

Dream Catchers

by Emily LaSita

Abstract: Laurel is a fifteen-year-old who has grown up in foster-care, moving from home to home. She considers herself to be fairly normal, aside from the small fact that she keeps having dreams of dead people she doesn't know, asking for their dying wishes. When her caseworker, Gina, brings Laurel to her new rich foster-family, where she must attend a new school with privileged kids, she begins to uncover the mysteries of their lives as well as her own. Some things aren't as they seem and what might happen to her new friends, the memory of her "clients" and Gina if these secrets are exposed?

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Reflection: Working on "Dream Catchers" this past academic year has been a true process of writing and rewriting. The characters and story have evolved so much from when I first started. I wrote an early version of "II" as an assignment for a Creative Writing course at SUNY New Paltz. My initial concept stemmed from an unusual dream I had years ago. In the beginning I considered telling this story from multiple perspectives, Laurel, the boy who falls off his bike, and Gina, but I decided to continue the piece in Laurel's voice. My goal became to write a piece in the young adult genre that was a mix of realism, mystery and supernatural/fantasy.

Because of the protagonist's upbringing and traumatic past, I heavily researched foster-care in New York state and the U.S. online. I began by reading blogs and websites designed for foster parents so that I could learn more about the system and process. I didn't expect that by reading them, I would come to better understand the mindset of a foster parent as well. This became paramount in my development of Mrs. Petrakis, Fran and Sadie. After this, I realized I should do similar research for Gina's profession as a caseworker. While Gina's relationship with Laurel and her foster-parents is highly unorthodox and in reality, might not be feasible, it is

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impossible to remove humanity from the difficult processes in foster-care and caseworkers always offer emotional support. In line with my research, I developed a series of questions to ask a New Paltz Psychology professor about the psychological impact foster-care has on children and teenagers, but I found that all of my questions could be answered by reading first-person accounts from foster-kids online. One facet of the story I think I should've have researched further is the grieving for parents who lose a teenager unexpectedly. While Chris' car accident happens four years prior to Laurel's arrival, the Petrakis family is in many ways still grieving this loss when she meets them, as they will for the rest of their lives. Overall, I did research so that I could write a believable and world, even with supernatural factors in play. Although I don't have any personal experience with foster-care, I am very familiar with the setting of the piece. The characters live on Long Island, NY in a fictitious town which in some ways mirror the two I've grown up in. Like Laurel, I moved to a new school district, but "Dream Catchers" is a work of fiction and none of the events described have happened to myself or anyone I know.

I chose to write this story as my honors thesis because I wanted to challenge myself to write a longer piece that I ever have before. Inexperienced writers often struggle with in staying interested in the work they are writing over a long period of time and I definitely felt this happen at times. What helped me continue was all my research as I further developed the characters; they changed from the figures I originally imagined them to be, so the story changed a bit too. Every section of this work I revised several times. I knew that authors go through such a process, but I now understand a little of what it like through my experience writing and rewriting "Dream Catchers". I feel more at peace with this work than I ever have previously, but I recognize that in many ways it feels like the beginning of a longer work and not a short story. I have ideas for what could happen to these characters if I continue with the story in the future.

I

We were floating above the city, me and the old man, in a hot air balloon. The world below was a garden of rusted red roofs and yellow buildings. The sky was an uneven pink and orange haze, and the clouds absorbed its passion. We landed in a field. Far away was a tiny house. A family was furiously waving at us, their cheeks as light as their hearts. They were beaming as they hugged and kissed the old man. I could not understand a word of what they said. I suspected we were in Europe, though I couldn't be sure as I'd never been. The language might've been Spanish or Italian. If it had been Spanish, my two years of learning the language had clearly failed me. We went inside their home and devoured a huge feast, made from the freshest foods from the family's farm. Afterwards, we lay down and rested during a sunny afternoon.

Then, suddenly, we were in a noisy city street. I read signs for restaurants and saw their menus written in English. We turned a corner and I recognized the Brooklyn Bridge. We were so close to it. We traveled along the uneven, cobblestone street, until we reached a very tall building, which instantly altered its appearance. Somehow, I could tell we were in a place that had undergone change overtime and had reverted back for a few moments, for the benefit of the old man. Next, we were inside the building on a floor high up in the sky. It was a factory and a few of the workers embraced the old man.

In an instant, we were standing in a cul de sac in a quiet neighborhood. We walked up to the front door and it opened. We stood in a living room with a family, three children, a mother and a father. The mother looked so much like the old man, but feminine and youthful. They laughed, shouted, and smiled warmly at each other.

This was family, and this was old man valued family, more than anything else in his world. Before he left them, he winked, and he thanked me profusely.

The dead man had done and seen all that he wanted, and finally could be at peace.

...

I woke up to the smell of onions and coffee.

When I entered the kitchen, Gina was standing over the stove, a steaming mug in one hand and a spatula in the other.

“What are you making?”

“Just some coffee and an omelet.” *Unusual, but okay*, I guessed Gina could be buttering me up for our trip. One I was not looking forward to. “How’d you sleep?”

“Okay, I guess.”

“I know that look. You had a *client* visit in one of your dreams, last night, didn’t you?”

“Client.” She always calls them that, as if I’m running some kind of business, entirely of my own free will, as if someone who doesn’t even have a driver’s license and only just learned to bike ride two summers ago could have clients.

“Yeahhhhh,” I said with a yawn, putting my head down on the kitchen table.

My eyes were closed, but I could hear her walking over to me. I could smell her comforting, familiar scent as she approached the table. She always smelled like coffee. She put down a plate above my head and nudged me with something.

“Here are the obits.”

I took the newspaper from her and read through all the names of people who died this week.

“This is him.” I said pointing to his name and thinking of the little old man with the strong nose, his face still fresh in my mind.

Gina was now sitting down beside me, at the head of the table. It was just the two of us. Sadie and the girls were out. I couldn’t go with them, not that I wanted to, because I am leaving today.

“Vincenzo ‘Vinnie’ Matteo DaNapoli. Italian.” She smiled. “And where did he take you? And what were his dying wishes?”

It’s a lot to explain. Or maybe it’s not really a lot to explain, it’s just unbelievable.

I have these *dreams* where I am traveling around with a person, I have never met, to carry out that person’s dreams and wishes. These people have all recently died. I follow them as they say goodbyes to loved ones and do the things they always wanted to before they died. I have been having dreams like this since I was maybe eight years old. I wouldn’t say I am a liaison between the living and the dead or that I have some kind of magical powers or anything. I honestly feel like the whole thing is pretty normal. I mean, I guess it’s weird, when I explain it like this, but it’s just been happening for so long and it doesn’t really negatively affect me or hurt anybody, so it’s not really a big deal. Gina is the only person who knows about my dreams and she’s the one who encouraged me to talk about them.

Gina's also my casework. When we first started talking about my dreams there was a lot of, "You know, you could be having these dreams about different people and families, Laurel, because you're in the foster system. Maybe you're dreaming of the permanent home we're going to find for you." Evidently, Gina's really big on "dream theory" or dissection of dreams. She said sometimes she feels like she's been so busy in her dreams, that she feels tired when she wakes up in the morning. Gina's also in her mid-sixties, so that could be partially why.

I first suspected that my dreams are about real people, when there was a shooting in a neighboring town of the group home, I'd been staying in. The man who had been killed, pictures of him, had been all over the news and I, waking up one morning and stumbling into the living room of Sunflower Fields, couldn't believe that it had been the same guy from the dream I'd had the night before. I thought for sure my mind was playing tricks. Like, I had been misremembering and associating the man's face on the screen with the one in my head, but then the next time it happened, it was a kid from school. She had died in a car accident. The entire school was in mourning. I had only been at Sunflower Fields five months, and this was a girl a few years younger than me, so I didn't know her. I had never met her in real life, but she came to me in a dream. After that I knew that these dreams of strangers showing up with their requests, and I, becoming an invisible onlooker, occasionally switching to watch the scene through the person's eyes, weren't just normal dreams. They are of real people. Though it's still unclear to me as to whether or not the "adventures", for lack of a better word, we embark really exist outside my own mind and reach them, somehow, as they move into the after-life or whatever exactly happens to people after they die.

