you left behind long before you left the world behind. They will be so cavalier as they pace around your house that your fiancée and step daughters can only assume they let the grief out of their systems during the four hour flight from Denver. They will arrive in Miami less than forty-eight hours after your death like they are on vacation, the men of the family in Tommy Bahama button downs, and the women in flowing dresses with swimwear peeking out from underneath. They will wear these clothes to your cremation and to your shiva call. They will wear these clothes as they make your posthumous decisions for you, because you did not have a will, and as your next of kin, they will screw over your fiancée and your stepdaughters.

Your fiancée will slip the extension piece into the dining room table, a task you would normally help her with, but now it is your brother who helps, sliding his finger across the smooth wood once it is in place and asking if it is mahogany, or perhaps sandalwood. Your fiancée will not know the answer to this question. All she knows is that the table, like the chandelier, is also from Costco, also a bargain. Your family will take their seats and it will look like a conference table, a far cry from your Arbor Day dreams. Your brother, the first to open his mouth, will get right to it.

“As you know, my brother did not have a will.”

“At least not that we know of right now,” his wife, your sister-in-law, will cut him off to say. Her legs will be propped up on your brother’s lap. She will look comfortable. “We think he may have drafted one up a long time ago, you know, when he was still with his ex-wife,” her eyes will roll, “and we’re working on finding it. But as of right now, we must proceed under the assumption that there is no will.”

Your fiancée, fighting tears, will recall the time, just a few weeks before, when you tossed an air mattress into the pool and floated on it together, your skin borrowing more red from the sun than you had time left to give back. You always got her into the pool, she will say, and even if her hair got wet, she wouldn’t mind. Your sister-in-law will adjust the shoulder straps of her swimsuit and pull out a brochure for a company that turns human remains into hourglasses.

“Isn’t it timeless? Pun not intended,” she will smirk. “I think he would have just loved this.” She will pass the brochure around the table.

Everyone will remark how beautiful it is, how it is both decorative and useful, how it just screams of you. When the brochure lands in your younger stepdaughter’s hands, she will tear it in half and run into her bedroom. The door will slam, sending the dangling crystals of the

chandelier into a mild frenzy. Your fiancée will apologize to everyone on her behalf, and kindly explain to them that it was she who found you, not two days before, on the bathroom floor. At only sixteen, a sight like that. She will then summon the strength to request that they not discuss matters of what to do with you, or your belongings, so soon. She will request more time to mourn. And isn't that why everyone will be gathered in your home in the first place, she will ask? To mourn you?

"You're right," your mother will say. And she will direct everyone's attention to the chandelier. She will pull out her phone and show everyone the photos you sent, without any responses back, of the chandelier in progress. Every week you sent her an update, the amount of crystals growing each time. "He worked so hard on that thing," she'll say, and everyone will marvel at it. Your father will snap another photo of it with his disposable camera. Your mother will look up appraisals of similar chandeliers on the internet. Your sister-in-law will fantasize of an estate attorney granting it to her, she will shake the attorney's hand and kiss your brother like they have just gotten married. And your brother will assess the bolts and screws that hold the chandelier against your ceiling, estimating the size of the screw drivers he will need to remove it and bolt it back into his own dining room ceiling.

Your fiancée will smirk, as though you could see it, at the fact that this beautiful chandelier came from Costco, and they would never guess that you once carried the box of it under your shoulder with one arm and used the other to hoist a \$1.50 hot dog up to your lips, an employee in an orange vest crossing a line through your receipt with a red marker at the exit. The hot dogs, your fiancée would say, made you so fat.

No one will be expecting the arrival of your ex-wife and, by extension, her daughter. Who is your daughter, too. The one who a judge once mandated you call every Friday though

you often felt the urge to call her on other days of the week as well. She would only answer on Fridays. It would be brief. She would remind you to fill her bank account and say “uh huh” in response to your work stories and memories you’d recall from her childhood.

The last time you saw her in person was two years earlier, when you and your fiancée, at the time just your girlfriend, took a road trip out to visit her. She would not look your fiancée in the eyes and only took two bites of the meal you treated her to. When you would not buy her a new iPhone, she told you to drop her back at her mother’s, and once she turned eighteen, about three months before your death, she stopped answering your calls. When the news breaks of your passing, she will post a photo on Instagram from the trip you’d taken with her to Disneyland when she was a toddler and then spend five hundred dollars on a day-of flight to Miami. She will not be wearing a swimsuit, but it is in her suitcase.

No one will expect their arrival, but they will enter your house like they own the place, because they technically will. Your fiancée will nearly faint upon seeing them. Your mother will roll her eyes and remind your father that your daughter never thanked them for the crisp twenty dollar bill they sent in the mail for her sixteenth birthday. Your brother and sister-in-law will curse under their breath, knowing full well that the battle over your belongings will only be made complicated by their arrival. Your stepdaughters will marvel at the sight of them in the flesh, they will have only ever seen your former family in the photos you shared. Your ex-wife will fall into your fiancée’s arms at the door and they will embrace the only way two women who once loved the same man could. It will shock everyone, even each other.

No one will know what to think of your ex-wife’s display of emotion, of whether it is genuine or not. Only you could know that, but you will be gone. You will not be a participant in the game you set up for everyone to play. All that is clear is that your ex-wife and your

biological daughter now have the upper hand, because everything goes to the daughter when you don't have a will.

When your ex-wife removes herself from your fiancée's arms, her cheeks flushed and damp with smothered tears, she will take notice of your fiancée's ringless hand. It will be all she needs to see in order to breathe a sigh of relief. Your fiancée is, in fact, your fiancée, but neither of you felt the need to put a ring on it, to sign the documents. You both knew it was real, your stepdaughters knew. You were a family, but this could only be proved by word of mouth.

Your biological daughter will introduce herself to your stepdaughters. She will say that she's heard so much about them. Your stepdaughters will marvel at how her facial features so closely resemble yours. They will feel envy towards the shape of her jaw and the point of her nose. Your biological daughter will lead the conversation, not because she is more extroverted, but because the grief she feels will not be the same type of grief your stepdaughters feel. They still have a long way to go in order to acclimate to the lack of you, while she has already done this, and by her own hand. Your biological daughter will convince them, in their vulnerable state, to lead her to the garage, where most of your belongings are stored.

At the same time, your fiancée will lead your ex-wife back to the dining room, where your ex-wife will assume the seat at the head of the table as your fiancée unfolds a folding chair. The folding chair, uncushioned and lacking in back support, makes her come up shorter than everyone else. She will wonder if your biological family will want this chair too. They would pull it out from under her if they have to, she thinks.

