

Far Away and Long Ago

by

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Submitted to the Board of Creative Writing
School of Humanities
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of the Arts

Purchase College
State University of New York

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Introductory Essay

When I first began this project, I didn't really know where I was going with it. In an Art of the Novella class I took in the spring semester of 2018, all I had was the first two chapters of something, though I didn't know what. In the first chapter was Andrea, a young woman whose father had just passed away. The next chapter took the reader back in time to when Andrea was only a fetus inside her mother, Margaret, who was already raising two children, one of them being the intelligent but ever-defiant April. I didn't really know where I was going with any of this, only that here were these two mothers and over three decades between them.

As I developed and fleshed out the relationships between different members of the Lovegrove family, I started to see how the life of these characters took them from Point Margaret to Point Andrea. The original focus of the project was Andrea in the present, all grown up and now a mother herself. In going through the process of grieving and sorting through her father's things, I wanted her to be able to look back at the past and realize, to some extent but not fully, that perhaps things were not really how she remembered them being.

Each chapter would alternate between two different perspectives and timelines, shifting from Andrea's present first person narration to Margaret from the past, told in the third person. Through Margaret, I wanted the reader to see exactly what Andrea couldn't quite make out. Where Andrea remembered her sister one way, the reader would be able to see the exact role Margaret played in April's childhood.

I had nearly 80 pages of material before I could accept that this wasn't really Andrea's story at all. What was most compelling and dynamic about this piece was Margaret's complicated relationship with April, the ways Margaret both loved and hurt her daughter. It was a difficult

choice to let go of Andrea's narrative, she was what started the whole thing for me, but I had to accept that her chapters only distracted the reader from what they really cared about: Margaret and what she did to April.

When I write, I often find myself exploring people's relationships with one another, particularly families. I wonder about sibling and parental relationships, the things we will and won't do for each other. I question how much we can love each other and what that love can make us do. In what ways do we hurt those we are trying to protect?

Here, we have Margaret. She's just trying to do her best and raise her children. Her oldest and youngest, Connor and Andrea, are quiet and obedient and easy to handle. But what happens when you have a child you can't control? What happens when all your other children are exactly how you expect good children to be, except for one? Overwhelmed and exhausted, Margaret begins to give her daughter medicine in an attempt to quell this wild spirit and repeatedly tells April, throughout the years, that she is sick.

Is Margaret a bad person? She's not trying to hurt April. In fact, she's just trying to help and to raise her daughter the best way she knows how. When readers encounter Margaret, I want them to be left wondering what they would do in that situation. Surely they wouldn't give their child something to make them easier to control but then what other options are left? The reader should be left feeling uncomfortable, because they don't *hate* Margaret, actually part of them might like her, sympathize with her, and that should leave them worried and unsettled. Because if it could be Margaret, could it be them?

April is meant to be the antithesis of Margaret. She is brilliant, imaginative, stubborn and a constant challenge to her mother. Just when Margaret thinks she's got a grip on April, the girl throws her a curveball. It's been an adventure navigating April and her relationship to Margaret

and the world around her. I wanted to explore the ways in which the two of them try to love each other, intentionally hurt each other, and everything in between. Both of them are just trying their best.

Writing April has been incredibly fun though at times difficult. I want her to be exceptional without becoming unbelievable. I want the reader to marvel at April's intelligence and creativity while always being reminded that she's young and immature and difficult. Most importantly, I want the reader to understand that April's story could end no other way. I want the reader to feel that knot in their stomach, to sense the inevitable, even if they can't quite put their finger on it right away.

The other members of the Lovegrove family include Patrick, Margaret's husband, Connor, the oldest, and Andrea, the baby. Patrick spends most of his time away from the household and appears just long enough to add his two-cents about how to handle April without taking any action to help Margaret in the process. Connor, the first born, was such a good and docile child that Margaret is shell-shocked and out of ideas when April comes along with her fiery attitude and constant resistance.

Andrea serves as the ideal daughter. She behaves how Margaret had hoped April would. She is also the sister and a little sister at that. She wants to be accepted by April but must also bear witness to her mother's constant attention and obsession with April. No matter what Andrea does, she is overshadowed by her older sister simply because Margaret is preoccupied with obtaining the control over April which she already has with Andrea.

While writing this piece, I found location to be an important feature in the process of telling this story. I wanted the Lovegroves to move around a lot to amplify this feeling of uprootedness. Members of the extended family are all planted in New York while these five move from Florida

to Austin, Texas to Dallas, Texas. Not only must Margaret and April struggle with one another but there is no one else to lean on for support. They are miles and miles away from family and never stay in any place long enough to form lasting relationships with people from the communities. The constant moving might seem like a point of confusion but I think it works to amplify this feeling of untetheredness and lack of connection.

Something I tried to incorporate in this story is a building impression of suspense. It's meant to be very subtle, Margaret gripping April's arm a bit too tight or looking at her the wrong way, so that the reader might not see it at all until they look back on what's happened. There are moments in the story where Margaret seems flustered or irritated and the reader is meant to wonder: is it because of some tangible vexation, such as the weather or pressure from others, or some visceral reaction to April's attitude or even mere presence.

In the summer of 2016, I read Mary Higgins Clark's *Where Are the Children?*. I literally could not put it down and read the entire novel in almost one sitting. It left in me a deep admiration for the genre of suspense and created a desire to write my own story filled with suspense. *Far Away and Long Ago* isn't necessarily a suspense story but I did try to incorporate a building sense of dread that I think falls under the same taxonomy.

In the introduction at the beginning of the book, Clark describes the process of writing suspense and compares the clues a writer gives their reader to the stones and breadcrumbs of the classic Hansel and Gretel legend. She writes "the stones, which blend in so well with the landscape, often prove to be the true guide to finding the solution to the crime." While this novella isn't about solving a crime, I wanted to accomplish a similar effect with this family drama. While some clues of what's to come are easy for the reader to see, others can be first interpreted as any standard family issues until one looks back on it.

Far Away and Long Ago has come a long way since its original conception. I've spent countless hours not only writing but thinking about and considering my characters and their lives. At work or in the classroom, during trips in the car, I would often find my mind wandering back to Margaret and April, wondering not just about their actions in the story but in the world in general. If they were with me now, what would they say? How would they act? It was difficult to accept that Andrea's entire narrative needed to be cut in order for the essence of the story to thrive but I think I've finally accomplished what I set out to do.

Chapter One

Margaret picked up the phone just before the call went to the answering machine. She put the laundry basket down by her feet, kids clothing tumbling from the top of the pile and sliding onto the floor. “Hi, Mom,” she said. “We’re doing fine down here, still unpacking some stuff.” Margaret brushed her bangs off of her forehead with the back of her hand. The Florida heat was new to them all.

Peering out the sliding glass door, she watched the children climb on the swingset. Connor sat on the swing, barely moving as he kicked his feet back and forth. His little green and white polo shirt and khaki shorts were crisp and clean, little shoes tied in little knots.

“The kids are doing fine,” Margaret answered her mother. “I’m okay... mostly tired.” She touched her stomach softly, skin cool under her shirt. She thought of her body swelling over the past weeks. “Soon we’ll find out if it’s a boy or girl,” she said.

“Mhmmm, what do you hope it is?” her mother inquired, partly teasing.

“As long as it’s healthy, Mom,” Margaret said, like one is supposed to say. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed April, pale skin nearly blinding against the summer sun, shirtless as she scrambled up the ladder with pink tank top bundled in her hand. Margaret pursed her lips as she watched April spread the shirt out at the top of the slide and carefully sit on it, pushing off and sliding down into the dusty below.

“Mom, I’m gonna have to call you back,” Margaret said and hung up.

She pulled open the door, the heat entering the house, so heavy she could scoop it into her hands. “April! April!” Margaret said, stepping out onto the porch. She looked out over the backyard, the grass yellow and crunchy, the bushes scraggly, almost leafless, the porch and railings splintery. They had been here nearly a month and a half and Patrick had barely touched the yard. Well, she was getting tired of waiting. She couldn’t possibly have the neighbors over until the yard was all taken care of.

“April,” Margaret said, her focus drawn back to her children as April nudged Connor down the slide on top of her shirt. “April, why is your shirt off?” Margaret felt flustered. “April, put your shirt back on.”

“The slide is too hot without it, Mommy,” April said, blonde curls falling out of her braid and sticking to her skin where she was sweaty. “I can’t go down the slide without it.”

“Well you can’t play outside without your shirt on.”

“Why not?”

“You’ll get sunburn,” Margaret answered, taking the shirt and yanking it back over her daughter’s head.

“Mom, I’m hungry,” Connor said, walking up to his mother and pulling on her shirt. Margaret led the children back into the house, sat them at the cluttered dinner table and gave them each a bowl of mixed berries.

“I don’t want this,” April said and pushed the bowl away.

Margaret held her child’s gaze. There was something about April, something impenetrable. Margaret couldn’t touch it, couldn’t even name it, but it was there, a force she couldn’t control. A bit unsettling, it was, to have this three-year-old who was not a three-year-old, who could not be molded. Like clay, children were, and yet here was this girl made of stone.

“Can I have a cookie?” April asked.

“Not right now,” Margaret said. She looked at Connor, who ate his berries carefully. He had been a good baby, a quiet one. She hoped the new baby would be like him.

“But I want one,” April said, her voice rising in hysteria. “Please, Mommy, I want one. Just one.”

“Not now, April. Maybe with dessert.”

There was a charged moment, electricity in the air. Margaret and April stared at each other, both holding their breath as though the next thing they touched would give a shock. The verge of a meltdown. Then, April sat back, her shoulders relaxed.

“Okay, Mommy.”