I have regular dreams too, where I'm not just there hanging in the background, following random people places. Dreams where I'm the "main character", I guess, but I can always tell the difference because the dreams with "clients" just *feel* different.

"Well," I said, "He wanted to do a whole bunch and there were so many goodbyes. Who knew one person could have that many relatives? And all the side-cheek kisses! We went to Italy, I think, then to the city, and finally, we ended up in a house with a family of five, somewhere on Long Island, as per usual." No matter what, the dreams always end up back on the island. It's because all the people who have died, have died here, I think.

Gina asked me more questions about the dream, making me describe in detail the sights in Italy.

"And I knew they were all happy, but so much of the interactions I couldn't really follow. Why didn't you ever teach me Italian?"

"Well Laurel, you're not Italian."

That made me a little sad. Gina was fluent and made it seem like being Italian was like having magic powers, like she herself had been the reigning queen of the country before her parents up and moved to Queens in the 1960's. I say that like immigrating to a brand-new country is easy, I know that it's not. Starting over is really hard.

"But you could be Laurel, we really don't know do we? Anyhow, that seems like an exhausting night you had. Eat your eggs."

I took a bite. Cheddar cheese, onions AND mushrooms? She was really buttering me up.

“Speaking of culture, how’d you like to be Greek?” Gina said, sitting down and taking a sip of coffee.

“What do you mean?” I said, pushing the mushroom to the left with my fork. “Am I?”

“Laurel, you know I don’t know, but the family I’m taking you to see, their last name is Petrakis, so I’m assuming at least the man is Greek.”

Gina spoke like that. Like, he wasn’t a husband or a father to his children, he was just the man. Like, him being so, made him an apathetic regulation. He was an unavoidable, mandated force. And he was in the way towards a person’s true happiness. Which I think for Gina, her “man” might’ve been. Gina was married once, but that was a long time ago, before I met her, before I was even born. In the time that I’ve known her, eight years, over half my lifetime since I’m fifteen, Gina has only ever dated women. In fact, she was dating Sadie, one of my foster moms for a long time while she was fostering me the first time. It was almost certainly a conflict of interest given the number of times I walked into Sadie’s kitchen to see a sight not unlike this morning: Gina making eggs on the stovetop. Except in those instances Gina had messy hair, wore sweatpants and a Giants t-shirt, not a neatly blown-out bob, slacks and short-sleeved collared shirt, like right now. She looked so professional, but from the seat I’d taken at the table, I could visibly see a bit of cat hair on her pants around the ankles, the places she must’ve missed with the lint roller, so I knew the truth.

I pushed an onion to the right of my plate and looked out the window.

“When do we have to leave? It looks like it stopped raining. Can we walk there?”

“Very funny. I know I said the house was close to here, but it’s a fifteen-minute drive”

So, and as if hearing my thoughts, “That’s six miles, Sweets.”

When I was first living at the girls’ home, Sadie would take all fourteen of us to the library on Wednesdays and Thursdays, Gina would come too, and we’d walk there because it was so close. It was near a major road, but for the most part we were careful. Some girls were really stupid though, or else they had a death wish—maybe they really did too, living in the foster care system is the worst. But anyway, after that I always wanted to walk everywhere because of how fun it was with Gina. Gina would say to me, “You’re a regular New Yorker, Sweets”, and I cringe to think of it now, but I would say “I know I am!”

I live in New York, but on Long Island, the fish-shaped landmass southeast of the city, which is nothing like the city—or so I’ve been told, by Gina mostly, since she grew up there. I’ve never been. It’d only be an hour and thirty-minute train ride, but it’s something like \$38 roundtrip and I don’t have that kind of money. I plan to get a job soon, and a real job, not just like the babysitting job I had watching Jose, Fran’s youngest son when I lived with them, in exchange for ice cream sandwiches. Fran, a volunteer at Gina’s church and former foster parent of mine, has another son too... I don’t want to talk about him right now. I just keep my eye on the prize: turning eighteen, choosing where to live and moving in with Gina. Being an adult means freedom and the ability to make my own life decisions. That’s why even though there’s no shot I’ll have a car, (with what money and with what driving lessons?) I’m still trying to get my driver’s permit. It’s a written test, doesn’t require any skill aside from memorization, and it’s gonna be mine when I turn sixteen.

“Now, Laurel, Mrs. Petrakis is a very kind lady, to tell you the truth I’ve never met a woman so enthusiastic about fostering a child... sorry teenager!”

And Gina started on this long spiel, one I'd heard most of before, about a great family she secured for me. She was saying just how hard she fought and prayed for me to get this spot. The foster mother was again, very kind, the son a little quiet, who was either called Kevin or K.P., and the 'man' was loaded. Well really the whole family was, but Gina's got her prejudice and honestly the older I get the more I understand her jadedness.

"Anyway, Laur, we should get going. We can head out once you've finished your breakfast—"

I was pushing a single mushroom around my plate, slowly losing my appetite. My eyes affixed the plate.

"We'll leave in ten minutes. Ya know, it's good that it won't be too long a drive, I mean I know it's still a different school district, but...", she said, folding her elbows on the table, as I had done before, with her head down, on the side, facing me, so that she could look up into my eyes, "I can drop in whenever you need me to. Okay, Laurel?"

"Okay."

"You gonna eat that?" She tiptoed her fingers towards the remaining mushroom on my plate so I stabbed it with my fork, put it in my mouth and chewed and swallowed.

I've lucked out with Gina. She has been my caseworker since I first went into the foster care system as a baby. I was adopted as an infant soon after I was born. I know virtually nothing about my birthmother, though it is likely that she was very young, and my birth was unexpected. No "man" as Gina would put it, ever claimed me as his biological daughter so I've got nothing to go on except that at least one of my biological parents was white and from the state of New

York, my only identifiers aside from my age and name, one they didn't even give me, on my record. Gina is the one who placed me with my adopted parents, as an infant, who were the two best and brightest people in the whole world. They were Mom and Dad, Heidi and Marcus Beasley, and they were crunchy granola, plant people who named me Laurel after their favorite seedling. I describe them this way in hindsight, now that I know not every child has a compost in their backyard and grows up regularly eating tofu. Anyway, if Mom and Dad hadn't hippie-ed out entirely, and kept up relations with their family, perhaps I wouldn't have ended up back in the foster care system like I did.

After Mom died, she came to visit me in my dreams too, but she was my mother, she was the person I knew most intimately, she wasn't a client. In the time after she died, Dad slowly stopped taking care of himself, which meant by default he wasn't taking care of me. I think he always had critical mental health problems, but he was on medication and he had Mom to take care of him and keep him accountable. His grief was so intense. I don't know who called CPS.

When I was taken away from Dad, in the second grade, I was reintroduced to Gina. My first impression of Gina: a squat Italian woman, with short, dark brown wavy hair who looked like she was capable of loving and strangling with the same amount of force. She still looks like that. I still think that she can. That's not to say I took to her kindly at first. Leaving my Dad, even in the state he was in, and my house and my town and everything, it was indescribably awful and seemed it was all happening because Gina Ambrogi had shown up. But I know now that isn't true. It just took me a while to see it. It's hard to even remember much from that year, I've blocked so much of it out, but meeting Gina and figuring out about my dreaming ability were the shining moments. The whole ordeal is easily the worst thing that's ever happened to me, but Gina is without a doubt the best thing.

Since mine was a closed adoption, Gina couldn't reach out to family members of my birth-mom to see if any of them would take me. That was how I ended up here, at Sunflower Fields, the first time--I've been back now since May. In total, I have been in two foster homes, Sunflower Fields, a group home for girls aged seven to fourteen, with Sadie, Gina's ex-girlfriend, and the home with Fran and her two biological sons. Before Fran, I was almost sent to a family in Nassau County, which is closer to the city, then to a couple who'd never fostered before, but they both fell through. After I left Fran's, I came back to the group home of girls. None of my foster sisters are still here, which is good for them. Gina told me that Carmen, who was always jumping around the place was just adopted in February, which made me really excited for her, though I would be lying if I said I wasn't jealous. Sometimes I wonder if she would adopt me, Gina I mean, if she could. Caseworkers aren't exactly allowed to adopt their cases. Like I said, I'm not sure it was entirely okay that she was dating my foster mother and still being my caseworker, but honestly, the fact that Gina didn't give up on me or our relationship so that she could have a less complicated one with Sadie means so much to me, so I'm not about to snitch.