Your ex-wife will inform everyone of the arrangements she has made at the cremation center several towns over in Lantana. It will be in a strip mall nestled between a Publix and a small casino. It will have four stars on Yelp. Your fiancée will cry. She will feel confused. She

won't understand why she will be sending your body to burn at a place she knows nothing about in a nearby town when not two days before your breath warmed her shoulder as you snored in bed. She will be unsure of whether these are the proper arrangements to make. She will not want to have to make these arrangements at all, because you should still be there. Your ex-wife will explain to your fiancée that she will not be making the arrangements, that they are taking care of it. Your fiancée will beg them to give you a proper burial. She will beg for just a small piece of your remains. They will offer to give her a small piece of you, but only if she lets them sell your house. Which is your fiancée's house, too, though her name was never on the paperwork. They will insist that it is the smartest thing to do. She will fight and fight and fight your blood relatives, and if you could see it, you would be ashamed of the mess you'll have left her in.

In the garage, your biological daughter will dust off your old book of poetry and song lyrics. She will read your poems, which you wrote when you were in your twenties, and they will make excessive use of the words "fly" and "baby" and "tonight." She will laugh at your efforts. Your older stepdaughter, wondering what on earth is so funny, will see the book in her hands and recall the day you unpacked all of your belongings after moving into the house. You were both in the garage, and she marvelled at your stuff like you were setting up a museum of your personal history, trying to get a good read on who her new stepfather would be. You dusted off the book, which you had never shown to anyone before, and handed it to her as a gesture of sorts. She laughed at the book, too. It was one of the first things the two of you bonded over. So she will snatch it out of your biological daughter's hands.

"He gave me this," she will say. But it won't feel convincing enough just to say it, so she will hug the book into her chest and attempt to cry over it. The tears, fake, used as a tool to

convince your biological daughter that she, too, is yours, will fall out of her eyelids as if being dragged.

“Keep it if it means that much to you,” your biological daughter will say. “My mom really just wants me to take what we can sell. I don’t think anyone will want his song book, the band never really took off.” She will run a finger across the rims of your record collection and wipe the dust on her jeans. She will ring the bell on your bike. “I can’t believe I’m finally seeing where he lived. And you guys. I was always kind of jealous. *Florida*. You guys probably go to the beach every day. He invited me here so many times, there was one Thanksgiving I almost bought a plane ticket.”

“Why didn’t you?” your older stepdaughter will ask.

“My mom wanted me to spend it with her. I guess it’s a family holiday. I mean he’s family too but, you know.” She will stick her hand in your baseball mitt. “I guess he always felt far away.” She will stuff the mitt in her backpack. “He would have wanted me to keep this.”

Your older stepdaughter will retreat to her bedroom with the book. She will take photos of every page just in case they find a way to take it from her. She will cry real tears over it. She will feel nearly orphaned, fatherless. Your biological daughter will continue to snoop around the garage, stuffing items in her backpack that she insists you would have wanted her to have. Your younger stepdaughter will keep watch.

Your fiancée will catch your brother in the kitchen, sticking his face in your fridge.

“Sorry,” he will say. “Just wanted to see what he was eating.” He will pull a bottle of wine from the fridge door. “Or what he was drinking.”

“Well that one’s mine,” your fiancée will say, pulling two glasses out of the cupboard.

“I guess I’m just looking for answers at this point. I don’t know what he must have done to himself this time to end up dead.” They will both sip their wine. “I think it’s quite funny he ended up in Florida. I don’t know if he ever told you, we used to come down here when we were kids to visit our uncle in Fort Lauderdale. He’d say the same thing to him every time we came down to visit. ‘You know why you’re so big and he’s so small? Because he eats what’s right and you eat what’s left.’” Your brother will shake his head. “We booked a hotel not far from where my uncle used to live. Right on the beach.”

“Sounds lovely.”

“You only had him for six years, you know.”

“What?”

“He’s my brother, we grew up together. You’re not even married.”

“We were engaged.”

“I don’t see a ring on your finger. You can’t give us shit for selling the house and wanting to make something nice out of his remains. My wife has wonderful taste, you know, and she picked out that hourglass.”

Your fiancée, realizing that she will never be able to explain the love she has for you, that it is beyond explaining, will look your brother straight in his eyes and tell him, god forbid, to imagine that his wife, your sister-in-law, has just died. That he will never see her again. And then, perhaps, he will understand the gravity of this loss for her. Your brother does not take kindly to this comparison. Your sister-in-law, overhearing the argument, will run to your brother’s rescue. She will console your brother’s shoulder and flip your fiancée off with the same hand her engagement ring is on.

Your mother, dipping her toes in your backyard pool, which you'd luckily cleaned the leaves and tadpoles out of before you passed, will make arrangements for a memorial service for you in Denver, to be held in a room just big enough to fit everyone from your past life. She will be discreet on the phone, speaking quietly, so your fiancée will not hear of it. Your father will hover over a bush next to the pool, taking a photo of a lizard with his disposable camera. When your mother hangs up the phone, your father will lean over his shoulder and tell her how excited he is to show you the photos he's taken.

"He's dead, sweetheart," your mother will say, shifting deeper into the pool to wet her calves. "We've been over this."

When your biological family leaves your home for the day, each of them retreating back to their respective beachfront hotels, your fiancée will open the door to the bathroom you died in two days earlier. She will not have set foot in there since it happened. Your toiletries will still be on the counter, your toothbrush gone dry. She will open all of your drawers and the smell of your deodorant and your shaving cream will escape from it. It will smell like you are standing right next to her. She will run her finger through the tiny residual hairs shed from your electric razor and then place them inside a plastic bag. She will hold it to her heart and cry over it. It will be the only physical remain she will keep of you.

The next day, your co-worker from the nursing home will ring your doorbell and then he will grab a miniature sandwich from the platter on your dining room table. This will be the day of your real shiva call. Your fiancée and your step daughters will invite your friends, neighbors, co-workers, and your biological family will know nothing of it. Your fiancée will not recognize your co-worker at first, only having met him once or twice before. He will not want to stay long.

He will stop by just to pay his respects and to inform your fiancée of what you were using. That perhaps you should not have worked in a place with access to such strong medications, given your history. He will tell her this, and before he leaves, he will marvel at the chandelier hanging above the dining room table, which you told him all about.

Boca

Mr. Wilson's sex robot moaned louder than Mrs. Wilson ever did during intercourse. He'd always bust it out whenever his wife was gone on a business trip. I tried my best to ignore it, focusing on the sound of the air conditioning or the bull frogs that made homes for themselves on the patios that time of year. But once he started thrusting her into the wall his master bedroom shared with my children's room, the collective sound of her gears turning and her monotonous expressions of pleasure causing them to ask questions I couldn't answer, it became impossible to ignore.

"Papa, why is our neighbor hurting that woman?" My six year old boy Jesse asked well past his bedtime. "It seems that she just wants to please her daddy!"

"No Jesse, I told you, she likes it! She keeps asking for more!" Jesse's twin, April, called in after him.