Margaret stepped away from the table, sighing as she piled the fallen clothes back into the basket and opened the door to the basement. Connor pushed his chair back and stood up, “Can I have a juicebox, Mom?”

“Yes,” she said. “They’re in the fridge downstairs. Come on.”

The two went down into the cool darkness together. At the bottom of the stairs, Margaret flicked on the lights and headed to the back of the basement where the laundry room was. Connor followed her, watched her as she filled the wash machine with clothes then detergent. After she had gotten the juice box for him, the two walked back up the stairs.

At the top, the door was closed, locked. Margaret knocked on the door, “April, honey,” she said, calm as she could, “April, let Mommy out.”

There was rustling on the other side, but the door did not unlock. “April, let Mommy and Connor out right now,” Margaret insisted, banging on the door harder and harder. “April, come on

sweetie, unlock the door.” She fluctuated between anger and calmness, commanding and coaxing, but the little girl did not come and the two descended back into the basement.

On the other side of the door, April pushed a kitchen chair up to the counter, climbed up onto the marble top, and reached for the cupboard. She knew she would get in trouble for locking Mommy in the basement, but it didn’t really matter to her as she rummaged around for the cookies and ate two Oreos. Then, when she was good and ready, and the taste of chocolate had been completely swallowed and savored, she climbed back down, went over to the basement door, and let her mother out.

Chapter Two

The baby's head still smelled of holy oil from the baptism the day before. Yesterday had been a busy day. Patrick's family had all come down from New York and Margaret's from Colorado. Her parents had stayed at the house for a couple of days but left late this morning, catching a ride with Patrick's brother to the airport. Patrick's family, the Lovegroves, were exhausting, all of them loud and unruly, the children high on sweets, adults always cackling, sometimes children themselves.

Margaret hated the way Kelley, Patrick's older sister, watched her with April. So smug. "Your girls are so wild," Margaret had made the mistake of saying to Kelley one time as she watched her nieces race around the kitchen, her own docile Connor sitting beside her. "Are you sure they're not..."

Somewhere in the far end of the house, April's voice rang out, a piercing shriek of unintelligible words. "They're kids, they have lots of energy," Kelley had replied simply. And then yesterday, Kelley sitting on the back porch watching April wreak havoc, pulling on table cloths and rounding up shoes, searching for "the red". Anything with red, April had insisted. Things of red and pink and purple, reaching for glasses of pinot noir and bowls of cherries, even carrots and blood oranges. If it wasn't so disruptive, it would be impressive, Margaret thought.

"She's so clever," Margaret had heard Kelley say to Patrick.

“It’s incredible, really,” he said back. Margaret held baby Andrea in her white christening gown. She thought back to the time she had been locked in the basement. And where was Patrick? At the office until five, with a forty-five minute commute on an empty, winding road, listening to the music he liked as the trees blurred past him and she was pregnant and trapped in the basement. Would he find it incredible if he had been there with her? If he had to try to outsmart a kid that was constantly outsmarting him?

Margaret touched her nose to Andrea’s and stroked chubby cheeks with her index finger. This was a good baby. She put Andrea down in the middle of the king-sized bed and walked into the master bathroom, turning on the water in the tub and feeling it run over her hands until it was the right temperature. In the bedroom, she heard the door swing open, the knob hitting the plaster of the wall behind it. The bedsprings creaked as a small body jumped up onto the bed.

“Andrea! Andrea!” Margaret heard, “do you want to play?” Margaret rushed out of the bathroom and saw April jumping on the bed. She bounced near the baby, Andrea rolling slightly into the depression of mattress where April landed.

“April,” Margaret said sharply, suddenly by the bed and holding Andrea. “April, you need to be more careful.” April wasn’t listening. She was still bouncing, her head of curls flowing like seaweed underwater.

Margaret suddenly missed all the people, all the chaos of the christening. At least that sort of chaos was expected, in-laws and celebrations and family flying in and staying over, it was natural to find the laws of entropy working at fantastical speeds. But here, this, in the quietness of her home, the stillness of routine, here was the real pandemonium.

She held the baby in one hand and reached out with the other, snagging April's arm, her manicured nails digging into pink fleshy skin. "April!" Margaret nearly shouted, "no jumping on the bed."

April tried to pull her arm out of her mother's grasp. "You're hurting me!" she said, her eyes fierce then wavering a moment, a quiet tremble in her voice.

"You could've hurt the baby," Margaret said, still holding the arm but relaxing her fingers. "You need to be careful."

"I was just playing," April said and pulled her arm away. Margaret touched the back of Andrea's fuzzy head and kissed the soft skin of her face.

"April, baby," Margaret said, finding a warmth in her voice. She rested Andrea in the bassinet in the room and went over to the four-year-old. She sat at the edge of the bed and reached out for the little girl but April stepped back. Margaret didn't understand, why couldn't April just let her love her. Why did she always have to resist? Was it so wrong of her to want, just for once, to have April resting in her arms, not running around or chattering ceaselessly, but just resting, little head in her mother's lap, her breath a hush like the ocean. "April," Margaret said, an idea slipping into her mind. "April, listen to Mommy." Margaret paused, took a deep breath. "April, you're sick."

The little girl stared at her mother. "No, I'm not," she said.

"Yes, you are," Margaret said.

"I don't feel sick."

"I know, baby, I know." Here, Margaret reached out for April, took her hand and pulled her towards her. "But you are. I'm going to give you some medicine though, okay? I'll give you some medicine and then you'll feel better."

“I don’t want to take medicine,” April said, her lips quivering.

“I know you don’t, baby.” Margaret stroked April’s hair, gently running her fingers through the blonde tresses, careful not to yank a knot. “But once you take this, you’ll feel better.” Margaret stood up and walked into the bathroom, opened up the medicine cabinet, and rummaged around for benadryl.

Was she going to do this? Yes, she was, just this one time. She just needed to catch her breath.

Back in the bedroom, Margaret gave her daughter Benadryl. Not a lot, only enough to calm her down. April took the medicine without much grief and Margaret stayed with her in bed until it kicked in. Mother caressed daughter’s hair, whispered in her ear, told her stories, and April listened, nuzzled her head in her mother’s lap, felt the weight of Margaret’s arm resting on her little body. Margaret felt the slow breath of a sleeper, felt the body rise and fall with serenity. Yes, this was what she wanted.

She slipped a pillow under April’s head and slid off the bed. She went over to baby Andrea, who had been so quiet and patient, and took the baby into the bathroom, where she drained the tub and filled it up again.

Chapter Three

Margaret walked throughout the kitchen and watered the house plants, Andrea waddling behind her with an empty watering can and doing the same. At the table, Connor sat hunched over, his knuckles white from gripping the pencil so hard. She could hear him muttering under his breath, frustrated by the numbers put in front of him.

It was late afternoon, the curtains drawn back and sunlight warming the room. The greenness of the plants were vibrant in the light, the glass of framed photos reflecting a brightness onto stained wood floors. Margaret sighed, just when this place really felt like home and now Patrick had to go. Texas this time. Well, it wasn't official but Margaret had already started organizing and packing things up in her mind. Whatever place Patrick suggested next, the family relocated.

"Mom, it's too hard," Connor said. Margaret dumped whatever water was left into the devil's ivy that was hung by the Dutch back door and overflowing, an abundance of leaves cascading almost to the floor. Andrea stood under the plant, its vines resting on her head and draping over her shoulders.

"Mommy, look at my hair!"

"Why, it's green!" Margaret exclaimed and the little girl giggled, stepping back so the leaves hid her face.

"Mom!" Connor pushed the homework away. "I just can't do it."

“Take a deep breath, Connor,” Margaret said and walked over to him. “You know it, you just need to focus.”

The floorboards creaked above Margaret and soon she could hear April descending the stairs. “Did you have a good nap, honey?” Margaret asked when her daughter walked into the kitchen.

April nodded as she rubbed the sleep from her eyes. “I’m starting to feel better,” April said and took a seat at the table across from her brother.

“That’s good.”

Margaret watched April carefully as she brushed hair out of her face with the back of her hand and leaned across the table, looking at Connor’s homework. The night before, Margaret and Patrick brushed their teeth next to each other and discussed April’s progress in the first grade, their words disfigured by foaming toothpaste.

Patrick wanted her to skip the second grade come August. “That thought is a little premature, don’t you think?” Margaret said, considering the fact it was only October.

Patrick spit and rinsed, wiping his mouth on a tan wash cloth. “You don’t think she’s smart enough?” he questioned. Margaret put the toothbrush back in the medicine cabinet, next to the Benadryl, and washed her face quickly.

“I don’t think she’s mature enough.”

Looking at her now, Margaret stood by her opinion. April wasn’t very good at making friends — a little too bossy, a little too intense. Other kids shied away from her.

Andrea tugged on the bottom of Margaret’s shirt. “Mommy! I need to goooo,” the toddler said and crossed her legs dramatically.

“Okay, baby.” Margaret took Andrea’s hand and led her to the master bathroom where the toilet trainer was. Potty training Connor had been such a hassle, Margaret remembered, that teaching the girls hardly seemed like training at all. Margaret thought back to what her sister-in-law Doreen had said after Connor had finally got it, that boys were harder than girls for some reason. And poor Doreen, she had four of them! Margaret pat Andrea on the head and stepped out of the bathroom into her room, taking a tootsie roll from the drawer of her nightstand to give to Andrea as a reward.

Andrea wiped then washed her hands, Margaret standing behind her, rewashing the little hands, just to be thorough.

Andrea shoved the tootsie roll into her mouth and rushed away to another part of the house. Walking back to the kitchen, Margaret could hear the older children talking to each other.