Leaving today to go live with some strangers who I will address as family for the foreseeable future was making me feel uneasy, as always. Gina always tells me that I have to have faith. To me, faith is complicated. It is like air in a dream, necessary but unreal.

"You're all packed up?" Gina asked me.

I nodded yes. I gulped down my water glass and went to get my bag.

My bag, not even as big as a small dog, has everything I own. I packed it up yesterday evening after dinner, hoping most of the girls would still be in the dining room, but of course

they all came in as soon as I started and were watching me from the corners of their eyes because even though foster homes suck, group homes often suck more. Even if Sadie is great, it's hard to care for and be attentive towards ten or more girls. It felt different from the first few years I'd spent growing up here before Fran's, but truly the biggest difference between the two are the girls, Victoria, isn't here. She was one of my foster-sisters, and my best friend, she still is I guess except she got adopted a few years ago and moved to California six months after. This couple who was living on Fire Island fostered her, then adopted her. My suspicion is that blonde-haired and blue-eyed Victoria was their primary pick because she looked the most like what they wanted, like them. Victoria's also just amazing, very outgoing and sparkly, so those are reasons too. I'm sorta quiet and awkward so I can see why they passed on me. It's surprising really that it took Victoria as long as it did to finally get adopted. I'm not sure what I keep doing wrong. Well I know what happened with Fran was mostly my fault. I hope at some point she'll forgive me.

Gina locked the door behind us, since it would be a while until Sadie and the girls returned from the church's yard sale. They had gone to get some back-to-school things. I'm glad I wasn't there. I definitely didn't need to run into Fran or worse her son, Dom.

We were in the car now, Gina's car, that she takes only to get groceries and cat food, retrieve kids out of detention and juvie out in Nassau County, and bring kids to new foster parents. Today, I'm the third reason. A couple of months ago, I was the second, but hey, at least it wasn't juvie. Gina started the car. I buckled up.

I didn't mind being back at Sunflower Fields, even if I was only here three months, because it meant Gina was around often, since she lives close, and is on slightly better than civil terms with Sadie. I started to befriend a girl my age, in the room named Juanita, but she got

adopted two months ago and we haven't kept up. Someone else moved in, in her place. I don't think anyone cares that I'm leaving. It just means one fewer girl in a room of four, meant for one.

We pulled out of the driveway and onto the street. I said goodbye to Sunflower Fields. On the highway, we speedily passed a Chinese food place, an Indian restaurant, a gas station and a Burger King, while "Hits from the 80s" blasted from the radio. It seemed like we'd only been in the car a few minutes when we reached a green highway sign, with the words "Sunken Pasture" written in white letters and turned right, getting off at the exit. We passed a bunch of shopping centers and it was feeling like the drive to the last foster home I was in, until we drove through a yellow traffic light and were suddenly in a small town. There was a church made from grey stone on the left, a sleek wooden temple on the right and a large, red brick fire department further down. Soon we were passing small shops, with ornate, painted signs. We passed an ice cream parlor, a deli, a barber, and a mechanic. Then, leaving behind the double-yellow road, we made it onto a road mostly lined with trees and houses. There was also a little pond with ducks we drove by. I don't know why but something about the village made me think of my parents. It really wasn't that long of a drive. It was about the same distance from the home as my last foster home, though Gina said it was in the opposite direction.

We continued passing by some very beautiful houses with pretty spacious yards and with, I kid you not, white picket fences. There were a bunch of kids in one yard, chasing a dog, all muddy from the rain. It was really cute, like a scene from a family movie that the dog narrates. I was busy looking at them, when a guy on a bicycle came into view. He was maybe my age or younger. "Now why isn't this kid wearing a helmet?" Gina said, exhaling with annoyance. We were about to pass him, when it appeared his bike was tipping. "What's he doing?" Gina said. "Maybe he's gonna try to do a trick," I said. *Figures.* I was midway through rolling my eyes,

when I realized I was wrong. He and his bike were falling over, not away from us either but into the street! “Mother--” Gina shouted and stopped short. The guy completely toppled over into the road right in front of our car. I couldn’t see him because of the front hood of the car. We looked at each other. Gina unbuckled. She was about to get out, to check on him when he stood up. He looked at us, wide-eyed, both scared and startled I think. He bent down, picking up his bike, and walked it over to the side. Gina lowered my window, to call to him. Now I was embarrassed. I mean obviously she wanted to make sure he was alright, but *ugh* couldn’t she just get out and do that. “Hey, come here,” Gina called. The kid looked up at the car and left his bike. I shrank in my seat as he walked over to my window. He looked nerdier in his face than I expected, but he was still cute. I looked away.

“Are you okay?”

He seemed uncomfortable, “Uh yeah, I’m fine. I don’t know what happened, I-I just lost control of the bike.”

“Yeah, you fell over, and you should be wearing a helmet!” Gina spoke straight up, to me, to everybody. “If I hadn’t seen you, that could’ve been really bad, you could’ve been seriously injured and in the hospital.”

“Yeah,” he said. I failed to see how if this guy was wearing a helmet, it would’ve saved him had Gina run him over with her car, but I understood where she was coming from. I mean he literally fell over. It looked like he was all of a sudden dead weight, like he was asleep.

“Are you gonna be okay, biking? Do you need a ride somewhere?” Now I was mortified.

“No, it’s okay. Thank you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Alright, just be careful.”

He nodded and as we pulled away, I saw that he was looking down. He didn't get back on his bike immediately, I think he was still stunned by what had just happened. That guy shouldn't be riding on roads with cars at all when clearly he's not a very strong biker.

“Jeez, I hope he's okay. Maybe I should have insisted on driving him home,” Gina said.

“You definitely would've freaked him out. For all he knows you're a kidnapper.” Gina gave me a look at this ridiculous remark. “For real, for all he knows, I'm your first victim, kept here against my will, unable to say the truth!” We laughed and it felt good to laugh. I don't want to have to leave Gina, again.

We drove for a few more minutes before turning left and coming to a stop at a very tiny building. I had one of those barriers attached to it like a toll booth. Gina pulled up to it, rolled down the window, and pressed on a button on the side. She leaned her head out the window and said, “Gina and Laurel for 114, Petrakis.” The barrier lifted and we drove on through. I looked over at Gina and she made a smirking, excited face back at me. What kinda place was she taking me too? The only other place I've heard of with a button like that is juvie. Where the hell were we going?

“Gina, where are you taking me?”

“Well Laurel, I told you this family was well-off.”

“Right, so why are they under surveillance? Who’s keeping them in?”

“Oh Laurel, rich people like this aren't concerned with keeping people in so much as keeping people out. Just trust me on this. It’s called a gated community.” I still didn't understand what she meant. I’m not sure how I felt about that notion of “keeping people out”. What if that meant Gina couldn’t visit?

We drove down a wide shady street of green grass and houses, each larger than the last. Finally, we began slowing down, arriving upon a series of trees and a large, wrought iron gate. *Another gate.* This one with a giant golden “P” on the front. She may have told me the Petrakis family was wealthy, but it is one thing to hear something said and another to fully see it staring you in the face. This was not a house. This was a mansion. Gina stepped out of the car. Typed into a keypad on the side of the gate and it opened. My stomach felt like a playground overrun by rambunctious toddlers, as Gina came back into the car and drove us down the driveway. When we were parked, she looked at me before getting out.

“Breathe, Laurel, you can do this. I know this is all new, but let’s put some trust in Mrs. Petrakis. This family is so excited to have you.” I didn’t breathe, but I nodded at Gina. She kissed my forehead.