I tried to keep them in the living room as late into the night as possible. It was a Tuesday, the kids had school in the morning. Once the cartoon channel underwent its nightly transformation into adult programming, we did a puzzle. We'd done this puzzle a million times. It was an apple with a worm coming out of the side giving a thumbs up and a wink. Hundred pieces. My wife Andrea bought it. Andrea looked nothing like a worm, yet the worm reminded me of her. Sometimes when we'd put the pieces together I'd pretend we were putting her back to life. Then Jesse would grind his toes into it as soon as we'd pressed in the final piece, never taking the time to appreciate what we had created.

“Daddy, daddy, can we get a new puzzle? I hate this one now,” April pleaded. They were getting over Andrea’s death much sooner than I was.

“Yeah, we’ll get a new puzzle. And maybe just call me dad from now on.”

I found out that it was a sex robot and not a real human lady after I knocked on Mr. Wilson’s door the next day. It was the first time I’d ever stood in his doorway. The entryway to every townhouse in our gated community was designed exactly the same, but his felt different than mine. It looked like it belonged to a couple who did not have any children, a couple who took care of their home as though it *were* their child. Or at least a couple who had enough money saved from not having children to pay housekeepers and landscapers to do it for them.

Andrea and I would always joke about the Wilsons. We didn’t know anything about them aside from what we could see of them in passing and the rumors that would circulate around the community. Mr. Wilson owned a local beauty school, and you could see it on his face. He had all of the work done; plastic surgery, dyed hair, unnaturally blushed cheeks. I was surprised his face never melted off in the Florida heat. Mrs. Wilson was a lawyer. She hardly ever left the house without a pant suit and a briefcase. She was always out of town on business trips. Andrea and I would come up with stories about the affairs we imagined they were having, and since the day we moved in we waited for the demise of their marriage. I never thought ours would have ended first.

Mr. Wilson answered the door in a robe that had *Boca School of Beauty* embroidered along the right shoulder. I hoped he was wearing something underneath it. The plastic surgery made his face so shiny I could almost see my reflection in it. I fought every urge to test the smoothness of his cheeks with my fingers.

“Hi Mr. Wilson-” I began. He cut me off immediately and put a muscular arm around my shoulders.

“Hey there sport, we’re neighbors! Call me Todd.”

“Hi, Todd.” He removed his arm from my shoulders.

“Sean Wood!” he told me my name like I didn’t know it while pointing at me with both hands. His nails were perfect.

“Yes, that’s me. Look, I know we don’t really talk much, but there’s something I wanted to bring to your attention,” I gulped, realizing that this was our first time having a real conversation. He stared at me like I had a piece of information he didn’t want to hear. I had to choose my words carefully. “How do I put this...”

“Do you wanna come inside? Heh, that’s what she said.” He laughed very hard at his joke.

“Oh, I don’t want to impose-”

“No, please! I insist. The Mrs. is out of town so no need to worry about seeing her indecent or anything. Though that certainly is a sight to see!” He lead me inside.

“Oh, did she just leave this morning?”

“No, she’s been gone for a few days now. Got a whole bachelor pad going on in here, man!” At this point I was sure I caught him having an affair. Then I saw the machine.

She looked homemade, bolts and screws were sticking out of various points on her body. She was splayed out on the living room couch, every piece of her wide open. Her eyes were closed, the eyelashes extended down to her cheeks. I found nothing attractive about her, she just looked like a metal robot. But then, I hadn’t felt attraction towards anyone since Andrea passed.

Todd carried on as though a sex robot wasn’t laying out in the middle of the house.

“You want anything? Tea, coffee?”

“What is that?”

“It’s a warm beverage.” I realized I’d forgotten to point at what I was talking about.

“I mean, nevermind. I’m okay actually, thanks.” It was a nice home and everything, lots of leather and wood and massive paintings on the walls. “Should I not be here?” I asked.

“What do you mean? Why shouldn’t you be?” I motioned towards the couch. “Oh yeah, that’s Penny. I hit that pretty much every night. Well, whenever Mrs. Wilson is gone that is, hah. Ain’t she a beaut?”

“I think that was actually what I came here to talk to you about. You know in these townhouses, everything’s just so close. We share a wall-”

“Ohhh. Okay. I see what you’re on about mister.” Todd had a smug look on his face as he approached me and put an arm around my shoulder again. “You heard us going at it last night, and you want a piece of the action.”

“Oh, no no no Todd, you’re misunderstanding-”

“Say no more. Sean, I don’t think I ever got to offer my condolences when your wife died. What was that chick’s name?”

“Andrea.”

“Andrea! Man, I saw all the ambulances and everything that day. Must’ve been devastating. How long’s she been gone now?”

“It’ll be eight months on Friday.”

Todd let out a long and loud whistle.

“Damn, eight months, huh? Long time. And I’m guessing you haven’t gotten much action in that time. Am I right about that, Sean?”

“Well, I haven’t really been thinking much about that-”

“Look, the least I could do is let you borrow Penny for a night.”

“Wait, what?”

“She’s real good, man. One of the best on the market. And I know you’ve got kids at home so don’t worry, you can adjust the volume.” Todd demonstrated the volume toggles, which were her nipples.

The thought of sticking my number in that thing made me uneasy. I hadn’t even thought about being intimate with another woman since Andrea left, let alone a sex robot. Even masturbating just felt wrong.

“Todd, I really do appreciate the offer, but I think I’m okay.”

“Look buddy, if you’re concerned about sanitation, I can assure you she’s very clean. She undergoes a deep sterilization after each go of it. You know how they say vaginas clean themselves? Well, Penny’s actually does. Hell, I’d say she’s cleaner than half the women in Boca Raton! And I can say that from experience, my friend. Hah!” We exchanged a weak high five. I didn’t like to talk about women that way.

“I mean, is it even okay to use someone else’s sex robot?”

“Well that’s what you do anyway with real women, don’t you? We’re all just sticking our numbers in the same women at the end of the day! Come on, consider this my mourning gift to you.”

When I tried to explain to Todd that people don’t give mourning gifts, I realized something. If Penny was at my house instead of Todd’s, he couldn’t use her that night, which meant a night of peace and quiet for me and the kids. I could put them to bed at a reasonable

hour, and we could share bedtime stories in the dark like we love to do without having to worry about the thrusts and moans from Mr. Wilson's side of the wall.

I wasn't sure how to transport Penny from Todd's house to mine without risking the neighbors seeing. But then Todd grabbed a large box of popcorn that he had bought in bulk from Costco and stuffed Penny in there. It would appear like a wholesome neighborly popcorn exchange. I brought the box to mine and Andrea's room with no intention of opening it. I only had to keep her hidden for one night. Todd wanted her back the next morning so he could have another go with her before Mrs. Wilson would return that night. He told me to do whatever I wanted with her, and I wanted her in that box.

Sometimes April would ask me when Andrea was coming back. I think my explanation of heaven caused the confusion. After it happened, the kids asked where their mother had gone, and when I told them she went up to heaven, April had a ton of follow up questions regarding the logistics. How did she get up above the clouds? A car, I told her. A car that goes up, that only people allowed into heaven can drive. Why can't we see her when the sky is clear? She's too far up, but if you use your imagination, you can see her. Do people in heaven ever come back? That was a tough one. Sometimes, I said. But not very often.