“You just do it like this,” she heard April say and, peering around the corner, saw her daughter leaning over Connor’s homework, pencil moving confidently across the page.

“What about this one?” Connor asked, pointing at a problem. “Nine times three.”

“That’s easy,” April said. She pulled the homework closer to her. “It just means that you need to find out what nine plus nine plus nine is.”

“Well, what is it?” Connor asked.

“Twenty-seven,” April said and wrote it down on the sheet for her brother. Margaret had known that there was something different about April, had known that she was not the same as kids her own age, but she hadn’t known this. The girl was only in first grade. Margaret was shocked to realize April must have picked up the math just from listening to her parents help her brother with it.

“Can you just do the rest for me?” Connor asked and slid off the chair so his sister could sit.

April hopped on the chair and Margaret stepped into the room. Spell broken. “Connor, you’re responsible for doing your own homework.”

“But Mom! She’s so much better at it than me,” he said.

“And you’ll never learn it if you don’t do it yourself.” Margaret looked at April. Third grade math, she thought. Patrick would love to hear that, though she didn’t plan on telling him.

Chapter Four

The actual moving of things was less difficult than Margaret expected. “The company is hiring movers to drive our stuff over,” Patrick had told her after finalizing the contract. In only days, the family packed up their possessions, said goodbye to the swingset out back, and flew from Florida to Texas with their stuff in tow. There, Patrick would help manage a startup company as they entered the world of high school sports broadcasting.

This new house was bigger, the walls stretching up to an unreachable ceiling, the manicured yard cut short by scraggly trees and a hiking trail. Upstairs, the kids ran through the halls and inspected all the rooms, ultimately debating which of them would get the master bedroom. Their footsteps echoed in the empty space, the movers a day behind.

Margaret stood in the foyer by the front door, her neck craned back as she looked up at the hanging chandelier and wondered how she would ever be able to dust it. “It’s nice, isn’t it,” said Patrick as he walked up behind her, resting his chin on her shoulder. “I guess it’s true what they say,” he said.

Margaret turned to him. “Everything is bigger in Texas,” he said and laughed, the sound bouncing off the walls. The corners of his eyes creased with smile as he pushed his slipping glasses up onto the bridge of his nose. Margaret smiled tightly, her eyes drifting back up to the ceiling. “Oh, come on Marg,” Patrick said when she didn’t say anything, “you’re stressing about nothing.”

Margaret took in the bare rooms around her. How was she expected to make so much *space* feel like a home?

“So the movers got stuck in traffic,” Patrick said, “but that’s okay. We can run out to the store and get sleeping bags, we can pretend like we’re camping.”

“I’m just worried,” she said. The house rang out with the children’s cries as they opened the closets and searched for all the hidden spaces.

“The kids will be okay,” Patrick said, “they’re resilient.” Again he put his chin on her shoulder, this time stroking her arms with his hands. “This is gonna be great for us.”

“Is it?” Margaret said suddenly. “Patrick, it’s a startup company. You have no idea how many hours you’ll need to put in to get this thing off the ground. And it’s just the beginning of the summer. What am I gonna do with the kids while you’re gone and they don’t know anybody and I don’t know anybody and —”

“Marg, it’s gonna be okay.”

“Patrick,” she said, twisting her lips in confession, “I’m worried about April.” She felt his fingers stiffen around her wrists, his breath hot on the back of her neck. “She’s only eight, she won’t fit in at the school. She’ll be new and younger than them all.”

Patrick spun her around so she faced him. “Marg, our daughter is so smart,” he said, “it would be unfair to her for us to hold her back. She’s a good kid, she’ll make friends.” He pulled a strand of her hair from behind her ear and twisted it between his fingers. “Plus, she’ll be in Connor’s grade. So they’ll have each other.”

Margaret scoffed. “You can’t honestly think that *that* helps the situation at all,” she said.

“Well, why don’t you home school her?” he said. “You seem to know what’s best for her, why don’t you be the one to teach her.”

“Patrick —” Margaret started to say.

“No, I’m serious. You can do it.”

“Patrick, I don’t know if I —” Patrick wrapped his arm around the small of her back and jerked her closer to him. The tip of her nose grazed the dark bristles of his moustache. He slid his hand through her hair behind her right ear, lightly scratching her scalp. A gesture he knew calmed her. “Hey,” he said, “have I ever steered you wrong?” He tilted her chin so she looked at him and kissed her slowly before she could answer. She felt his hand in her hair, pushing her closer. When they were younger, she had loved the hardness of his body, the feeling of him pressing into her. She had loved the challenge of him, this appetite that she wanted to tame and channel. Now, his fat tongue parted her lips to fill her mouth, an uninvited explorer feeling for the caverns of her body. She tried to step back slightly but his arms held her there, lips sucking the air from her lungs.

“Gross!” Connor yelled, emerging from the depths of the upstairs and peering down at them from the second floor balcony. On either side of him, April and Andrea squished their faces into the bars of the bannister and stuck their tongues out.

“Ewww,” Andrea squealed, “Mommy and Daddy are kissing!” Margaret lurched away from Patrick, brushing down the hair displaced by her husband’s groping.

“Who is that up there?” Patrick yelled up to them, squinting as if to make out something from a great distance. “Mommy, do you see who’s talking?”

Margaret shook her head and brought her hand up to her brow, shielding her eyes from an invisible sun. “I can’t see anything, whoever they are must be very high up,” she said.

“It’s us!” Andrea called down.

“Who is this Us?” Patrick asked and turned to Margaret.

“I don’t know *anybody* by the name of Us,” Margaret said, “maybe we have a ghost in the house.”

“No!” April said, “not Us! *Us!* Your kids!”

“Well, I didn’t know this house came with kids,” Patrick said. The children stepped away from the bannister and ran down the stairs, butting their heads into their father’s soft stomach. The room grew light with laughter. Margaret felt the denseness of her body relax, her limbs sighing as though the cells of her had let out a deep breath.

“We’re gonna sleep on the floor tonight,” April said, her arms still latched around her father’s waist, “aren’t we?”

“Wrong!” her father answered. “We’ll sleep in sleeping bags!”

“Really?” Andrea asked and jumped in front of him, her pale blonde hair shaken loose from its pony.

“And we’ll make s’mores over the stove,” Patrick said and looked to Margaret.

“Let’s all put our shoes on,” she said and smiled at the children. “We can all go to the store together.”

The kids bounced and clapped, running off to collect their discarded shoes. Patrick took that strand of hair he had toyed with and tucked it back behind her ear. He kissed her cheekbone and went to grab the keys to the rental car. Margaret looked around the house, already deciding where she would put what piece of furniture. *This will be good*, she thought, stroking the smooth eggshell paint of the walls.

In the morning, the girls crept out of their sleeping bags like hatching inchworms. The early sun slipped through the curtainless windows of the living room and shined across Margaret’s face,

illuminating the pores of her skin. “Can we go outside?” April asked, her nose touching her mother’s as she crouched next to her. Behind her, Andrea’s hands were pressed to the sliding glass door, peering out into the woods behind the house. Last night, Margaret had heard the gushing of the river farther on, coursing through the crevice it had dug out over time.

“What?” Margaret asked, half awake. She turned away from her daughter and covered her eyes with the back of her hand.

“I *said* can we go outside?” April repeated.

Patrick shifted in his sleeping bag and rubbed the stubble on his chin. “What time is it?” he asked and fumbled for his wristwatch which lay beside his glasses on the floor. “It’s only seven,” he said.

“But we’re wide awake,” April said, “we want to explore.”

“Yeah!” Andrea agreed. “I want to go out *there*,” she said, pressing her index finger hard against the glass.

Margaret shifted and saw the slumbering form of her son, still huddled inside his nylon cocoon. “Your brother isn’t even up yet,” she said.

Andrea walked away from the window, towards Connor, and nudged him with her foot. “Psst,” she whispered, crouching down to the entrance of the bag. “Connor, are you in there?”

Margaret reached over and pulled on Andrea’s arm. “Don’t wake him up,” she said, the mistiness of sleep draining from her body. “Lie down with Mommy,” she told her youngest daughter and pulled the little girl closer. Andrea squirmed into her mother’s sleeping bag and Margaret wrapped her arms around her, slowly inhaling the smell of shampooed hair. Andrea fidgeted in her embrace like a pet being held onto too tight.

Margaret closed her eyes but could hear the light steps of April's bare feet as she walked towards the front of the house. "Where are you going?" Margaret mumbled, sleepiness reaching out to her like a slept-in bed. She felt the warmth of Andrea's little body curled into her stomach and had the fleeting thought of a Russian nesting doll, how maybe if Andrea curled up tight enough she could fit back inside her mother.

April's return was made more prominent by the shoes she had put on, squeaking slightly on the freshly polished wood floors. "I can go outside by myself," she said as she passed her sleeping parents and fumbled with the lock on the back door.

"Not yet, April," Patrick muttered, eyes still closed.

"Let me go with her," Andrea said and wiggled out of her mother's arms. She ran off to grab her sneakers.

"April, we said no," Margaret said. She sat up, fully awake. Margaret got up and walked over to her daughter, slamming the partly-opened door back shut.

"Mom! Just let me go," she said. April's yellow pajama shirt hung slightly off her left shoulder, stretched out by wear. In New York, Kelley had given her daughters the same pajama set: yellow shirt with pink flowers, inverse pattern on the pants. Margaret felt the frustration catch in her chest. She thought she might scream. How was it that even miles and miles away they were somehow still there, like an infection she couldn't quite get rid of.

"Patrick," Margaret said, her jaw clenched. She held April's wrist in her hand, trying not to leave crescent imprints in her daughter's skin.