We walked up the steps to the front door. Gina asked if I wanted to ring the doorbell. I didn’t. She did and soon the large brown door opened. A tall woman with shoulder-length whitish blonde hair opened the door. She had a tight smile pressed onto her face and bright brown eyes. She was wearing long-sleeves, even though it had to be eighty degrees out today. A sparkly silver necklace swung around her neck and her breasts stood up to greet you. She looked

at us, taking us in before saying, “Hi there Gina, come on in.” Then to me Mrs. Petrakis said, “Hi, you must be Laurel.”

We stepped into the palace, into a room lined with dark wood including the floor, the banister and the surrounding walls up to my shoulders, with built-in shelves, which kept the room pretty cave-like, but shiny. A shiny cave.

“Oh here, let me take that from you,” Mrs. Petrakis said, reaching out her arms to grab my bag. *This fancy lady was gonna take my bag? Don't rich people have servants for that?*

“No,” I said sort of quietly and most-probably abruptly, then mumbled that it was okay and I could hold onto it. Mrs. Petrakis didn't miss a beat and just smiled at me jovially.

“Would you like us to remove our shoes?” Gina asked, with an air of proper politeness she had tapped into upon arriving at this mansion.

“That would be great.” Mrs. Petrakis responded.

As I took off my sneakers, I put a hand on one of the shelves to balance myself. There was a picture frame on the shelf, a portrait of a blonde-haired teenager. The moment I saw his face, it brought me back.

I knew him. He had been one of my “clients”.

II

I don't think anyone noticed me noticing the photo, but as Mrs. Petrakis led us through the cavernous foyer and into the kitchen, it became abundantly clear that the guy was exactly as I

thought, a deceased person, from one of my dreams, since his face was all over this house. *Now I really need to breathe.*

In stark contrast, to the entry, the rest of the house was white, bright and airy. It felt vaguely empty. I looked towards the windows to see transparent plastic tarps covering each of them. I thought that maybe they'd been robbed recently and that the robber had broken in through the windows. Naturally my next thought was, *how'd he get past the prison gate with the keypad?*, but as it turns out the Petrakis' wanted their house this way.

"We're in the process of remodeling," Mrs. Petrakis explained. "That's why all the rooms down here are white right now. Repainting."

I would've liked nothing more than to explore the place, but at the same time I guess I should've been kinda nervous to leave Gina. Which I was too, but Gina always says I like to wander.

As we passed a white room of white furniture covered in plastic, I noticed the photos of Chris, that was his name, if I remember correctly. There was a large photo on the floor, resting against the wall, of four people; Chris, was one of them, it was a family portrait. He looked younger than when I "met" him; based on the photo, Mrs. Petrakis looked like she hadn't aged at all. Beside her, in the picture stood a stout man with a black mustache, and next to him, a little kid with spiked-up, gelled dirty-blond hair and braces. The frame must've been taken down so the walls could be painted.

Gina and I followed Mrs. Petrakis to the kitchen. In the center, there was a large black countertop with two stools, which matched the counter that wrapped around the perimeter. There was a small kitchen table, but oh so fancy and its surface was this really beautiful orange, red and

yellow glass mosaic that looked like pieces of Jell-O on a dark background. I was glad that she had us three sit at the table so I would have something colorful to look at if I felt like keeping my head down. I put my bag down on the floor next to me, since I was still holding it. Gina took out a clipboard and my file from her purse. The meeting had commenced.

“I’m not sure if you saw my message since you were driving, but there was a terrible accident on the L.I.E. and my husband is stuck in traffic, he left work early too so he’d be here in time but now he might get home a little later than expected. I’m sorry--” Mrs. Petrakis finished.

The meeting was put on pause. This was unusual. When I came to meet foster families with Gina in the past, everyone I’d be staying with had been present. That is the whole point of these meetings, so that we all (I guess myself mostly) feel comfortable with the new situation. And also, it is so Gina can see how the family and I interact. Gina always makes sure that I feel safe. The family has, of course, already been screened for several months, but this meeting is so that Gina knows that I know, I’ll be in good hands. I trust Gina’s judgment, so I was surprised that instead of stopping the meeting, rescheduling, or suggesting we wait to start until Mr. Petrakis got there, she said, “Well that’s alright.”

I was a little relieved when she continued, “I will still be here when he arrives.”

There was confidence in her words that she was looking out for me. It seemed like we were about to carry on as if it was business as usual, but Mrs. Petrakis quickly added, “and my son, Kevin, is just upstairs, working on his summer assignment for school because I thought it best if he came down a little later.”

“Yes, that sounds good.” Gina said

“Okay. So, I have a few more forms for you and Mr. Petrakis to read and sign. But there are still a few matters to discuss,” Gina said, keeping her slightly formal tone.

Mrs. Petrakis nodded her head and looked at me grinning. I wondered if her cheeks hurt. Or if she was worried about those lines people get from smiling and laughing that are supposed to be bad for some reason? She could probably afford to laugh, she could probably afford botox.

“For starters, where will Laurel be going to school?” Gina asked.

“She will be attending Anna Stong High School, it’s the public school, but it is very good! Kevin goes there. He’s starting tenth grade this fall.”

“Sounds great. Where will Laurel be staying? Does she have her own room?”

Mrs. Petrakis looked momentarily surprised by the question, but answered passionately, “Yes, of course she does.” Then she turned her attention to me, “Your room is upstairs, down the hallway on the left.”

I looked to Gina, I wondered if she’d been witnessing my internal freak-out since we arrived. She probably knew I’d love nothing more than the chance to wander around exploring this place, especially the room I’d be living in, at least until I inevitably go back to Sunflower Fields, for a third time, and to another foster home after that.

“It used to be my yoga room,” Mrs. Petrakis continued, “but I find I much prefer yoga in the studio, so I hardly used it anyway. The best place for yoga really is on the beach!” She gestured with her hand slightly to the left.

My eyes widened slightly, *did these people have beachfront property? We for sure didn't drive all the way to the South shore, the ocean, in fifteen minutes, but we're probably near enough the North shore, it could be the Long Island Sound...*

"Laur, why don't you take a look?" Gina said.

For a second I thought she meant go and look for the beach, then I realized she was talking about the room.

As I got up to go, I became aware suddenly that I had said very little so far since getting here. Not that I had said much of anything today. Something kind towards Mrs. Petrakis would probably be good.

"Thank you," I said. I paused and thought about saying something intelligent or funny, but remembered I am neither and decided to just head upstairs. I wasn't sure whether or not to grab my bag, but I did, given I may as well try to make myself comfortable here. Plus, I made the scene of wanting to hold onto it earlier. It's a wonder Mrs. Petrakis didn't suspect me of concealing drugs. Isn't that what people like her would expect from me? Fran did.

I awkwardly ascended the stairs. As I did, I heard Mrs. Petrakis say enthusiastically, "I've had just the most fun with her room. It's been part of the renovation. Really having Laurel here is a large part of the inspiration to refurbish."

The stairs were wooden, but when I reached the top, I stepped onto a plush, cream colored carpet. *More white.*

I heard some faint music. It sounded like it was coming from one of the two doors at the top of the stairs, on the right. I recognized it. It was the track to a video game, Dom, my former

foster-brother got for Christmas. So maybe that was Kevin's room? Guess he wasn't working on that summer-assignment anymore.

Turning my head, I spotted another photo of Chris.

It was a high school graduation photo. That's where I knew him from, the recent graduate and soon-to-be college freshman, who had gotten into a messy car accident a month before he was supposed to start college. I "dreamt" of him during the summer before I started seventh grade. I'd been living with Fran and her sons. Yeah, still don't feel like getting into that now. Anyway, in the dream we lived out Chris' four years of college: his dying wish. I didn't know what to think of it afterward. Everything about the dream was foreign and interesting, like watching a teen drama, but it was also sad. His dying wishes only spanned through college—he didn't have goals passed that one. His life had been cut so short and he had been robbed of so much, but it was this experience he so longed for and it was his top priority. I think that's why I remembered it too. I've never idolized college like that. I don't know if I'm gonna go. Something like less than 10% of foster kids end up in college. Gina wants me to go. She says there are scholarships. But that is so far away. I just want to get through high school.