When I tucked April into bed, she told me she saw a car drop from the sky and onto the road. A car came back from heaven today, she said. Maybe it was mom. Maybe it was, I said, or it could have been someone else. I don't know what she thought she saw, but she was certain that Andrea was coming back.

I returned to my room and laid in bed picturing a car gently dropping from the sky and onto State Road 7. It immediately adapted to its new surroundings, matching the speed of the

other cars, driving like it had an errand to run. The car arrived at the gated entry to our community and a hand with painted fingernails and a wedding ring extended out from the driver's window to push a key fob against the scanner, causing the gate to open in that painfully slow way it does. The car pulled into our driveway, and out stepped Andrea in her work uniform. She unlocked the door with her key and after kissing the kids goodnight, she laid down next to me in bed.

I got up and took whatever was left of my wife and moved her several inches to the left. I faced every framed photo downwards, covered the urn with a t-shirt, took any stray item that belonged to her and put it in the bathroom. I wanted her not to see me. I grabbed Penny from the box and tried to find Andrea's face in hers somehow. It was hard, Penny was the most lackluster attempt at a human replica. But I tried my best to work with her.

I did not want to be disrespectful of Penny, even though she was probably designed for that purpose, and I'm sure Todd disrespected her every time he used her. I didn't think I was that type of guy. I tried to warm her up with foreplay, though she wasn't designed to need it. I did everything I knew worked on Andrea. I went in for a kiss. It was difficult with her mouth opened so wide, so I made mine wider. When I removed my mouth, hers came off with it. It was stuck inside my mouth. I tried moving it around with my tongue and nearly choked on it before spitting it out. It didn't seem that she'd ever been kissed before. I didn't seem that she was designed for any kind of loving embrace. I placed her mouth on my night table and cuddled her until I imagined we both fell asleep, and it felt, vaguely, like Andrea was right there.

I woke up to Penny still in my arms like a lover. Her mouth was on the night table where I left it. I tried for a long time to reattach it to her, but it wouldn't stick. I didn't feel right about it. I threw her unlovingly back into the popcorn box and stored her back in the closet.

I knocked on Todd's door again after dropping the kids off at school. He was wearing the same robe. I explained to him that the mouth had fallen off. He asked me what in the world I did, seeming a bit impressed, and I told him I tried to kiss her.

"Yeah, she's not really made for that kind of action," he said. I apologized profusely, but he told me not to worry. He needed to spice things up with her anyway. "I think I could get into a little mouthless sex, if you know what I mean." I did not know what he meant, but I high fived him anyway.

I returned back home and heard Mr. Wilson already at it again through the walls. When I entered my room, the popcorn box was still there. I'd returned Penny out in the open without thinking. I moved everything of Andrea's that I had hidden the night before, and instead of placing them back where they were, I stored them in the popcorn box, deciding that it was okay to move on.

The Sweepstakes

I'd had a few drinks when an email from Jetflew Airlines set off my phone during my boss's speech at the annual Women in Cheese Gala. My boss, Helen, was about midway through the section of her speech about the history of working women in the cheese industry when the

ringer sounded in my clutch loud enough for Diane Robinson, standing right next to me, to pinch my shoulder. I retrieved my phone discreetly so that Helen wouldn't see and as I silenced the ringer, I caught a brief glimpse of the email's caps-locked subject line. "SWEEPSTAKES: ENTER NOW AND WE'LL WRAP YOU..." The business woman in me could finish the subject line for them. *In savings*, it probably said. What else could an airline wrap me in? It didn't make much sense, to be wrapped in savings, but there's only so many ways to tell your customers that you have the lowest prices when you send them an email at least once a day. You had to give them credit for trying something new.

Helen, resting her forearms on the podium as if to prevent it from falling, was explaining how Chedda Inc., and cheese in general, would not be what it is today without the contributions of women. She was seconds away from announcing the winner of the Cheese Lady of the Year award, which I was up for because of the deal I closed with Costco to sell our cheese at their stores. It was between me and Diane Robinson, who had pioneered Chedda's dairy free line of cheeses. Diane had clearly dressed to receive the award, in a fitted yet work appropriate dress the same shade of orange as cheddar itself. The dress would look perfect against the award, a golden block of swiss cheese with the body of a female, breasts and all, as she held it up for photo ops.

I may not have been dressed the same color as our product, but ever since I got hired at Chedda after college, cheese became my whole life. I'd spent the last ten years at the company working my way up. Diane had only been working at Chedda for a year, fresh out of undergrad. She was one of the younger employees brought in to help make the Chedda brand more progressive. Their first initiative was to get rid of the "r" in "Cheddar," our original name, which, as Diane pointed out, wasn't very original.

As Helen neared the end of her speech, Diane and I both prepared ourselves to bolt up to the podium, Diane straightening her posture as I fingered the index cards in my clutch that my acceptance speech was written on. I knocked back the rest of my drink and placed it on a waiter's tray as he walked past me.

"I'm pleased to announce this year's Cheese Lady of the Year," Helen looked in the direction of Diane and I, and it was impossible to tell who she intended to make eye contact with. We both smiled back at her, each making a claim to her gaze.

"She looks so pathetic in that orange dress," I slurred into the ears of Chedda's IT department, who I joined at the bar. "It's like, we get it, you work in *cheese*." Diane was making the rounds, accepting congratulatory handshakes while I ordered another drink. I'd never spoken to the IT department before in my life, aside from the one time I was certain my computer had broken when it was only unplugged. I apologized to them several times throughout the night for this incident, though none of them seemed to remember it. But they listened to me, and they were supportive.

"Who eats dairy free cheese anyway?" one of them said, putting an arm around my shoulder in companionship. "Isn't dairy the whole point of cheese?"

Diane's handshake tour brought her to the bar, where she thanked the IT department for all of their hard work. I didn't want to give her the satisfaction of my attention, so I took out my phone. No texts, no missed calls. No one had made any effort to contact me except Jetflew Airlines, so I opened the email, eager to engage with my phone so that I would look busy.

FROM: JETFLEW AIRLINES

TO: ELISE.FRIEDMAN@CHEDDACHEESE.ORG

SUBJECT: SWEEPSTAKES: ENTER NOW AND WE'LL WRAP YOU FOR THE HOLIDAYS

Dear beloved miles-earning customer,

Don't have any ideas of what to get your family for the holidays? Enter our holiday sweepstakes and send yourself as a gift! Winner will be professionally gift-wrapped in our limited edition human-sized gift box and receive a free roundtrip flight home for the holidays from December 24th to December 26th. Click the link below to enter.

I looked the email over a few times to make sure I was reading it right. I was no stranger to a sweepstakes, having organized several for Chedda over the years, but this one was bizarre, a laugh, even. Once Diane had left the bar, I showed it to my buddies in the IT department.