Andrea ran back into the room and plopped down onto the floor, fitting her light up sneakers onto the wrong feet. "Let's go!" she said as April tugged at her mother's grip.

“Patrick!” Margaret said a second time, her teeth grinding like rusted gears in her mouth. Connor stirred in his sleeping bag, rubbing his nose with the back of his hand.

Finally, Patrick got out of the bag. He took April’s arm from Margaret and rubbed the redness from her skin. Then he wiped his glasses clean with the bottom of his grey t-shirt, placed them back on his face, and peered out into the waking colors of the morning. “I think we could go for a short walk,” he said. Margaret caught the slight twitch of a smirk on April’s lips.

So, leaving Connor scrunched up in his sleeping bag, the four of them set out along the trail directly behind the house. The girls kicked up dust as they ran ahead, carefully stroking the waxy leaves of trees. Margaret hadn’t realized how stuffy the house was until she stepped outside. The clean air pricked the inside of her nose, leaving her with the sensation of a lost sneeze. She thought she would need to open all the windows when they got back. Patrick and Margaret walked in silence behind the children, taking in the sounds around them: twigs scratching in the breeze, bird calls in the bramble, the gurgling river somewhere far below and out of sight. “It’s nice,” Margaret admitted.

Patrick turned his head slightly to look at Margaret but did not speak. April and Andrea walked around a bend in the trail, glimpses of bright pajamas moving through the branches before disappearing completely. “I think you’re right,” Margaret admitted again. She felt her stomach knotting but swallowed the squeamishness of not seeing the children. “About April... I think I should homeschool her.”

“Marg,” Patrick sighed, “I didn’t mean that. I’m sorry, I was tired from the trip. Of course we are going to send her to school.”

“No, I really think I should. You’re right. I’m her mother, I know what’s best for her.” As she said it, Margaret felt unsure. She was exhausted and achy.

“Margaret, she doesn’t know anybody here. If you don’t send her to school, she’ll never know anyone. She’ll have no friends.”

“She won’t have friends if she goes to school either,” Margaret insisted. “This is what’s best. At least until she’s better.”

“Better?” Patrick asked, his step faltering.

“I mean until she’s better under control.”

“She’s not out of control, Margaret, she’s a kid. She’s—”

“Patrick, I know what I’m doing.”

Margaret and Patrick caught up to their daughters, stopped a few feet back from the edge of a cliff. Margaret grabbed Andrea’s hand as the four of them stepped closer. A scar cut through the skin of earth, loose roots dangling like wind chimes. Below, water churned white as it rushed through the canyon. April inched forward and watched the river splash against boulders and reach up the stone then fall back down into its flowing body. Patrick took in Margaret’s gaze, fixed on the oldest daughter as she peered out at the expanse of nature before them. “Careful, April,” Patrick said and, reaching out, pulled her back to him.

Chapter Five

April would not open the door. Margaret stood outside her daughter's room, fingering the shiny doorknob. "April, baby," Margaret said into the wood of the door, rapping her knuckles lightly near the frame. The summer had left Margaret's stomach all twisted up, anxious for months about when and how she would tell April she would be staying home for school. Earlier in the week, Margaret had finally delivered the news, first by taking just April to get their nails done together then making her favorite dinner, tacos.

The first day of school had actually been two days ago: Connor dressed in a crisp green striped polo, Andrea standing next to him as he held up a sign reading "Grade 5". April had sulked in her den of blankets, refusing to take part in the ritual picture-taking, refusing to leave her room at all.

It had been a draining discussion between Margaret and Patrick. Multiple draining discussions, to be exact. Patrick wanted April to go to school, to be in a classroom, surrounded by other kids. Margaret insisted homeschooling was in everyone's best interest. What would the kids think of Connor if his eight-year-old sister was in the same fifth grade class as him? What would the kids think of April, Margaret pressed, she'd never fit in with them. No, it was best for April to stay at home, where Margaret could keep a close eye on her.

"I think you're making a mistake," Patrick had said as Margaret filled out the paperwork. He shook his head and rubbed the scruff of his beard with an open palm. Margaret signed her name

in neat cursive one paper after another and slid it across the table to her husband who reluctantly held the pen and signed nothing.

“You don’t think I can do this?” she had asked.

“What about Andrea? All your time will be taken up teaching April, what’s Andrea gonna do?”

Now, Andrea looked up at her mother expectantly as Margaret tried to open the locked door. “Andrea, why don’t you go play in your room,” Margaret said and nudged her away.

“Can you come play with me?” the four-year-old asked and tugged on her mother’s shirt sleeve.

“Not right now, baby,” Margaret said, “I need to spend some time with April.”

“Can I spend time with April?”

“Not right now,” Margaret said.

“Why not?” Andrea asked.

“Because,” Margaret answered and pried her sleeve loose from Andrea’s grip. She spun the girl around and prodded her to walk down the hallway to her room. Margaret then turned back to the door and knocked again, this time harder. “April, let me in.”

“No,” she heard April say from inside the room. Well, that was progress, Margaret thought. April hadn’t said a word to her in the days since school started. Patrick had been leaving food outside April’s door, though Margaret felt not bringing it to her would be a more effective way of coaxing her out.

“April, just talk to me,” Margaret said. Her mouth tasted like resentment. When April didn’t answer, Margaret banged louder, the door rattling in its frame. “April, if you don’t unlock this door right now, I’m going to unscrew the lock from this door, is that what you want?”

“Go ahead!” April yelled and the door shook from her pounding on the other side. Margaret took a step back. “Go ahead, Unscrew the locks from the doors ! Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs !”

Margaret turned her head as if to look for someone to translate. “What?” she asked.

“Never mind, you don’t understand,” April said.

“I want to,” Margaret said and pressed her forehead to the door. “April, please let me in.” She exhaled onto the door as the lock clicked and it opened slowly. Margaret practically stumbled into the room.

“It’s Walt Whitman,” April said to her mother.

“What is?”

April rolled her eyes and said “the quote. It’s a Walt Whitman quote,” and when Margaret didn’t respond, she added “he’s a poet.”

“Oh,” Margaret said. The silence made her skin sticky like sitting in a hot room. “Do you,” Margaret asked, “read him a lot?”

April shrugged. “Only sometimes,” she said. Then, her voice shifted gears and she said “Mom, I want to go to school.” Margaret nodded and walked over to the unmade bed, sitting down and gesturing for April to follow.

“I know, baby,” she said and stroked April’s hair when she was seated next to her. “I want you to go to school too.”

“Then why can’t I?” April asked, her voice rising an octave in distress. Margaret could sense the impending tears.

“I just think this is what’s best,” Margaret said.

“You keep saying that,” April said, her voice now wavering with anger, “but you won’t say why!”

Margaret’s lips twisted as she considered how to answer. “April, honey,” she said finally, “I don’t expect you to understand but I do expect you to listen to me.”

“Mom!”

“Let’s at least give this a shot,” Margaret said. “Come here, give me a hug.” She leaned over to wrap her arms around her daughter but April pushed her away and got off the bed. Margaret sat still for a moment, rubbing her knuckles. Then, she stood up and started to straighten up the room, picking up clothes and asking is this clean or is this dirty? April walked out of the room.

In the hallway, Margaret heard Andrea ask “do you want to play with me?”

“No,” April said, “I don’t!”

There was a thud then crying and Margaret rushed out of the room to see Andrea on the floor. Margaret went over and picked her up. “April pushed me,” Andrea wailed through tears and Margaret rubbed her back and shushed into her ear to calm her down.

“I didn’t push her!” April yelled from down the stairs now. “She fell on her own.”

“No I didn’t,” Andrea said between gasping breaths.

“April, if you’re upset at me then fine but you’re not allowed to be mean to your sister.” Margaret said, on the verge of yelling. She kissed Andrea’s forehead then pressed the girl’s face into her shoulder to stifle the cries. When the crying had lightened, though not completely ended, Margaret set Andrea back down then ventured downstairs in search of April.

April sat on the leather couch and flicked through the TV channels. Margaret walked over to her and yanked the remote from her hand. She turned and shut the TV off. April didn’t say anything but leaned over and grabbed a book left beside the couch. Margaret took that too. “April,”

she said, "I've had enough of this. Sulk all you want today but tomorrow you are going to sit down and do school work. Do you understand me?"

Rain started streaking down the windows. The room grew dim with the looming weather. April peered out into the blurriness of the world. Neither of them said anything for a while, Margaret holding her breath. She felt that if she spoke, she might scream. Margaret took a slow step closer to April.

"Fine," April finally said without looking at her mother. "You can try to teach me." She leaned over for another random book as if to show Margaret anything was more worthy of her attention.

"April," Margaret brought herself to say, "we're in this together."

"Are we?" she asked. The rain came down harder now, drumming on the roof like war drums in the distance. Around them, the world rumbled with thunder.

Chapter Six

The plane touched down in Hawaii an hour ahead of schedule, but sat on the runway for two because of weather and traffic. Margaret sat between her daughters, schoolwork spread out on both of their tray tables. Andrea practiced writing her name, drawing a backwards E in blue crayon. April sat back in her chair, lanky arms folded across her chest.

Margaret shifted in her seat, her hips aching and butt numb from sitting. In the row in front of her, she could hear Connor and Patrick talking about Texas football. The boys spoke in hushed voices about statistics and the upcoming draft.

“Dad,” April said, leaning out into the aisle slightly to tap her father’s arm. Patrick twisted around in his chair to look back at them, his black hair messy from travel but still parted slightly to the left.

“How’s it going back there?” he asked and glanced at his girls, all in a row.

“Let’s see who’s in seat 487,” April said and shuffled the papers of her homework, questions untried and unanswered.