The air was hot and had a distinct smell. My skin was sticky and my hair frizzed. I could feel a pounding in my chest which matched the pounding in my ears, a result of the music and I noticed a few neon lights streaming from a DJ booth in this otherwise very dark and crowded room. It was a space full of people, much older than me. The women were all wearing crop tops with not just their midriff, but their full stomachs exposed, and were dancing with each other and with guys, wearing polos and muscle tanks.

Someone shoved into me and I felt something wet on my shoulder, a leak? No, a very large guy had spilled something from the red SOLO cup he was carrying when he mistakenly bumped me, but I wasn't me suddenly. I was looking at this scene now, towering over everyone, I was taller and stronger, and as soon as I realized I was someone else, I was again my normal height and facing opposite the spot I had just stood. Chris was the tall, strong stranger. I had brought him here, or so I had told him when he asked, in truth, I have little control, he brought us here, but generally for my own safety, I tell my "clients" it is all me.

He was amongst a crowd of guys and it was clear by the way they kept turning to him, that he was commander. They all looked to him to know the next move. No one could see me now, I was just there as an underqualified, invisible babysitter.

I felt the ground shaking. A crowd of women came closer to us, they were dancing and singing every lyric of this song as if their lives depended on it. I felt a swoosh, we were in the same space we had been before only I felt more tired, it was later in the night, earlier in the morning. The guys were still together aside from Chris and I soon found out why. He emerged from the crowd a few seconds later with a girl. The region around his mouth was all pink and wet, though most people wouldn't have been able to notice, his face was already so red and sweaty from the booze, these signs that he'd been at least making out with this girl weren't abundantly clear. She said something to her friends, they were all excited and she was smiling too, which was good—no one was getting sexually assaulted in Chris' dream. Chris saluted to his friends and the pair shuffled away.

Swoosh, we were at a sports stadium. Chris was standing up with his friends, guys and girls and the same girl from the party he held in his arm, under his shoulder. They all had drinks

in their hands, and dark green lines painted on their faces. They were wearing green and grey clothes and they loudly cheered, when the team on the field did something particularly amazing.

Swoosh, I sat beside Chris in a large auditorium-esc space, except instead of just rows of seats, there were rows of seats with tables and instead of a stage, there was just the ground and whiteboard on the far wall, the seats all faced. A man was standing there and speaking to everyone in the room in a loud voice. Chris raised his hand and the professor called on him. After he said his response, the professor nodded his head profusely, calling Chris a genius, and they both were beaming.

Swoosh, another party. Swoosh, another sports-related event. Swoosh another lecture class. Swoosh a night of intense studying in the library. Swoosh, a night at a bar. Swoosh, yet another party, but this time a younger guy, with a resemblance to Chris was there with him, his younger brother.

Swoosh, Chris was standing on the front porch of a house and he had a beard now. He and some other guys stood with him. Somebody blew a whistle and suddenly a line of men came running, they were all naked and began circling the house—what kind of weird ritual was this? I backed away, trying also to avert my eyes. The house had some funny looking letters nailed to the front underneath a window. This was some form of “hazing” at a Frat house, a series of embarrassing and sometimes dangerous tasks guys had to do to show their allegiance to the frat and pledge to become “brothers”.

Swoosh, we were outside, on a temperate, sunny day. There was a breeze. I was sitting down in a chair, wearing a green gown and flat hat. And suddenly I wasn't. I could see Chris sitting down, on that chair, in a grid of students all doing the same and I realized we were on

that sports field from before. There was a booming voice. A woman standing at a podium before the students. It was graduation day. I looked to the stands and saw Chris' family, his mother crying, his father stoic, but proud, and his brother, looking with eyes of incredible adoration. Swoosh, the dream ended and Chris and I talked a little as we had before the adventures began.

I remember these types of dreams so well. It's like they really happened. They are so vivid, they *feel* real. Reflecting on it now feels invasive. I'm gonna be living with that family now. I don't know them, but it's like I watched a deleted scene from the movie of their lives. We shared an experience that didn't really happen.

I walked down the hallway. There were a whole bunch of photos of Chris in a line down the wall.

God, I hope my new room had not been his. No, Mrs. Petrakis said it used to be for yoga. Because apparently when you are rich, a room entirely dedicated to yoga makes perfect sense.

I looked to the right and saw two doors, and decided to open the one farthest to the right.

The room could only be described as an heiress' dollhouse. The room was shaped like an octagon, with 3 sets of windows on the far wall. The bed was huge, large enough for at least two people, and there were more pillows piled on it than there were girls at Sunflower Fields. There were frills everywhere and a whimsical lace canopy which hung down from the ceiling, protecting the bed like a treasure under tissue paper in a gift bag. I put my bag down near the doorway. When I sat on the bed, I sank into it. The bed was so full of pillows, but they were so fancy I didn't want to throw any on the floor, even though it was probably the cleanest carpet I'd ever seen in my life, instead I just sprawled out on top of them.

I mean the room was “girly”. The walls were a lavender, broken up by a white curved line that went around the whole room. To be perfectly honest, this was too much. Especially given that placements with the foster system fall through all the time. It was an awful lot of work to put into something that might not work out, something *I* was sure wouldn’t. Not to mention, what if the foster-kid that came here wasn’t who Mrs. Petrakis was expecting.

There were a lot of books, which made me more than a little excited. On the far wall was a white desk with a bookshelf attached. I went over to see if there were any I had already read. I sat in a matching chair which faced the desk and swiveled around in it. When I stopped spinning I faced two doors, separated by the octagon walls on the opposite side. I wondered if there were two closets. I opened one door and didn’t even have to turn on a light, there was a small octagon shaped window in here. It was less like a closet and more like a second bedroom. It wasn’t as large as this bedroom, but it could easily fit my bed at Sunflower Fields, I thought, even if it would take up the full space of the room.

“Laurel?” I heard from the dollhouse.

I went back to it and there was Gina and suddenly, the room was a lot brighter; the summer sun was setting and had made all the furniture a warm yellow. She sat down on the bed and patted the spot next to her, inviting me to come sit too.

“What do you think of this place? I know it’s not as nice as Sunflower Fields.” She said, smirking.

I smirked back. I agreed, in most ways this seemed like an upgrade, I guess I was just worried about seeing Gina less frequently. Because she lived in the same town as my last home, I saw her all the time. And before that, I mean I practically lived with her. (Sadie)

“Laurel, don’t let Mrs. Petrakis’ enthusiasm unnerve you, it’s a really good thing for her to be this passionate”, with her toothy smile she continued, “and it makes sense, I mean she gets to have *you* in her life.”

I doubt that.

“Laur, I think this is gonna be an adjustment like any other, sure the Petrakis’ have a little more change in their pockets than most,” she said looking around the room. I doubted Mrs. Petrakis ever carried change in her pockets, maybe a solid gold credit-card. “And yeah the kids you’ll be going to school with will be--”

“Rich.” I said cutting her off.

“Well yeah, but I was gonna say, smart. While I was downstairs, Mrs. Petrakis was saying that the school operates almost like a prep school.”

“A prep-school? Prepping for what?”

“College.”

Oh, somehow that kept popping up.

“High schools generally are preparing their students for college, but this school focuses on it a bit more. I don’t want you to get discouraged if the school feels a bit more competitive. You’re a bright girl and you earn good grades!... at least before this past school year, and well I think you owe it to yourself to put the past behind you and take your bravest step forward. You are a great kid, Laurel. Truly. You know I believe that and I think being here will open up so many new opportunities for you. I love you, Laurel. Call me whenever you want to talk. I’ll be coming for a check-in within the next six weeks, alright?”

I didn't know what to make of all this. It felt like more of a warning than a pep-talk, but when Gina had finished her grand soliloquy, we hugged tightly. She still smelled like coffee and I didn't want her to go.

“Now let's go meet Kevin,”

We walked past the 12 school portraits of Chris on our way down the stairs.

...