“Get a load of this,” I told them. They all gathered around my phone as I read the email out loud. IT got a real laugh out of it, the idea of someone being wrapped in a human-sized gift box, some to the point that their drinks would not stay in their mouths.

“Sweepstakes these days are getting stranger and stranger,” one of them said.

“Gotta love how they say ‘holidays’ plural, when we all know which holiday they’re really sending you home for,” said another, who must have been Jewish just like I was, and realized that the dates mentioned in the email fell only on Christmas.

“You should enter it, Elise! Maybe it would be nice to visit your family, even if you don’t celebrate Christmas,” said another. I explained to my new friends that I didn’t have much of a family. That my parents died in a car crash when I was in college. That my grandparents had gone long before that, one-by-one over the course of my childhood. That I grew up an only child, no siblings. That I didn’t even have any in-laws because I wasn’t married. Next thing I knew I was being concealed inside a group hug, consoled by IT.

“I guess they call you guys tech *support* for a reason. No one at this company has supported me like you all have tonight. IT is the true backbone of this company, and there should be an award for you too, damn it! Why the hell isn’t there an award for IT?” I looked around for Helen, to ask her this exact question. I bumped into Diane on the way and when she extended her hand to me I faked the enthusiasm to congratulate her.

“This was very clever,” I said, poking the orange sleeve of her dress. “You look like cheddar cheese.”

“Oh wow, I wasn’t even going for that!” Diane giggled, accepting it as a compliment.

“Oh, sure you weren’t, miss cheese lady.” I pushed past her and made my way to Helen, who was in the middle of a conversation with Chedda’s CEO. Helen saw me and flagged me down, like my approach was her own idea.

“Ah yes, Elise! Our Cheese Lady runner up!” Helen extended a hand out to me for a shake. “You’ve been working here for what, five years now? And I’m sure you haven’t even met our CEO!” I rejected Helen’s attempted handshake and corrected her, explaining that I’d been working at Chedda for ten years. Ten whole years, and several months. And I bet she didn’t even know my last name, did she? “Um, yes. Friedman. We’ve worked together for years, Elise.”

So she did know my full name. Well since she’s so full of *knowledge*, then perhaps she could name every single employee in the IT department. First and last. Wouldn’t a good boss at least know that, I asked her?

“Elise, I’m not going to list off the names of everyone who works in IT. There’s, like, twenty of them,” she went on, explaining to me that it wouldn’t be appropriate to continue with this topic of conversation at the Gala. “If you have concerns about my management, Elise, you

can stop by my office any time and we can discuss it.” She was probably just trying to look good in front of our CEO, which was of no concern to me in my drunken state.

“Oh, I have concerns, Helen, and I think Mr. CEO here deserves to know that you treat our IT department like animals!” I walked up to the CEO and put my arm around his shoulders like he was a friend. “You see all those people over there?” I pointed towards the bar, where the IT department continued to drink and paid us no mind. “Those are some good people who I’m lucky enough to call my friends, and where’s their award, huh? They don’t get one, because Helen is too busy handing out awards to people who don’t even eat dairy! And I just think that’s against our values, don’t you?” The CEO maneuvered himself out of my embrace and looked at Helen like he wanted her to fire me. So she did.

“Elise, perhaps you should go home,” Helen said, both furious and mortified. “And don’t bother coming back.”

I could feel the alcohol moving through my stomach with the twists and turns of the cab. I sat slumped in the back seat, eating the grapes I pulled from an edible arrangement and stuffed in my purse on the way out of the gala. I started venting to the cab driver, trying to make sense of my unemployment.

“Can you believe they would just let me go like that after ten years of working for them? It’s like, ‘thanks for putting us on the Costco shelves, Elise! Now leave and never come back.’” The world outside of the cab window was just a swirl of color and light to me. “At least the IT people were nice to me. We had some good laughs tonight. You know Jetflew Airlines? They sent out this ridiculous email.” Not noticing that the cab driver had shut the window that divided us, I continued to tell him all about the sweepstakes. “Apparently they wrap you up in a human

sized box. I mean who comes up with these things?” The driver continued to focus on the road, made a right turn. “I would enter it myself, you know, just for a laugh, but I don’t know who I’d visit.” Then I remembered my grandmother’s sister, Ruth. We were never that close, but she made an appearance at my parents’ funeral all those years ago, said I was welcome to visit her at her beachfront condo in Florida any time, which I never took her up on. I was usually too busy with work to take a vacation anyway. Now I was unemployed, and I needed a win.

I pulled out my phone, which illuminated the entire back seat of the cab, and opened up the email. I clicked the link to enter the sweepstakes and it brought me to a URL that probably had more penguins and christmas trees on it than any other page on the internet. Before I had time to stop myself, I began entering my information into the blank spaces. I wondered as I typed in my last name, Friedman, if entering such a Jewish last name would disqualify me from winning, but maybe they would think I was one of those half-jews who celebrated Hanukkah *and* Christmas. I entered in all of my basic information, selected my preferred pattern of wrapping paper and the size gift box I would need, which they recommended to be at least three inches taller than my height for optimum comfort. I quickly glossed over the terms and conditions before submitting my entry. My phone buzzed with a confirmation email. The cab driver told me to leave. My apartment was right outside.

When I got another email from Jetflew three weeks later with the subject line, “CONGRATULATIONS,” I’d forgotten that I ever entered the sweepstakes. I was so caught up with trying to fix my mistakes from the gala, piecing the drunken night back together in my head, then applying for new jobs and unemployment benefits. At first I thought the email was for a job offer with Jetflew, or at least an interview. But when I opened it there was a GIF of my

photoshopped face emerging from a gift box, indicating that I had won. It was no Cheese Lady of the Year award, but it was still a win. And now I would be heading to Ruth's for the holidays. I conducted some quick Google searches to make sure she was still alive after all these years, and thankfully she was.

It had been a long time since I last participated in air travel, and there was a lot about the culture of it that I had to be reminded of. When I arrived at the airport, it all came back to me. I forgot that if you packed a bag that weighed more than a small child, they would charge you a fee that cost more than the ticket itself, so when I arrived at the check-in counter and placed my large suitcase on the scale, the desk attendant gave me a sorrowful look like someone in my family had just died. I had also forgotten how bright airline employees were to look at; they all had shiny white teeth that you could see hints of your reflection in, and those who chose to wear lipstick always wore the same shade of red that was part of the airline's logo. It somehow never got on their teeth.

When I handed the desk attendant my passport, before she could tell me that I did not need a passport for a domestic flight, her face dropped.

"Oh my gosh. You're Elise? Elise *Friedman*?" I told her yes, and she started to cry. She used my passport to fan herself off. "Oh my god. She's here, everyone!"

The two other desk attendants stopped helping their customers to grab a bouquet of balloons and a sash that said "Sweepstakes Queen" on the front and "I'm a little Christmas present" on the back. One of them placed a gold crown on my head with what looked like real sapphire gems.