“Do you think this plane has a 487th seat?” Patrick asked, stretching his neck to see above the seats at the back of the plane. April had developed an infatuation with the number, taking notice when it appeared on receipts and addresses, license plates, even phone numbers. “We’re pretty far back, past the wings.”

“Oh, definitely,” April said, nodding. “This is row 62. Each row has six seats so we’re already in the low 370s.”

Margaret began to talk over her, saying April needed to finish her work first. “Don’t you want to get it done now so you don’t have to worry about it during the trip?” she asked.

“There’s at least another twenty rows behind us so that’s another 120 seats at least.” April finished saying without pause. She tapped the loose pages into a neat pile and started to snap the tray into the back of her father’s seat.

“April, you need to do your equations before you can do anything else.” Margaret said sternly, sticking her hand on the tray and pushing it back down.

“Sounds like she just did math to me,” Patrick joked, a chuckle inflating his words.

“Mom, it’s so easy, I can just do it later.” April said and stood up anyway, her wiry body slinking around the jutting table.

“If it’s so easy then why don’t you do mine while you’re at it,” said Connor as his face appeared squished between two seats. He started to crumple his own homework and pass it to his sister, who was practicing the same math he was learning in school. Margaret had wondered what it must’ve felt like for Connor, to have his little sister in the same grade as him, although he went to a school and Margaret taught April at home.

“Mommy,” Andrea said as she waved her homework in front of her mother’s face. “Look, I did it, I wrote my name.”

Margaret swatted the paper out of her face and grabbed hold of April’s wrist. “April, sit back down and finish your homework.”

“Come on, Marg,” Patrick said and started to get up too, “it’ll take like five minutes.” When that didn’t get a positive reaction out of his wife, he continued “we’ve been sitting for hours, it’ll be nice to stretch our legs.”

“Mommy,” Andrea persisted, her voice rising into a shriek as Margaret focused on April, who was prying at her mother’s fingers.

“Let me go,” April said, pulling backwards. Margaret didn’t let go, her nails beginning to dig into the skin of April’s arm.

Margaret could hear people turning in their seats, eyes glancing sideways at them as Andrea started to cry, saying “Mommy, look! Look, Mommy!”

“I wanna go with you guys,” Connor said, his seatbelt unclicking.

Margaret felt Andrea’s little hand slapping her arm as her shrieks became piercing. She could see a stewardess walking towards them, adjusting her skirt, lips twitching.

“Mom, let go!” April yelled suddenly, her face red. Margaret did, turning quickly to Andrea who had snot dripping from her nose and onto her top lip. April stumbled backwards, not prepared for the sudden release, and fell into the lap of the fat man sitting across the aisle.

The man cursed as he was startled awake, the white noise of the plane falling away as nearby passengers held their breath and watched. April stood quickly and smoothed the front of her green and pink striped shirt. She inhaled sharply as if to say something but shut her lips, cheeks puffed with a breath she could not let out. She walked away.

Patrick shot a look at Margaret and began apologizing to the man; a long plane ride, not enough sleep, and now the delays, but the man shifted in his seat and closed his eyes, the fat of his throat folding into layers like a built-in neck pillow. Margaret focused on Andrea, wiping the hair

away from her face and dabbing at her cheeks with a tissue pulled from her pant pocket. “Shhh,” Margaret cooed, “I’m sorry, baby, I’m sorry.”

“Why don’t you ever,” Andrea sputtered, still red and crying, “pay attention to me?”

“I do, baby, I do. I was just distracted, I’m sorry.” Margaret kissed her daughter’s forehead and buried Andrea’s face into her breast to stifle the crying. Her eyes scanned the plane around her: passengers’ heads peered down into their own laps, Connor stared at the seat in front of him, Patrick gone off and down the aisle to the back of the plane, after April. Margaret bent over and picked up the dropped homework from the cabin floor, smoothed it out on the tray table still spread out in front of Andrea, and said “You did such a good job, Andrea, you did so good.”

Chapter Seven

On the fourth morning of the trip, Margaret took her daughters for a walk along the beach while Connor and Patrick played with a basketball in the courts behind the hotel. The three of them strolled, barefoot, along the shore as the water reached up to tickle their toes before quickly retreating. It was low tide, the waves drawing back to reveal a bed of seashells that rolled over and sounded like rain-makers whenever the water returned.

“They’re all so beautiful,” April said and ran to look at the shells while they were revealed. “They’re all so different.” She held up two shells, one that spiraled like a unicorn’s horn, the other flat and smooth. Then she gave them to Andrea who turned it over in her hand and stroked the underside with her thumb.

The girls took off their cover-ups to reveal matching red bathing suits, straps ruffled. They waded ankle-deep into the surf and raced back to their mother when the waves came for them. They snatched up as many shells they could carry when the water drew back and dropped them at Margaret’s feet as though this was their gift to her. Margaret sat herself in the sand and took out a disposable camera from her fanny pack, taking pictures of Andrea and April as they laughed in the sun and examined their jewels.

“Look at this one!” April exclaimed and held up a nearly perfect conch shell, its inside pink as a newborn. She held it up to her ear to listen.

“What do you hear?” Andrea asked, pulling on her sister’s arm.

“The ocean,” April said. “It’s whispering to me.” Margaret brought the camera up to her eye and focused its lens on April. Margaret thought about how beautiful this daughter was, wisps of shocking blonde hair blew across April’s face as a breeze drifted off the sea. Margaret pressed the button. The camera shuttered then ensnared.

“What is it saying?” asked Andrea, giddy with wonder.

“It says hello,” said April and looked at her mother. She gave the shell to her sister. “Listen.”

Margaret watched as April guided the placement of the shell against Andrea’s ear. “I can’t make out the words!” Andrea said and fidgeted. Margaret shifted to help but April put her hand on her sister’s shoulder and said “just listen” and bent over so her face was just as close to the shell as Andrea’s.

“Do you hear it now?” April asked, her voice low and breathy. Andrea looked at her sister then closed her eyes.

“Yes,” she said.

Later, Margaret sat up in her lounge chair and massaged sunblock into April’s exposed back. Somewhere in the swelling waves was Connor, floating on a boogie board with his father’s guidance. Andrea plopped down just in front of her mother and shoveled sand into her yellow pail, turning it over without packing it down, her castle crumbling before it was even built. April squirmed at the edge of the chair as the cool lotion spread over her skin. “Sit still,” Margaret said as she slid her hands under straps and over shoulders. “It’s cold,” April said back.

Margaret squeezed April’s shoulders to tell her when she was done, then leaned back into the shade of the umbrella planted next to her chair. She scanned the beach quickly and took in the

shiny new suits of tourists, tags freshly plucked from the fabric like fruit finally ripe and ready to be savored. She reached down and dragged her fingers through the warm sand as it accepted and flowed around the tips of her fingers like water.

“I’m going in the water,” April said.

“Wait a couple more minutes for the sunblock to soak in,” Margaret told her and turned her head to get a better look at Andrea.

“No, I want to go now,” said April as she started to walk away.

Andrea paused in the sand and looked up, then stood quickly and swiped at the sand on her legs. “I want to go too,” she said.

Margaret’s eyes darted between Andrea and April. She felt a heaviness in her stomach as she looked at her daughters and wondered, worried, if Andrea would grow up to be like April. The little girl had now taken up the habit of wanting to do whatever her older sister wanted to do. Margaret remembered hoping, when she began to have children, that, should she have daughters, they would be close. Margaret only had one brother and had spent her childhood envious of girl friends that did have sisters. She remembered her friends sometimes bickering with their sisters but there was also the sharing of dolls, clothes, feelings and ideas. There was a mirroring of behavior and attitudes, as though one sister intrinsically affected and inspired the other. Margaret watched Andrea discard her sand toys and stand up to follow April. Was this what Margaret had asked for?

“Just wait a few minutes and we can all go,” Margaret said. But April didn’t want to wait and so she set off into the crowd of beach goers. Margaret sprang up from her chair and grabbed April’s hand before she slipped out of sight.

“April, can’t you just wait?” she snapped and looked back at Andrea who was left standing by the family’s things. “Just wait five minutes, that’s all I’m asking.” After the incident on the plane, Margaret had promised Patrick she would be more patient. You think I like fighting with her? Margaret had whispered to Patrick in the darkness of their hotel room that night, the kids sleeping one room over, a door linking them through the shared wall. Of course, that’s not what Patrick had been suggesting and Margaret knew it but still she couldn’t help but feel like she was being accused of something.

“April,” Margaret said in an attempt to connect instead of overrule her. “I would let you go but we don’t know where Daddy is and I don’t want you wandering the beach by yourself.” April paused to mull it over but then insisted she would be fine on her own. She began tugging again as Margaret’s gaze kept snapping back to Andrea, who seemed too far away and alone on such a busy beach. “Come on, let’s sit down and we can go look for them in a couple minutes.”

She tried to lead April back to the umbrella and sun chairs but her daughter resisted. “Mom, they’ve already been gone for so long if we wait then it’ll be too late!” April dug her heels into the sand. Now, a herd of college kids moved clumsily along the beach and forged their path between Margaret and Andrea. Margaret caught glimpses of her youngest as the group dragged their coolers and chairs but the distance and disruption made her uneasy and she yanked on April’s arm harder. Margaret’s need to return to the beach chairs only escalated April’s need to escape.

“April,” Margaret said suddenly, her focus entirely on the struggle for a moment, “if you don’t come back with me right now then you won’t be allowed to go to the beach for the rest of this trip. Is that what you want?”