Kevin was pretty quiet too, not as much as me, but at least it made my silence less awkward, or so I hoped. He was short. At least a foot shorter than me, despite him being a year older. He seemed obviously less stagnant than his photo, but somehow quieter and sunken in like an old couch, but who am I to judge. I wasn't exactly a sunshower and he had experienced a lot of change in the past few years. He also looked so much like his brother.

“So I'm sure you're already thinking about school,” Mrs Petrakis said, “Next week, I was thinking it would be a great idea for you to go on a tour of your new school. There's an orientation day in the summer, so that the kids can all check out the high school. Kevin went last year, when he was a freshman,” then speaking to Kevin, “But then, I guess you'd been there a few times already, right? For JV lacrosse and cross country?”

“Yeah, and for Chris' graduation.”

I had started to wonder when they were going to tell me about Chris themselves.

But then there was a loud noise, like the sound of a garage door opening.

As soon as Mr. Petrakis walked in, he felt familiar. Maybe it was because his kids looked so much like him, or maybe because the time I met him in the dream was suddenly fresh after

seeing all the photos of Chris? He might even have been one of those people with a familiar look. Maybe he's one of those business owners who does tv commercials on local stations? I honestly don't know why, but just because he looked familiar, didn't mean I was inclined to trust him. It wasn't as if he seemed threatening to me, he just didn't seem very genuine.

“Hello Laurel, pleasure to meet you,” he said holding out his hand for me to shake. It was so weird, but maybe this is just what he did. His face was old and his eyes were piercing, as if pointed into my soul, as if he was trying to get me to confess something or maybe sell me something I would have no interest in. “That’s a good handshake,” he said in a voice meant for a small child, however I could tell from the way he was pulling on my arm rather intensely, he hadn’t exactly been around young children since his own, if he was even around for that, how was I to know. I wondered if this was how he talked to Kevin too?

“The L.I.E. was just about as backed up as I am after eating Kelly’s meatloaf.” This joke I guess was meant to make me laugh, but crude-humor wasn't the way to reach me, and I think it just insulted Mrs. Petrakis. He chuckled in spite of himself and put his briefcase down next to a potted plant.

...

After Gina left, the house felt empty. It was certainly quieter. I had hardly said anything to Mrs. P while Gina was here and now that she was gone, I still didn't know what to say. I was saved from it a bit. When Mrs. Petrakis realized my lack of desire in answering the questions, she stopped.

After what felt like the longest day of my life, I retreated to the dollhouse. As I lay in the princess bed, I looked up through the canopy at the ceiling. I heard Mr. and Mrs. Petrakis talking, I could hear them so clearly surprisingly, from downstairs.

“That was a disgusting joke, Greg.”

“I’m sorry--”

“And wasn’t the accident really bad, I mean to slow down the expressway.”

“Yeah I had the radio on and it said a whole minivan was brought into the E.R.”

“That’s terrible. I have to see if there’s anything about it on Facebook.”

The acoustics in the house were really something, I thought, as I layed in the dollhouse, not sleeping. Eventually, I could hear Mr. and Mrs. Petrakis as they came upstairs and walked towards their bedroom, through the double doors at the end of the hall.

That night I dreamt of Connie Wagner, a 43-year-old woman, who had died as a result of the accident on the Long Island Expressway, a mother of two, a breast-cancer survivor, and a teaching aid at a middle school. Her dying wish was to attend her daughter’s wedding, I had never been to a wedding. I liked it a lot, the idea of people from many stages of your life all in one room, there just for you.

At the church there were pews of people, and I learned that the groom’s family sat on one side and the wife’s on the other. Later at the reception, there was a buffet of the most delicious food and a toast with champagne. If I get married one day, which I hope I will, it will have to be a small wedding. The only person in my pew will be Gina. Not that I would get married in a church, unless my future spouse wanted to. Maybe Fran would come, though probably not. Sadie

might, but she would want me to get married in a church. Had I not been sleeping I might've cried.

Some people forget their dreams when they wake up from them. I don't have that luxury, especially not ones with "clients", whose faces I can never forget. Maybe it was this dream and the wedding that made me reconsider what Gina had advised that I be optimistic about living with the Petrakises. Mrs. and Mr. Petrakis could clearly afford another kid financially, so maybe they could emotionally too. Maybe they both really want another kid. Maybe they wanted a strange teenager who once had a weird dream about them and their dead son. Maybe. But thinking this way will only make it harder when it doesn't work out, and I end up back at Sunflower Fields.

III.

I woke up to such brightness. Sunlight sprung off the lavender walls and puffy comforter, although the white curtains were still closed from last night. The room I shared at Sunflower Fields faced away from the sun in the morning and there was a large tree directly in front of the window. At Fran's, I had my own room, but it had a very small window, since it was in the basement of her house. Growing up, I never wanted to close the blinds of my room, because of how much I loved the sunshine in the morning. I was surprised that I still liked it this much.

I pulled a t-shirt and shorts out of my bag and got dressed. Usually after arriving at a new foster home, I spent the first day shopping at Wal-Mart. Foster parents get a check from the government to spend on food, toiletries and clothes for me. Fran maybe used a fourth of it, to buy me a shampoo, underwear and a new pair of sneakers. We went to GoodWill for everything else and she gave me Dom's hand-me downs. She bought groceries with it too, but most of it

went towards her mortgage I think. The pajamas I slept in last night were from Fran, one of her t-shirts and an old pair of plaid pajama pants. I wish she didn't hate me now, but I wasn't sure I really cared much for her anymore anyway. She definitely wasn't the person I thought she was, in the end.

It might not have been the sunlight after all, that woke me up. Like last night, I could clearly hear the Petrakis' awake and moving downstairs in the kitchen, the voices from the kitchen might've been right outside my door. It sounded like it was only Mrs. Petrakis and Kevin. Presumably Mr. P was at work, Mrs. P. had already told me she works part-time now. I don't remember what she does. I listened in as I braided my hair.

“Well yeah, but I met up with Ethan, Luca, and Joe. I mean everyone goes with their friends, Mom.”

“Well I could go with her.”

I didn't hear Kevin say anything to that, then Mrs. Petrakis said, “What if you went with her? It's next Tuesday. Or do you still have tryouts?”

“I think they'll be done by then, but McNamara invited me onto his boat.”

“Kev, come on.”

Silence from Kevin.

“You know what, never mind, I have a better idea. I'm gonna make a call.”

I heard her walking away somewhere. When it sounded like the kitchen was empty I went down stairs. With any luck, I could avoid talking to anyone a while longer.

I walked in and saw Kevin sitting at the counter. He was still wearing pajamas. He looked startled when he saw me, “Hi.”

“Hi,” I said back.

“I didn’t realize you’d be up yet. My mom said she’s gonna make you breakfast. I’ll go get her.”

He hurried away, taking his bowl of cereal with him. I guess he was going to have to get used to my being here as much as I was going to have to have to get used to it too. The cereal was still out on the counter, I could just help myself.

Mrs. Petrakis came into the kitchen. “Good morning, Laurel! How did you sleep? What would you like for breakfast, I can make you anything you like. We have eggs and bread, I can make French toast!”

“Cereal is fine.”

“Okay,” she said. “What kind of milk? I have 2%, 1% and Almond.”

While I ate breakfast, Mrs. P. filled me in on what she had planned for the day. We were going to the mall. She was also going to bring Kevin to lacrosse tryouts at the school on our way there. It hadn’t fully registered that this was where I would be living now and these were the people I’d be living with, but I tried hard to listen to her.

“School will be starting in two weeks. I know you are probably a little nervous, but don’t worry, you can ask me anything. And Kevin will be around too if you need anything.”

I wasn't all that nervous. I mean, I still had two full weeks before I *actually* had to deal with a new school. It may as well be months, years or centuries away, right? I wasn't going to worry about it just yet. If I did, I'd have to come to terms with how terrifying the whole thing is.

Kevin came into the kitchen dressed and carrying an oddly shaped bag, turns out it was his lacrosse stick. When I was done with my cereal, we went out to Mrs. P's silver BMW.

"Let Laurel have the front, dear."

"I can sit in the back," I said.