“Is this real gold?” I asked. The three desk attendants ignored my question and immediately broke out into song. It wasn’t very clever, it was essentially just Happy Birthday, but they replaced the word “birthday” with the word “sweepstakes.” By the end of the song, the three of them formed a human pyramid, but I don’t think any of them were cheerleaders in high school so it was quite wobbly. None of the customers in the airport seemed to notice the performance, so I was the only one who applauded. I then had to help them deform the pyramid, as the attendant on top turned out to have a crippling fear of heights.

The desk attendant handed me a boarding pass that, when you held it up to the light, had a watermark of my face in the top right corner like I was a president. She still charged me one hundred dollars for my suitcase being three pounds over the weight limit.

Once I was through security and purchased a small bag of almonds for ten dollars at a newsstand that did not sell any newspapers, I thought about calling Ruth just to tell her I was coming to visit. We hadn’t spoken in so long, it felt strange that I would be showing up at her door unannounced and that she would have to host me for a holiday that neither of us celebrated. Before I got the chance to dial her number an overly-enthusiastic airline employee approached me.

“Don’t call her!”

“Excuse me?”

“It has to be a surprise! If Ruth knows you’re coming home, the whole sweepstakes will be ruined, and you’ll have to pay for all expenses incurred for your flight. It’s in the terms and conditions you signed. I’m Patty, your escort. Smile!” Patty pulled out a cell phone and snapped a photo of me for Jetflew’s Instagram. “I’ll be sitting next to you on the plane. I was assigned to assist you with your every need. I’m not sure if you recognize me, a photo of my face appears on

several walls throughout the airport. I've been voted 'best flight attendant' for fifty years in a row, and because of this, I've recently earned the title 'best flight attendant ever.' She pointed to her name tag, which read "Patty Patterson, Best Flight Attendant Ever." "I play a crucial role in your sweepstakes prize. I'm here to make sure you have the best flying experience of your entire life." Her smile stretched wider than her actual face.

"Wait a minute, did you say you've been a flight attendant for fifty years? You look no more than twenty-five."

"My positivity keeps me young! Now come with me, you don't have to sit out here with all the *regular* travelers. We have a special lounge for our more privileged customers, and we reserved a special VIP section just for you! Let's boogie!" Normally, I would never trust anyone who used the phrase "let's boogie," but it didn't seem like I had a choice.

Patty led me to my VIP lounge, which was closed off by a red ribbon and had large prints of my passport photo on the walls and sewed onto the couch pillows. The bouncer, who was holding a list that had only my name on it, let us in immediately. A waiter dressed in a white button down with a bow-tie brought the two of us cocktails as soon as we sat down. I don't know how much money Jetflew must have set aside for these amenities, all for one person no less. We clinked glasses, and while I took a modest sip, Patty downed the entire glass.

"Did you know that once you go through menopause, you don't feel the effects of alcohol?" she told me.

"I don't think that's true," I said. The waiter brought Patty another glass, which she downed once again.

After about an hour of getting fully pampered at my VIP lounge with a massage, manicures and pedicures, and a therapy session with a licensed psychologist, the flight was ready

to board. They called me up to board first, before active service members and those flying with small children. As soon as my boarding pass was scanned, confetti was shot from the ceiling and a mariachi band appeared to play me down the runway until I arrived at my seat. Patty slipped some singles into their back pockets as they left, along with vouchers for a free in-flight pillow that they could redeem on their next flight. Every single passenger who boarded the flight gave me a high five as they passed. Before the flight attendants gave the safety demonstration, the pilot came on the PA to congratulate me, and the entire flight erupted into applause.

Before we took off, Patty asked me if I needed anything. There were a lot of things I needed. I needed a job. I needed a family. I needed a whole new life. But at that moment, it felt like Jetflew had given me everything I could have possibly needed.

The Palm Beach International Airport greeted me with an overwhelming amount of Christmas spirit to make up for the fact that there was no snow in Florida. There was a Christmas tree in every corner, and all of the employees wore santa hats. They were considerate enough to dedicate one corner to all of the other holidays that fell around this time of year. If you squinted hard enough, you could see a little menorah large enough for the airport's ants to appreciate the miracle of Hanukkah.

Patty waited with me at the baggage claim to reunite with my suitcase. She also grabbed my human-sized gift box from the carousel. A group of bearded men in sweatshirts made their way down the escalator. Patty waved her arm to flag them down.

“Ah yes, there’s the film crew,” Patty said.

“Film crew?”

“Yes, you probably didn’t notice them sitting way back in coach. They’re the ones who will be filming the reunion for the commercials.”

“What commercials?” Several of them grabbed black bags containing what I could only assume to be camera equipment. The man with the longest beard, whose name was Jayson, introduced himself to Patty and I as the director. He explained that they would be filming my reunion with Ruth to use for a Jetflew commercial.

“We’re gonna make the narrative that she’s your grandmother, just to make it less confusing for the viewers at home,” Jayson told me. “In fact, if you could call her Mee Maw, that would be perfect.”

“I don’t remember agreeing to this,” I said.

“Sure you did!” Patty said. “This was all lined out in the terms and conditions of the sweepstakes. We fly you to your family, *for free*, and you star in five of our commercials. It’s a win-win. In fact, it’s really more of a double win for you. We’re making you a star!”

“Wait, did you say *five* commercials?”

“Well, it could be more, if you’re the right fit for the role!” Patty explained to me that, as part of the sweepstakes, I would essentially be the new spokesperson for Jetflew. “You’ll be like our Geico gecko, or Flo from those Progressive commercials.”

“We rented out this sick film studio in Miami on the 26th,” Jayson said. “They’re only letting us use it for eight hours, so we’ll have to make it quick.”

“As long as she’s done in time for her return flight that night, of course. But I’m sure you’ll be a natural,” Patty said, giving my cheek a squeeze. I should have known that this sweepstakes would come with some sort of catch. I couldn’t act to save my life, and I bet all of my former co-workers at Chedda would see it. The commercial would be bound to pop up on the

TV in the breakroom of the office, and everyone would gather around, Helen and Diane having a good laugh over it.

Patty led myself and the film crew out to the large party bus on the curb, which would be my ride to Ruth's place. Our goodbye was emotional, for her. She told me she was crying, but that I wouldn't be able to see her tears because, after you go through menopause, your tears get absorbed immediately back into your skin.

"Goodbye, Elise. Send Ruth my love, and don't let society change you. I'll see you in two days for your return flight. Merry Christmas!" Patty planted a kiss on my cheek, her lipstick painting the shape of her lips on my skin. One of the film crew wiped it off immediately, saying it wouldn't look right on camera.

In the bus, to the tune of loud disco music, the film crew went over the plan. They would be filming off to the side, positioning themselves so that Ruth would only see me as a package at her front door. They would need me to open myself up before she would have a chance to bring the box inside, to make sure that they would get our reunion on camera.