They held each other’s stare for a moment. Margaret knew that April knew that Margaret would keep good on her word. They had been at this crossroads before and, already, Margaret

knew what would happen. The wind swept over the beach and loose hair fell across April's face like before but now she looked different, almost ragged and untamed, her face red and patchy and wild. April tugged on her arm and took a hard step back, still holding her mother's gaze.

"Enjoy it while it lasts," Margaret said and released her daughter.

April stepped backwards a second time then turned around and disappeared among the flowing bodies. Margaret rushed back to Andrea who had returned to playing with her sand toys. She sat down, sucking in her cheeks and breathing deeply. She bit the corner of her lip and stifled tears she would not allow herself to cry.

Patrick returned with the two oldest when the afternoon grew late and the crowd thinned. By then, the sun exposure of the day had left both Andrea and Margaret drowsy as the waves crashed higher and higher onto the shore, the force reverberating in Margaret's chest. The two of them dozed in and out under the umbrella after having splashed in the water and raised a perfect sandcastle. Seawater dripped from the tips of Patrick's hair as he leaned over Margaret and woke her. Connor stuck his wet sandy hands into the family's beach bag and dug around until he pulled two towels borrowed from the hotel room.

"How was it?" Margaret asked, still groggy as she sat up. She looked down next to her, where Andrea was sprawled out on a towel in the sand.

"The water is just beautiful, Marg," Patrick said, his voice too loud, and sat on the edge of her chair. Margaret scrunched her toes out from under his butt. "The waves are just so smooth, they're great for body surfing, right kids?" And he looked to April and Connor for confirmation.

“And great for boogie boarding too!” April said and raised her arm, the board attached to her wrist by a cord. Margaret’s anger at April felt like a dream, so sharp and vivid when first awake but now so distant she could hardly remember what had been so upsetting in the first place.

“I’m glad you had fun,” Margaret then said, smiling as she stood up and stretched her limbs. “Should we pack up and get ready for dinner?” They all agreed so April roused Andrea as Connor helped Patrick fold the chairs and umbrellas. They began shaking the sand out of toys and towels and putting everything in the beach cart.

Patrick leaned in close to Margaret as she rearranged everything in the cart. “April told me about your tiff earlier. You said she couldn’t go to the beach anymore?”

“That’s right,” Margaret said.

“Margaret, I get that she didn’t listen, but don’t you think that is a little extreme? I mean, we’re all on vacation here. I want us to all spend and enjoy this time together.”

“I do too,” Margaret said, “but what kind of message are we sending if we don’t follow through with what we say. She needs to learn that actions have consequences.”

“Marg—”

“Patrick,” Margaret said, looking right at him now so he shut up before her complete name could leave his mouth. “You’re either with me or against me. Which is it?” Patrick pressed his lips into a thin straight line and nodded.

“April,” Margaret said, “why don’t you come back with me now and we can get a head start on showers. Daddy and Connor can handle the beach stuff.”

“Okay,” April said.

“What about me?” asked Andrea.

Margaret squatted and pinched Andrea’s cheek. “You can supervise,” she said.

Margaret and April headed out ahead of the others. They didn't say anything as they walked sluggishly through the loose sand. What was there to say? April knew Margaret would enforce whatever punishment had been threatened and still she had left.

To be honest, Margaret wasn't even mad anymore. In fact, she suspected, she had better enjoyed her time at the beach reading and watching Andrea than she would have should April have actually listened and stayed behind. But whether or not she was still angry wasn't the point and so Margaret led April back to the hotel room, reminding her that this had been her last time at the beach.

"You'll need to take some medicine before we go to dinner," Margaret said as they stepped up onto the wooden path that led them over the sand dunes and to the back of the hotel.

"Why?" April asked. "I'm not sick." It was always the same conversation.

"I saw how you were today," Margaret said. "Take your medicine and you'll be better." Margaret walked a few feet before realizing April had stopped following. Instead she stood by the railings of the elevated path and watched the thin stalks of sea grass bend and bow in the wind. Margaret walked back to her.

"I'm not trying to be sick," April said without looking up. "I don't even feel it in me."

"I know, baby," Margaret said and reached out to touch April's arm. She half expected her daughter to jerk away but instead April drooped into Margaret's embrace and buried her face into her mother's green sundress. Margaret bent down to kiss the top of April's forehead and felt her daughter's despair pressed against her abdomen. "It's not your fault you are this way. You'll be okay."

April stepped back and rubbed at her eyes. "I don't think I'll ever get better," she said.

“Baby, of course you will.” Margaret got low so she was eye level with her daughter and took her face in both hands. “You’re gonna be okay,” she told April, “I’m gonna make sure you are okay.” And when April nodded, Margaret added “you just need to listen to me. Okay? You need to do a better job at listening to me.”

Again, April nodded and Margaret pressed her forehead to her daughter’s. They stayed like that until April had finished crying, then Margaret gave her a moment to catch her breath. They walked more slowly this time and the sky grew pink with dusk.

Chapter Eight

It wasn't really a surprise at all when Patrick brought up the idea of moving. He loved the thrill of believing in himself and convincing Margaret to go along with it was just part of the game he somehow always won. "Trust me, Margaret," (his favorite line), "this is where the money is. We move here and we'll never move again, we'll have it made in the shade." He stood behind her as she sat at the kitchen table in the morning before the kids woke. He squeezed her arms then held his hand out in front of her face as though with just a wave, all the great potential of their lives would pan out before her.

"What's your idea again?" she asked and sipped her coffee. She stared out the window across from the table, the sky burning pink and orange with the new day. Again, Patrick explained the new start-up he had in mind but all it meant to Margaret was that they would have to relocate once more. It was so unfair to her, she thought. Patrick never stood still long enough to feel settled and so had no problem asking her to uproot everything she had been trying to plant.

"I like it here," she told him and absently pulled at a loose thread on the cuff of her sleeve. Outside, a house sparrow perched briefly on the edge of a flower box of yellow and purple perennials, then flitted into the towering elm tree on the side of the house. Some mornings, before the sunlight reached her sleeping eyes, she could hear the birds chirping in their nest, the tree's sweeping limbs reaching near her bedroom window so the branch occasionally shook with their arrival and departure.

“We’ll find a place we really like in Dallas,” Patrick said and took the mug from her hands, slurping as he sipped, and kissed her with his coffee breath after giving it back. “And another thing,” Patrick said now, stepping out from behind her so she could see him. “I think maybe we should consider stopping April’s medication.”

Margaret stiffened in her seat. The two of them almost never discussed April’s medication, primarily because Margaret felt Patrick wasn’t around often enough to have an opinion on the matter. Was he there during the day when April was most resistant? Was he the one to try to manage her when she was most defiant, bent on challenging everything set before her?

“I just don’t think it is accomplishing what we want it to,” Patrick continued, speaking quickly. “And I know April doesn’t feel good about it.”

“Did you talk to her?”

“A little bit,” he said, “last night.”

“What did she say?”

“That she doesn’t like the way it makes her feel, that it’s not working.”

Margaret folded her arms across her chest and tilted her head slightly. “Did you ever stop to think how much worse it would be if she wasn’t taking medicine at all? Did you ever think that it’s doing exactly what it’s supposed to do?” Margaret went to sip her coffee but remembered her husband’s lips on the mug, tonguing the painted ceramic, his saliva left on the rim, and pushed the drink away instead.

“Margaret—” He sat down next to her at the table and reached out to touch her hand but she kept them hidden in the crevice of her folded arms.

“No, you didn’t, did you?” she said, ignoring his outstretched hands. “Because you’re never around, Patrick. You’re so obsessed with work, you have no idea what it’s really like here. So

maybe before you try to disrupt a system that is making the best of a tough situation, you could, I don't know, spend more time with your kids, spend less time focused on yourself and your projects.”

“I at least think we should have a conversation about it,” Patrick said, “we're both her parents.”

“Really? What's the name of the medicine she's taking? How often does she take it?” Margaret thought of the extra strength Benadryl in the medicine cabinet upstairs. She always took it out of its packaging and gave it to April in the palm of her hand, little pink pills that April received like communion. “So help me god, Patrick, if you get it in April's head that she doesn't need this medicine...”

“Okay, okay,” he said back and shoved the chair back so hard it scratched the floor. “I'm sorry I brought it up.”

“Me too.”

She looked across the room to the clock hanging over the kitchen sink and saw now that they were running late. She left the kitchen wordlessly and went to wake up the kids for school.

A few months later, after it became clear that, yes, they were definitely moving to Dallas, Margaret set out on the three hour drive to go look at different houses for sale. April would accompany her and Patrick was in charge of getting the other two to school on time.

Margaret loved driving in the morning. It was 5:26 am. Peaceful. She thought that there was a certain type of serenity that blanketed the world during the earliest hours of the day, a type of calmness which settled over towns and cities. And when the sun began to rise, it is was as though the sculpted landscapes were yawning awake and the shadows grew long with anticipation.

Margaret sometimes found herself drifting awake at these odd hours. She could feel the cloud of sleep slowly dissipate and she'd pull aside curtains to watch the bright hues bleed into the purple sky, bringing to life the dark crevices of the night.

In the back seat, April slept with her face pressed to the cool glass of the window, a smudge of fog pulsing as she breathed in and out. Margaret caught a glimpse of her daughter in the rearview mirror and thought about how beautiful April was when she slept. The hardness of her face softened as she dreamed, her eyes fluttering back and forth under her eyelids.

Margaret finally had the complete thought, after months of trying not to notice the splinter in her mind, that April was really growing up. She was on the cusp of thirteen, her body shrinking at the waist and swelling on her chest. Not only that but she was maturing and Margaret realized that it scared her. When April was a child, Margaret tried to tell herself that she would grow out of her defiant and difficult tendencies. It seemed now, however, that this behavior wasn't disappearing but instead evolving. Instead of getting upset about sharing her toys or restrictions on sweets, April was sneaky and deceitful. There were at least two instances where April had snuck out of the house in the middle of the night, though who knows how many times she had done it without getting caught.