"No, no that's okay. We'll just work out a system. You guys can take turns for the front"

The gates closed behind us as we drove away. Mrs. P. went a different way than Gina had and we drove right by the Sound. If I thought the sunlight looked beautiful in my new bedroom, it looked spectacular, sparking in the distance as it reflected off the water. When we reached the big gate, I noticed a sign about a "neighborhood watch", which was unsettling.

We drove on a main road. I thought we were passing by the college, until I saw "Anna Strong High School" in big letters, on an electric sign. The building was massive and had a facade made up of columns, like the kind from Ancient Rome. We drove around the perimeter 'til we reached a busy parking lot, with kids holding various sport equipment, walking towards a field. My stomach felt tight. It was harder to be in denial mode when we were actually at the school.

Kevin got out. Mrs. P. lowered the window next to me and called out,

"I'm picking up at 3, right?"

"I might get a ride with Radke."

“Okay, just text me.”

We pulled away and headed to the mall. We spent the first hour trying to figure out my style. It was decided that olive green was my color. She wasn’t wrong about that and I actually found a pair of jeans that fit me perfectly, with the help of a sales person. Mrs. P. was so kind to every person that helped us. I guess her cheerful energy didn’t unnerve the sales people, the way it did for me. *Why am I so weird?*

We were coming out of our last store, with more bags of new clothes and electronics (she got me a phone and laptop) than I’d ever held in my life, when I nearly walked right into Mrs. P. She had stopped in her tracks. Two women were coming out of the store that looked like it sold fancy kitchen equipment and headed our way.

“Deborah?” Mrs. P called.

“Kim, hi!”

The ladies were rushing over.

“It’s good to see you. You look well.” I noticed a pitying look in her eyes, “How’s Kevin?”

“He’s good! He’s at lacrosse tryouts right now.”

“I remember those days.” The other woman, who was not Deborah said.

“And who is this?” Deborah asked, looking at me.

“This is Laurel.” Mrs. P said, putting her hand on my back.

“That is such a pretty name.”

“She’ll be starting up at Anna Strong next week.”

“Oh that’s great. Is she in grade with Kevin and Nicholas?”, Not-Deborah said.

“No, she’s going into ninth grade.”

“Oh Laurel, are you excited to start high school?” Deborah asked, addressing me directly for the first time.

“Yeah, I can’t wait.” I said, trying to convince myself of this.

“We’ve just been getting Laurel a couple of things she needs to get back to school. But I’ve actually gotta get Kev from tryouts.” Mrs. P said with a quick glance at her designer watch. She was lying. Shad told me in the last store Kevin got a ride to his friend’s house. “It was good to see you Deb, Ashley.”

“Good to see you Kim. Tell Greg I say hello.”

“Will do, say hi to Al for me.”

As we walked away, I felt a sense of relief not from myself, but from Mrs. P. I wondered if Mrs. Petrakis had intentionally kept from mentioning that she was fostering me. I wondered also why the ladies didn’t ask about why she was taking a random girl back-to-school shopping, when they both seemed to know enough about her family. Maybe they already knew. Maybe she’d sent a warning out. After all, even her neighborhood had a ‘neighborhood watch’. It was clearly an awkward exchange, but I couldn’t tell why.

We had passed a few stores, when I realized I’d left one of my bags inside the last one. It wasn’t the bag with my new phone and laptop, still I braced myself for anger, but when I told Mrs. P, she said, “Okay, just run in and get it.” She didn’t reprimand me or suggest someone

might've stolen it, like Sadie would've. She didn't ask to go with me either, like Fran. Maybe I'd been on edge ever since I ran away from Fran's, but I really wasn't used to this from a foster parent or adults, aside from Gina, trusting me, I guess.

When I went back into the store, I saw the two ladies. I found my bag on the floor near the jeans, where I overheard the two ladies speaking.

“Was that her niece?”

“No, She and her husband decided to--what is that called? They're 'fostering' her,” Deborah said.

“I don't know why anyone would willingly take in a teenager, honestly. More power to them.”

“Well I think it was Kim's idea. Ever since, you know, ever since, Chris, I don't know. It's been hard. I mean don't know how bringing in *something* new is going to help. Marriage counseling might've been a better choice.”

“Well if she wanted a daughter, this way has got to be easier than getting pregnant and going through the full eighteen years again...”

These women were awful. They made it seem like I was a dog or a new hobby Mrs. P had picked up. Calling me “something” and like hell is fostering easy. Was this how Mrs. P felt? Could that explain the lavishly decorated bedroom? I ran out of the store and I saw her waiting for me on a bench. She smiled up at me as I walked over.

“Who were those women we ran into?” I asked as Mrs. P started up her BMW in the parking lot, finally deciding it was my turn to be the one asking questions. She explained that

they were parents, friends, who she knew because of her older son. At last she was telling me about Chris.

When she was done explaining she said, “I figured Ms. Ambrogi”—it was weird to hear someone address Gina this way—“told you about Chris and I was waiting until Greg and I were together with you so we could tell you ourselves, but it seemed wrong to do it your first night. I’m sorry if this makes you feel as though I’ve been keeping something from you.”

I couldn’t think of a moment an adult had ever apologized to me. I didn’t know what to make of it. I told her it wasn’t a big deal, and it wasn’t, but as we drove back to the Petrakis’ house, I wondered how Mrs. P. must feel. Even if I couldn’t imagine how it feels to lose a child, I would never forget losing my mom. Or my dad, for that matter, in a way. But losing a child is different. Parents, good ones, love their kids so much, they devote their love to them, invest their life in theirs. They don’t expect to outlive their kids. Four years later, people in this town still remembered her son. Of course, the Petrakis’ would never forget. They probably couldn’t and sometimes still can’t imagine living in a world without their son, but they are trying to live. It made me consider myself, like Gina said, fortunate that they’ve chosen to live with me, as much as I am living with them.

As we pulled into Mrs. P.’s driveway she told me, “So I know I told you that there’s gonna be a tour of the school next week, but I spoke with Dr. Pulitzer earlier, he’s the high school principal, and he has arranged for us to have our own personal tour! This way, when you go later for the tour with all the other freshmen it will be... less daunting.” Mrs. Petrakis said this like she was announcing I’d just won the lottery. Her smile had gotten so impossibly bright again. I just said, “Okay.”

I'm not sure what sort of connections Mrs. P had to be able to ask the principal for a personal favor, but she did. Though from the way the women in the mall treated her, I was sensing it all had to do with Chris' accident; they couldn't keep from pitying.

On Wednesday, Dr. Pulizer, the principal, met us at the front entrance of the school.

We walked down an infinite hallway that connected the art and music wing, the auditorium, the cafeteria and the gym. A section of windows and with steps beneath for sitting, I was told were "The Commons". They were directly across from the cafeteria. I wondered how many fights broke out here. I almost asked, but then I figured that wasn't really appropriate.

I got to see the state-of-the-art gym facility, which unlike the "gymnasium" we'd seen earlier, this looked like an adult gym. There were all kinds of treadmill-like machines, including a few stationary bikes. "Students don't usually get to see this during the Freshman Orientation Tour," Dr. Pulitzer told me, emphasizing what a real treat this was. We couldn't go into the library, but I could tell just from the smooth dark wood on the window frames, that it would be beautiful.

When we made it to the hallway joining the history wing and the foreign languages wing, Dr. Pulitzer brought us into an open classroom. The lights were off and the shades to the windows were down. Dr. Pulitzer raised them, allowing the brightness from the summer afternoon sky to leap in through the windows and spread all over the linoleum-tile floor. It was incredible just how much floor space there was in a classroom meant to teach history to 9-12th graders. The classrooms at my last school were much smaller, but that didn't mean class sizes were, just that to achieve the sight of twenty kids seated in a room, the desks had to be squashed very close together. This reality made it so fun to come into last period English from 8th period

gym, with a few of the same classmates, Andrew Bennett among them, sit in my assigned seat, directly behind him, and attempt to ignore the droplets of sweat landing on my desk from his wet head.