"We're gonna need you to cry. Can you fake cry?" Jayson asked me.

"I guess I can try."

"Well then we'll at least need Ruth to cry. Would you say she's a very emotional person?"

"I honestly don't know her that well." I felt bad, dragging Ruth into this. Had I known about the commercials, I wouldn't have entered this sweepstakes in the first place.

The bus parked down the street from Ruth's condo, in an effort to be discreet. The film crew quickly set up their equipment. I stepped inside my human sized box, and when I complained about the lack of air circulation, they poked a couple holes in it. I couldn't see

anything that was happening, but I felt them place me on a hand truck and wheel me up to the front door.

“Places, everybody!” Jayson said. I heard the doorbell ring and waited anxiously, a gift that nobody asked for.

As soon as I heard the door open, I counted three Mississippi’s, as per Jayson’s instructions, so they could get a quick shot of Ruth standing before the closed box.

“Oh my,” I heard her say. Her voice sounded just as frail as I remembered from the last time I saw her. She was quite old, in her late eighties I believe. I was anxious to see her again, to see how she looked after all these years, to talk to her and learn all about her. I pushed open the box, and before I could process the details of her face, she screamed, reached her hands toward her heart, and collapsed into her walker.

“Cut!” Jayson yelled from the shrub he was hiding in.

Several minutes later, the ambulance I had called for Ruth arrived and transported her on a gurney from the doorstep. When I asked the paramedics if she would be okay, they told me it appeared that she had a heart attack, but that she was still alive. My body shook as the ambulance drove away, and Jayson put a hand on my shoulder to console me.

“Don’t worry, Elise. We’ve already found an actress to replace Ruth, and she’s on her way.”

“What?”

“She’s fifty-five years old, a bit too young for a grandmother, so she’s gonna have to play your mother. But the show must go on, right?”

“Jayson, my grandmother’s sister just had a heart attack. She’s pretty much the only family member I have left on this earth.”

“Damn. That’s super depressing.”

“Yeah, it is depressing, so I’m not gonna act in your stupid commercial. I have to go wait for her at the hospital.”

“Elise, you can’t do that. Those terms and conditions you signed? They’re essentially a performance contract. And trust me, you do not want to get caught in a legal battle with Jetflew Airlines. Look, you can go to the hospital later tonight, and you can spend all of Christmas day there tomorrow if that’s what you want. But right now, we have to film this commercial.”

The actress who would be playing my mother arrived about thirty minutes later than they said she would. She pulled up in a Range Rover with a *Live, Laugh, Love* bumper sticker on the trunk. She looked nothing like me, her hair bleach blond and damaged at the edges from hitting it one too many times with a straightener. Her plastic surgery was apparent, but it failed at making her look much younger than her actual age. Her yoga attire latched onto her form and moved with her body like it was a second layer of skin. It was quite a contrast from my attire, jeans and a sweater that had clearly traveled with me from a place that snowed this time of year.

“Hi sweetheart, I’m Celia, your new mom!” she said as she approached me. She grabbed a chunk of my hair and observed it. “If I knew about this gig sooner I wouldn’t have got my roots retouched yesterday. I’m a natural brunette, not that you’d ever know it.” Jayson led Celia and I to the doorstep where Ruth had fainted less than an hour earlier.

The commercial took nine takes. Each time I pushed open the box, I was reminded of the horror on Ruth’s face before she collapsed. I was still trying to process everything that had happened. I’d never witnessed someone have a heart attack before, and certainly never thought

that I would cause one. I felt guilty, and I was anxious to get to the hospital to check on her, but my horrible acting made the shoot longer than it had to be. Jayson gave me acting tips between takes that Celia would then explain to me in terms I could understand.

“Really try to lean into the line, Elise,” Jayson would say.

“Just try to use real emotion,” Celia would say. “Try to pretend that I’m your real mom, and that you haven’t seen me in a long long time.” I thought about my mom, who I really hadn’t seen in a long long time and would never see ever again. I thought about reuniting with her in heaven, and I cried real tears, and then the shoot was over.

Celia offered to give me a ride to the hospital. The sun was setting, turning the sky pink and the palm trees into black silhouettes. She lowered the windows of her Range Rover as we cruised down the ocean road.

“That’s my one rule, every time I drive down this road, the windows *must* be lowered. That seabreeze just can’t be beat. It’s like a natural blowout!” The wind blew our hair back vertically behind us. Celia told me all about her move down to Florida twenty years ago. She also lived in New York, and decided to move down here when she was visiting her grandmother one summer. “I just love the beach lifestyle. It’s so simple. Plus warm weather year round is good for the soul, you know? I write all about it in my lifestyle blog. You should read it.”

Celia asked what my Christmas plans were, and I explained to her that I didn’t have any. I told her everything, about the Sweepstakes, about my Judaism, about Chedda, about Ruth and how she wasn’t my real grandmother. “I don’t even know where I’m gonna sleep tonight, if Ruth’s at the hospital,” I told her.

“Well you can stay with me! We can spend Christmas Eve together. I have a nice big loft with a guest room, right on the water. I was just gonna watch the Housewives Christmas special

alone anyway. It'd be nice to have some company." I realized that Celia must have been just as lonely as I was. "Plus, I can give you some acting tips before you film the rest of those commercials!" I wasn't in any place to say no. It would've been hard to find a hotel with any vacancies this late in the evening, during the peak travel season in Florida no less. And money had been tight anyway since I lost my job, so I accepted her offer.

I held Ruth's hand, still unconscious as she laid in her hospital bed. I apologized over and over again on the off chance that she could hear it. The doctors told me that she would have to stay overnight, just as I expected, but that she would be okay.

Celia drove us to her apartment, accelerating well over the speed limit so that we would not miss the Housewives Christmas special.

Celia's apartment was slick and expensive. She poured us wine and ordered Chinese food.

"I'm so bad, I never cook," she said. "And yet I paid extra for the same quality appliances Gordon Ramsey uses in his home kitchen. But hey, at least it *looks* like I cook."

"Well, you are an actress," I told her. "It's all about appearances anyway."

Celia, already tipsy, laughed harder at this than it made sense to. "See, you're funny! And so charming. Those cheese people you were telling me about, it's their loss, really. I'm sure that company's gonna suffer without you there." I told Celia it was easy for her to say. That she wasn't the one unemployed. "Well Elise, I think you and I are more similar than you think. I used to work for a big corporation, in marketing. And well, I wasn't fired and humiliated like you were, but I quit. I was around the same age as you, in my early thirties, and I had passions, and I wanted to pursue them. So I moved down here and made a life for myself. I started

teaching yoga and joined a local theater. I always wanted to act. And eventually I started booking commercials, and that's what pays for this apartment! Well, that and my alimony checks." She pressed a button on the side of the couch and reclined, a feature I didn't realize the couch had. "And if I can start my life over, Elise, you can do it too."