When asked where she had gone, April said she went to that clearing along the trail behind the house. The neighborhood where they lived was extensive and only filled with houses, nothing else close enough to be walked to, so Margaret and Patrick conceded to believe this answer.

"Why?" Patrick had asked after the first time, April sitting alone at the table, her parents standing over her.

"It's pretty at night," she said and shrugged, smirking as she caught Margaret's eye. Margaret knew that, more likely, April was just trying to get her all riled up, which had worked.

Margaret remembered frantically checking all the rooms and sending Patrick to drive around the neighborhood at three in the morning when she had, for some midnight reason, gotten out of bed and realized April wasn't in her room.

A deep pothole in the road drew Margaret back to the car as it jolted and April stirred awake. The sun was fully up now, brightening every fleck of dust and dirt on the windshield as more and more cars joined her trek across the stretching highway. They traveled in almost silence, the radio turned down so low Margaret could really only hear it if she held her breath and focused on the sound. April tried to get some of her schoolwork done but quickly complained of motion sickness as she tried to focus on the small font of her history textbook.

Eventually, they made it to the suburbs of Dallas and met with the realtor, who showed them first a small, one-floor house built of white wooden planks and then a brick townhouse closer to the city. They moved through the spaces slowly, Margaret and April taking notice of the different rooms and windows and quirks. The first house had the tiniest breakfast nook they had ever seen, with a surface area hardly big enough to table a standard serving dish.

“What do you think?” Margaret asked her daughter. She had brought her along because otherwise April would have been left to her own devices but now that she was here, Margaret was glad to be with someone who seemed just as unhappy about moving as she was.

“It's a house,” April said.

“It sure is,” Margaret said back, both of them unimpressed. The realtor took them to two other places after April commented on a strange odor in the townhouse.

In each house, April would excuse herself to use the bathroom as Margaret stood in the doorway after touring the space and listen to the realtor spew logistics.

Later, when it was just the two of them eating lunch before the drive home, Margaret and April said what they really thought about the houses. “That first one was way too small,” April said, seated across from her mother in a booth with plastic coverings. She dragged a french fry through a puddle of ketchup and popped it in her mouth. “*And* it had some funky carpeting in the living room, what even is *that* color?”

“I suspect it was orange once,” Margaret said and sipped water carefully through a straw so as not to mess up her lipstick.

“See, I was thinking it was purple.” They scrunched their noses at each other and laughed at how the third house they looked at had a framed caricature of a horse mounted to the living room wall. The bell over the door kept dinging as people waded in and out of the diner. Two waitresses navigated the growing lunch crowd like trout swimming upstream.

Margaret thought to ask about the reading April had to do on the Cold War but decided not to. Most of her time spent with April involved schooling and they often disagreed on how much time to spend on what topics and how April understood the material compared to Margaret. It was undeniable: April was intelligent and processed things in ways Margaret wasn’t even close to understanding. It had always been true but now they had reached a crossroads and it seemed that what April needed from her education far exceeded anything Margaret was capable of providing her with. Margaret felt like she was constantly holding her breath when she was around April, as though any sort of change in pressure or atmosphere could set her off and make her impossible to work with.

But here, for once, they were making jokes and chatting. When they were done poking fun at the houses, they talked about the trail that they both liked to walk (though never together).

Margaret liked how loud the trail was with life, there was always something scuffling in the leaves, water gushing through the canyon, even the wind in the trees sounded to her like music.

They didn't talk at all on the car ride home, they'd run out of things to say to each other. But that was okay, lunch had been so good. They made great time and got back home before the sunset. In the driveway, Margaret twisted in her seat to look at April before they both got out of the car. "I had a really nice time with you today," she said and reached out to touch her daughter's knee. She really meant it, so much of her time was spent paddling against April's current, it was refreshing to just float along for once.

"Me too," April said and pushed her car door open. As she got out, something slipped out of her pocket. Margaret caught the glint out of the corner of her eye and, turning against the seatbelt still buckled, saw a diamond teardrop earring.

"What is this?" Margaret said and reached over to grab it. Now, she unbuckled and got out of the car, stopping April before she went inside. "Where did this come from?"

April's eyes grew big at the sight of the earring but she quickly masked it with a look of indifference and said "I don't know."

"What's in your pockets?" Margaret asked and reached out to stuff her hands in April's pant pockets.

"Nothing," April said and stepped away.

"April, let me see," Margaret said harshly.

The front door opened and Patrick stepped out, saying "I thought I heard the car pull up" but he stopped himself at the sight of his girls, both poised like fighters moment before the bell rings. "What's wrong?"

“Look at what April suddenly has,” Margaret said and held up the diamond earring, which caught the late sun in its gem and glittered.

“Where did you get that?” Patrick asked his daughter.

“It’s not mine.” April looked at her father and made her eyes glossy with denial, as though the accusation hurt more coming from him. While April was focused on Patrick, Margaret took hold of daughter’s arm and plunged her free hand into the pant pocket, pulling out two strings of pearls, a gold ring with an opal gem, and the earring’s other half.

“Did you take these?” Margaret almost yelled, the color draining from her face from sheer embarrassment. She felt lightheaded.

“It’s not a big deal,” April said, resuming that air of indifference she was so infuriatingly good at.

“Of course it’s a big deal,” Patrick said now and even Margaret was surprised by the sharpness of his voice. “Are you kidding me, April!” For a moment, Margaret thought April was going to cry and she thought of course it’s Patrick who can get a genuine reaction from the girl. But no, the wave of emotion passed over her face and April stood their stoically, folding her arms across her chest and shifting her weight to one foot so she seemed like someone who was waiting for something very boring to be over.

For once, Margaret was speechless. She had taken her daughter into somebody else’s home and her daughter had stolen from them. And what was worse, April didn’t even care.

Chapter Nine

Margaret had plans to meet her friend Joanna at the coffee shop near the park. They had met each other shortly after Margaret and the family moved from Austin to Dallas. “This is the last time,” Margaret insisted, trying not to shake her head as she and Patrick tore open cardboard boxes and began the ritual process of beginning again.

Patrick had introduced Margaret to Joanna, the wife of one of his new coworkers, by saying “you might find you have some things in common.” These things which they held in common turned out to be daughters who had a tendency to be difficult. Margaret, at first, didn’t want to like Joanna just because of how Patrick had introduced them but she found that not only was it comforting to confide in someone who understood how challenging these daughters could be but that they had other things in common as well. They both sprouted from small, quiet families, enjoyed filling their homes with plants that were easy to nurture and quick to flourish, and they even took their coffee the same way, black with sugar, no cream.

Now, a little over a year since moving to Dallas and meeting Joanna, Margaret enjoyed this new routine, twice a week she would meet Joanna and they would get coffee to go and walk the dirt path along the manmade lake. Two miles one way and two miles back. Margaret pushed her cat-eye sunglasses further up onto the bridge of her nose and sipped the coffee. She heard the whirring of bicycle tires as a kid sped up behind and then past them, kicking up dust in his wake. “April can be so mean,” she told Joanna, looking past her to the lake. From here it seemed so still

and empty but she could picture the fish just beneath the surface, bass and catfish and crappie brought in from somewhere else just in time for the fishing season.

“She’s so nasty to Andrea, I don’t even know what to say half the time. The other day Andrea’s friend, Clara, was over and Andrea asked if April could help them play with some makeup and April said ‘makeup won’t hide the fact that your both ugly’. I didn’t even know what to say, you should have seen the look on Clara’s face. I don’t think the poor girl will ever come back over.” Margaret was shaking her head, her face blushing with embarrassment as she remembered the encounter, the stench of silence seeping up from the carpet and through their shoes.

“That’s terrible,” Joanna said and Margaret wanted her to say more but she didn’t.

“It’s just that nothing works with her,” Margaret said and she could feel the frustration rising up in her throat. “No matter what I do to punish her, nothing changes. She just doesn’t care.” Joanna was a head shorter than Margaret, her skin more receptive to the Texan sun. Margaret wore a long sleeve shirt made of the lightest fabric she could get her hands on and had a wide brim hat shading her face and the back of her neck but Joanna was the near opposite, tank top exposing her dark shoulders.

In the trees that lined the path, birds chirped and fluttered from branch to branch. She saw the bright red cap of a red-bellied woodpecker flit from one tree to the other just ahead of them. Margaret loved how green everything was. She remembered, before moving all those years ago, how she’d imagined Texas to be one vast brown wasteland of sand and dust. And sure, that was true in some parts, particularly western Texas. But here there were hills and gorges and the world was so many shades of green. The landscape seemed like a patchwork quilt of forest green,

chartreuse green, emerald green, fern green. Just a few weeks ago, she and April had gone through a book of colors in search for the right words to describe the nature around them.

“And I don’t think I can keep up with this homeschooling anymore,” Margaret found herself admitting. She had been thinking it for a while but, until now, saying it out loud seemed to her an admittance of defeat. She had fought so hard for this, arguing with Patrick over and over again about how this was the best thing for April but half of this stuff didn’t even make any sense to her and now she was expected to teach it to someone else? It had been different when April was a kid and learning about earth science and algebra. But she was fourteen now and supposed to learn physics and would you believe it Margaret had never even taken a course in physics herself.

“I know you were concerned about April fitting in at school when she was younger,” Joanna said, “but she’s not a little kid anymore. I’m sure she could handle herself if you decided to send her to a school again.”