That school was cool up until the second month, when Dom ruined my life and Fran started hating my guts. Much less 8th grade, overall I'd not been a fan of middle school. High school I dreamed would be better, especially here. In terms of technology, I could already tell this school would be an upgrade. All Gina could talk about was how high the taxes were on Long Island. They must be really, really high here.

IV.

I layed on the mountain of pillows on the princess bed. I was still fully dressed from the day. Which I'd spent getting a couple of last minute things for school--apparently every student needed to buy a personal lock for their gym lockers before the first day.

As much as I would've liked to put on pajamas hours ago, I didn't exactly want to walk around the house in front of the Petrakis like that, so I came upstairs to change and get comfortable. Instead I'd been laying there for the past 20 minutes, thinking about school starting tomorrow. I remembered I needed to set my alarm for school still. I opened up to the alarm clock app of my new phone and created one for weekdays at 6 AM. Mrs. Petrakis told me that she would be driving me and Kevin tomorrow. The screen read 9:04, in a couple of minutes I'd call her. I had emailed Gina, my new number, after Mrs. P and I came back from the mall the other day. We were supposed to talk at 9.

The fear about starting at the new school had set in two days ago. As soon as Mrs. P showed me an email from the school that had me set up an account with virtual platforms for

each of my classes. Reading the supply lists and syllabi from all these teachers, had me thinking about all the new people I'd have to meet in just a few days: students, teachers, security guards, janitors! I'd gotten basic school supplies like notebooks a day or two after the freshmen tour which I ran away from. Yeah, I didn't go to that. Mrs. P. doesn't know. She dropped me off and said she'd be back in an hour, later if I needed to. I don't know what she expected I'd do for an hour. The place was full of strangers judging me, and the school they'd spend the next four years locked in, and I'd already toured the school, so I just found a spot in the library, which had been open this time. I grabbed a book and sat in the A/C, until I convinced myself I'd never been so cold, not even in the winter. I would've gone outside, but the only shade came from the school, in the shadow behind it and only sketchy kids hang out behind a school. Kids like Dom. I wasn't gonna get branded sketchy before I had reason to be.

I looked at my phone, 9:06, I rolled myself off the bed and changed.

At last at 9:08 she called. I had to tell her how things had really been. I mean it's one thing to at least be feeling sorta comfortable inside the dollhouse, but it's going to take a while longer for me to feel comfortable with the whole Petrakis family. In part, things were odd because this was a major adjustment, but there seemed to be other reasons for the feeling too.

“Gina, it's just so weird being in this house. I mean I keep seeing photos of the guy.”

I'd started a tally of the number of photos of Chris in their house. Is it insensitive? I don't know, it's just something I'd started doing while exploring the many rooms of this mansion, while I've been anxiously awaiting the start of school, and I'm keeping it to myself. Obviously. There are fifteen photos of him just upstairs.

So that was another, but it was also weird because of Mr. and Mrs. Petrakis, but I didn't tell Gina that. They are significantly better parents than Fran ever was, Sadie wasn't bad just in over-her-head with the number of children in that house and never had any time for me. Mr. and Mrs. P just don't seem to know how to function together? If that makes sense. And I'm saying this as someone who rarely knows to function with people. I mean they're married, so you'd think Mr. P would know by now that Mrs. P doesn't like it when he makes jokes incessantly (and stereotypically) about how she cooks. And Mrs. P always goes into his home office to talk to him at the worst moments it seems. He's always having to ask her to leave—"ask", I'm being polite. Though I don't know why. He's probably my least favorite Petrakis, Chris included of course!

"Yeah, I could see that." Gina's voice emitted from the phone, responding to what I'd said about Chris' photos. There was a slight pause on her end and then, "You know Laurel, I met Chris once."

"You did??"

What? Why hadn't she told me? Well I guess how could she have known. I mean she only interviewed the live Petrakis family members, the one I'd actually be living with.

"Yes, I met him at Tara's once."

During the summertime, Gina sometimes picks up shifts there bartending, ever since she stopped working as a school social worker a few years ago, which she had been doing on top of her responsibilities at the agency, working with kids like me. Gina worked at Tara's while she was in school to become a social worker.

"Oh, how do you know it was him? Why do you remember that?"

“He was drunk, so I gave him a ride home.”

I thought about that. Something didn’t add up.

“Well Gina, he was underage. Couldn’t you tell? Were you bartending or waitressing that night?” I said without expecting to hear a note of accusation in my voice.

“I couldn’t tell. I don’t scan IDs at the bar, they only do that at the door.” Gina huffed, “In fact, I didn’t realize how young he was until I dropped him off and Mrs. Petrakis mentioned him just graduating high school and heading to school--”

“You met Mrs. P before too??”

There was a significant pause. I could feel my heart pounding.

“Yes.”

“Gina,” I had to ask, “was placing me with the Petrakis’ intentional in some way?”

“Honey, you know how much parent-child placements get tossed up and around. So many foster parents are told to expect a child’s arrival in the morning and by evening, that same child can be placed with an entirely different family.”

I did know this. It had happened more than once to me, though I never knew why. I know that sometimes a foster kid will end up having a blood relative turn up and say they’ll take them instead or even their parents, if a judge approves it, but clearly neither of those things had ever been my case.

“They seem like loving parents towards their son, Kevin, just as they were with Chris, and I could see when I first met Mrs. Petrakis and they live very comfortably. They can certainly

provide for you and themselves without even needing those checks the state sends them. It is very fortunate that you came to live with the Petrakis, Laurel.”

Well, I couldn’t argue with that, but somehow, it didn’t feel like Gina was being completely honest with me.

“Laurel, you should probably head to bed now. You don’t want to be too exhausted for your first day at a new school.”

I sighed, “I have to be up by 6 am, I am going to be exhausted either way.”

“That may be true, but still sweet dreams and good night, my dear. I love you. Feel free to shoot me a text, if you need during the day.” And then, “Don’t be afraid to open up with Mrs. Petrakis, something tells me she’s gonna want to hear all about your first day.”

I mean, yeah I guess she had a point, though Gina has said something along these lines with every foster parent I’ve had, that they wanted to listen to me. Everytime she meant it, I just don’t think every time they did.

“Okay, I love you too, Gina. Good night.”

I hung up the new phone. It was still unbelievable that it was mine. I wasn’t getting too attached. Especially after everything Gina had just said. This was very weird because now, it hadn’t been just one (Fran), but two foster homes that Gina had placed with me that she knew in some capacity before I arrived there. I mean knowing someone beyond the context of a social-worker-foster parent relationship, not to mention the changed nature of her and Sadie’s relationship once she became my foster mother, they seemed like a treacherously blurred line, Gina’s walked with my guardians. She’s mixing personal with professional constantly, and they

could all be seen as unethical circumstances, including her devotion to me. But I guess this is just an example of how tricky it is for Gina for her to keep her life portioned off. Gina cares with her whole heart, and she brings her fullest, truest self with her most-everywhere that she goes. With Gina, what you see is what you get. Sometimes I wish I could be so forthcoming; be as blunt as her, then maybe people would know who I am without question. I would know who I am without question.

Yeah, that was definitely it. I decided to think about this some more in the morning, if I could keep from my usual insomniac tendencies before a first day at a new school. I could at least try to sleep, so I burrowed my way under the covers, tossed away the pillows, turned off the lamp and lay awake for another two hours, until finally I was dreaming.

V.

It was Tuesday. Gina had a superstition about Tuesdays. She told me that Tuesdays are her least favorite day of the week because “Tuesdays suck!” One day I said to her, “But maybe by perpetuating this negative attitude towards Tuesdays, you have been subconsciously manifesting bad Tuesdays.” Gina always stared at me strangely when I talked like this. I thought I sounded like my dad. “No”, Gina explained, “because I’m not really saying that all Tuesdays are terrible, I’m just saying that if something bad is going to happen, even something small, it’s going to come into effect on a Tuesday.”

Well, today is Tuesday, it’s been a week since my first day of high school, and I haven’t heard from Gina. Not so much as a text back. It’s been incredibly odd. I don’t know what’s gotten into me but I’ve fully convinced myself that something’s wrong. What if something happened to Gina?