"I suppose. It still hurts, getting fired after all these years. Say what you will about the whole corporate thing, but I grew to really love that company, and cheese. No cheese company will ever hire me again. Word gets around quick in that industry."

"Do you love cheese, Elise? Or do you love the *idea* of cheese?" I was reluctant to take advice from Celia. She was so naive, but at least she was happy with her life.

When the Chinese food arrived, Celia set up the dining room table like she was expecting more guests, but it was just the two of us. "I hardly ever eat at this table. I usually save it for special occasions, and it's Christmas Eve, after all!" As we ate, she explained to me in great detail all of the drama I had missed on the *Housewives* from years of never having watched the show. It was impossible to follow, and I was exhausted from the long day, but I appreciated the effort. Celia was nothing like my real mom, nothing like anyone I had ever known personally. Meeting Celia felt like how it must feel to meet a stepmother for the first time. I was reluctant to let her in at first, but as the night went on, I couldn't help but warm up to her.

The mattress in Celia's guest room had a deep impression in certain areas like it had been slept on too often. I had a feeling the mattress must have been Celia's in the master bedroom before she moved it in here. The room faced out to the beach, and the sound of the ocean's waves put me to sleep. The impressed mattress and the ocean sounds made me dream that I was drowning.

Celia woke me up at 8am the next morning for sunrise yoga. She was wearing a santa hat, reminding me that it was Christmas, and it fell off her head with each downward dog. I'd only done yoga once in my life, during a corporate retreat for Chedda several years ago. Celia was patient with my stiff bones, making gentle adjustments to my poses. It felt strange to be as relaxed as I was while Ruth's heart was relearning how to pump blood through her system at the hospital.

Two voicemails were left on my phone during the yoga session. The first was from a nurse at the hospital, who called to tell me that Ruth would have to stay another night there. That she was improving, but she wasn't stable enough to be released yet. The other voicemail was from Jayson, who told me that Jetflew wanted him to film me today, celebrating Christmas with my fake mother.

Celia drove us to the film studio in Miami, the streets of I-95 nearly empty for the holiday. We drove past the graffiti'd buildings in the Wynwood neighborhood, where the studio was located. Inside, the set was of a living room that looked like it belonged in a family sitcom. It had a large Christmas tree in the corner. It looked nothing like Celia's home or mine, but it didn't matter. None of it was real.

Two male actors, one old enough to play my father and one young enough to play my brother, emerged from the dressing rooms in the back. Another actor emerged dressed as Santa Claus. In the scene, the four of us, a family, woke up on Christmas morning to find that Santa had not delivered our presents yet. Santa then falls down the chimney and apologizes, explaining that his flight was delayed. Then Celia tells Santa that if he had flown with Jetflew, he wouldn't be in this mess, because Jetflew flights are always on time.

The shoot took about four hours. During one of the breaks, I overheard the young male actor talking on the phone with his agent about his pay. I'd forgotten that all of the other actors were getting paid for this, and I wasn't. I was repaying a debt to the airline in the form of free labor. But after almost a month of being unemployed, it felt good to work. It felt like I had a purpose, even though I wasn't very good at the job. When Celia and I returned to her apartment, she gave me some personal acting lessons, and we watched the Housewives until we both fell asleep.

Early the next morning, after yoga, Celia drove me back to the hospital so I could check on Ruth before the commercial shoot. The nurse informed me that Ruth could be released later that night.

"She's stable, but she should still be monitored," she told me. I learned from the nurse that Ruth's emergency contact, her son, who after running through some calculations in my head I determined to be my first cousin, lived in California with his wife and children and couldn't watch over her. I told them not to worry, that I would watch her until I had to go back home. "And when will you be going home?" she asked me. My return flight was scheduled for that night, but I could try to change it. It wasn't like I had anywhere to be in New York anyway. I suppose that was the good thing about unemployment, you could do it anywhere.

During the drive to Miami, I called Jetflew's customer service to see about changing my return flight, and they told me it was impossible to change a sweepstakes flight in the system. I had to get a hold of Patty somehow, so I created an Instagram and sent a message to Jetflew's account, knowing that Patty ran it. She called me immediately.

“Elise! So good to hear from you. So here’s the thing. You signed a legal document when you agreed to the terms and conditions. Jetflew takes these things very seriously. Unfortunately, your return flight is part of the contract, and it can’t be changed.”

“My grandmother’s sister almost died, Patty. I have to take care of her. Can’t an exception be made?”

“I’m very sorry, Elise, but your ticket is essentially locked into the system. If you don’t show up for the flight tomorrow, Jetflew will have to charge you a no-show fee as well as a breach of contract fee, which all together could cost thousands of dollars. But if you want, I could check if there are any available seats left on the flight so that Ruth could fly with you!”

“She just had a heart attack, I’m not taking her on a plane.”

“I see. Well, I’m sorry I can’t help you, Elise. But please know that myself and all of the crew at Jetflew Airlines look forward to having you fly with us again tonight. And if you do decide to forgo the flight, might I suggest signing up for Jetflew’s Mile High Savings Card, which will earn you 10% back on all purchases, including no-show fees! You don’t have to decide right now, take some time to think about it. So long for now!”

Celia, overhearing the call, took the opportunity to console me.

“See, this is why the corporate world sucks, Elise. They have no regard for human needs. They would all benefit from a yoga class or two,” Celia said. While I didn’t agree that yoga was a cure for everything, Celia was right. That was why Chedda was so quick to fire me after one drunken mistake. Even though it was certainly a bad mistake, the company had no regard for me or the work I did for them for over ten years as soon as I became an inconvenience. “You know, Elise, if you wanted, I could take care of Ruth after you leave. I don’t mind, I think it would be

nice to have the company. Plus I can get Ruth's heart back into shape, I used to teach yoga classes at a nursing home, helped a lot of people with heart conditions."

After I finished repaying my debt with the final commercial shoot, which took the full eight hours, Celia and I picked up Ruth from the hospital. She hardly remembered what happened to her, that I had caused her heart attack, but she remembered talking to me at my parents' funeral all those years ago, and she was delighted to see me. I explained to her that she would be staying with Celia for a little while as she healed. When she asked me who Celia was, I told her she was something like a mother to me.

Celia dropped me off at the airport, and we said our goodbyes. Patty met me at the check-in and guided me through the airport just like she had the first time. My return flight was not nearly as ceremonious as my outbound flight, no crown, no song or dance, no VIP lounge or mariachi band. Jetflew must have blown through all of the money they set aside for the sweepstakes on the first flight. All Patty could offer me this time was a free in-flight pillow as we soared through the night sky. When we landed, I picked up my bag from the carousel and took the escalator up to the check-in counter, where I bought a ticket for the next available flight out to Florida. I went through the boarding process again like an ordinary traveler, without Patty's guidance, and I slumped into a middle seat in coach, my knees resting against the seat in front of me, not knowing when I would return.