“I just feel like if I give up on this then Patrick will throw it in my face with every other thing we disagree on. I feel like he’ll never listen to me.” Margaret thought about Patrick, how consumed he was by his work. Everybody around her was growing up and away, Connor enthralled by a girl he had met at school, Andrea always asking if she could play with this friend or that friend. And Patrick promised he wouldn’t make the family move again. They had really liked their home in Austin but were finally feeling like this could be home too, finally after a year of living in a space that seemed almost as uncomfortable with them as they were with it.

Margaret could practically prophesize what would happen next: a new business adventure landing on Patrick’s desk, the gleam in his eye as he would tell her how great this could be for them, her standing her ground. This time she would stand her ground and stand right here in Dallas,

so she planned on telling him that he could travel, if that would alleviate his restlessness, she would let him travel for work. But then, who did that leave? Just Margaret and April.

“Okay,” Joanna said, pulling Margaret back from her thoughts so quickly it made her dizzy. She felt angry having thought about all that was yet to happen, thinking about a conversation they were yet to have but she was certain it was coming, it was always coming. Joanna continued “but you both need to remember that this isn’t about you or him. It’s about April, what’s best for her.” Joanna touched Margaret’s arm, a gesture not unusual of her but it always surprised Margaret a little bit, this physicality of hers, this reaching out and being reached out to. “You need to do what’s right by her.”

Without Margaret realizing it, they had reached the post on the side of the trail that marked their two miles away from the coffee shop. The two women paused to take in the lake, trees giving way to sand imported from who knows where to craft a little beach where people planted chairs and read their books and soaked up the sun. Margaret smiled at Joanna and adjusted her hat, her hairline damp with sweat. They turned and walked back the way they came, this time talking about the impending summer, the golf tournament that clogged their local streets with traffic, and didn’t mention either of their daughters once.

After returning home from her walk with Joanna, Margaret went up to April’s bedroom and knocked on the door. She turned the knob, her slender fingers wrapping around the doorframe as she peered in. A sliver of light slipped through the center of the window where two curtains met but did not touch. The hardwood floors were littered with clothes. Margaret felt the familiar twinge of distaste as she tried to decide which items were dirty and which had just been discarded on the

floor. Looking around, though, she thought it was best like this. The room would feel too big, too cold, without the piles to navigate through.

April's bed jutted out into the middle of the room and Margaret could make out her daughter's form under the lump of comforter. "What's wrong, baby?" Margaret asked April. The teen was curled up, only a few strands of blonde hair spilling out from underneath the covers.

"Carly's dog died," she said, her voice muffled by blankets. Carly lived across the street and had three brothers and no sisters so she would sometimes knock on the door to see if April or Andrea wanted to play. Which sister came outside didn't really matter because Carly was sandwiched right between them, two years younger than April, two years older than Andrea. April had taken an unusual liking to Carly and was affectionate and warm towards her in a way Margaret wished April would be towards her own little sister.

Margaret climbed into her daughter's bed, her body bending around April's. "That's sad," she said and kissed the back of April's shoulder. "Was he sick?"

"Yeah," April said. "For a long time." Margaret touched April's curls, chopped short and cropped but still curling.

"Sometimes it's better that way," Margaret said. "When an animal is sick and there's no getting better... it's more humane to put it down instead of letting it suffer."

April turned over and looked at her mother. "Do you really believe that?"

Margaret touched her daughter's cheek, pale but warm, and her thumb stroked April's brow bone and this thing that she had created was so beautiful. "Yes," she said. "I do."

Chapter Ten

Margaret stood near the window looking out into the backyard and soaked up the warm orange glow of the October morning. She had just hung up the phone after talking to Connor, telling him she'd just sent a care package in the mail and that he should keep an eye out for it. He was quick to say thank you and good bye and she couldn't help but feel just a tiny bit hurt over how much he enjoyed being away at college. Stepping away from the window, she returned to the bundle of clothes dumped onto the kitchen table and finished folding them. She then divided the mix of slacks, jeans, blouses, sweaters into piles: Patrick, Andrea, April.

April had graduated high school that past spring but didn't go off to college like her brother. "I'm tired," she kept saying, "I just need to rest." Well, Margaret had always agreed with that. April just needed to lie down for a good long while and then she would be good to go. Of course, this was starting to drag on into one long slumber as the months spilled into each other. Margaret couldn't help but blame Patrick a bit for this. He had insisted on advancing April to grades beyond her maturity and now she was done with high school two years young and burnt out. Of course, sending her to an actual school hadn't helped as much as they had hoped. Margaret was reluctant to let April out, she was finally getting a real good grip on her, but she just couldn't teach the necessary subjects. Calculus, physics, dense hard-to-read literature, sometimes it seemed like April was teaching it to her.

Margaret was beginning to think that, come Thanksgiving, they would need to start pushing April to make some plans for the future. Yes, rest was essential but even water goes bad when it becomes stagnant. She placed the folded clothes back in the basket and, propping it on her hip, headed upstairs to put everything away.

She thought about late last night: April coming into her room just as she was falling asleep. She slipped into the vast bed, Patrick's pillows untouched while he was away on business. "Can I lie down with you?" April had whispered into the darkness. Margaret scooted more towards the middle of the bed, the springs squeaking as April climbed in. She was taller than her mother now and Margaret thought what an odd feeling to be the big spoon when she was smaller but it was a rare occurrence to get any affection from April so she wrapped her arms around her daughter's body and squeezed.

"I wish Dad was here," April said. Margaret nuzzled her face into April's loose curls and said "he'll be back soon."

They lied in silence for a bit, the world so quiet Margaret could hear her wristwatch ticking on the dresser. Margaret matched her breathing to April's so their bodies filled slowly together then exhaled in unison. "How are you feeling?" Margaret had asked, her voice seeming almost far away and not hers as she spoke with sleep pressing in.

"I just need to sleep," April told her and shifted slightly, nudging herself closer to her mother. "I'm sorry," she thought she heard April say.

"It's okay, baby," Margaret said back, "I understand." April must have slipped out some time in the night because when Margaret woke up in the morning, she woke up alone.

Now, she walked up the carpeted stairs, stopping first in her room then Andrea's to put the clean clothes away. Andrea was on a three day trip to Austin, the capitol, with her ninth-grade

class. It was already day two and she would be back late evening tomorrow, Sunday. In Andrea's room, Margaret found already a small pile of things on her bed. It was some of April's clothes: a cardigan of a rich lilac hue with fake pearl buttons, a band t-shirt she had once worn for a week straight after finding out the band had broken up, and a beautiful red dress that cinched at the waist. Margaret remembered, last week, the blow up that had happened when Andrea tried to wear the dress for a school dance.

"It's mine," April had screeched, nearly hysterical, as she tried to rip the dress from her sister's body.

"Please, April," Andrea begged, "I want to borrow it just this one time." The dress didn't fit the younger sister as well as it did the older one, her body was growing out before it grew up apparently so the dress fell awkwardly over her flat chest and protruding belly. Even still, Margaret thought she looked mature and beautiful.

"You didn't even ask me," April said back. "You just went into my room and took it!"

"Because I knew you'd say no!" Andrea said, now starting to cry, and she was just about to go out, Margaret didn't want her to leave with her face all red and blotchy.

"April, please," Margaret said, finally intervening. "What do you even need it for? You're not going out any time soon. Let your sister borrow the dress."

April gave her mother a look that at first seemed like hurt but quickly traveled down her face to her mouth, her lips curling up in a wicked smirk. "I don't even know why she would want to wear it," she said like one who is frighteningly calm amidst their anger. "It doesn't even look good on her," then, turning to her little sister, she said "that dress makes you look fat."

On top of the pile of clothes was an envelope addressed to Andrea. Margaret picked it up and felt something slide amongst the contents sealed inside. Margaret felt like the dress altercation

had been an abnormally low blow for April and was pleased to see what seemed like an attempt at an apology, even if it was some days overdue. Margaret began to pick at the glue that kept hidden the contents of the envelope but somehow managed to resist her urge to snoop. The girls are getting older now, she told herself, they need to learn to navigate their relationship on their own.

Margaret put down the envelope, deposited the clothes she had come to put away, and headed towards April's room. At April's door, she started to turn the knob but then stopped. She was trying to better respect April's privacy so she knocked on the door. "April," she said, "can I come in?" She didn't hear anything on the other side. "I just have some clothes of yours that I want to put away." She adjusted the now almost empty basket on her other hip and waited. She glanced down at her wristwatch, 10:46 am.

"I saw what you left in Andrea's room," she said louder so April could hear her approval and gratitude at this unexpected gesture. "It's really nice of you to give your sister that dress. She's going to be so excited when she gets back tomorrow." Still, Margaret heard nothing from behind the door. She had a passing thought that maybe April wasn't in there. But of course she was because where else would she be? Since the second move in Texas and her reintroduction into the public school system, April had made very few friends and the ones she did were now off at college in other parts of the country.

Margaret knocked on the door harder this time because April must be sleeping and this would wake her up. "Okay, April, I'm coming in," she finally said after waiting in the hallway, the echo of the ticking watch keeping count. She turned the knob. Inside, the room was almost entirely dark, a thin shaft of sunlight creeping in from the edge of the window where the curtain could not reach. Margaret noticed the room was spotless: clothes that had taken a permanent residence on the floor were now tucked away in shut drawers, papers and books that once cluttered

the surfaces of desk and dresser were now neatened and organized, and, looking closer, Margaret could see that the mirror hanging on the closed closet door had been wiped down with glass cleaner. The room was startling cold. Margaret stepped in. She took notice of her daughter's still form encased in blankets.

“April,” Margaret said as she stepped towards the bed. “April!” She cried now and dropped the basket, clothes tumbling out of their order.