Green Light

by

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Contents

I am fascinated by the way memory shapes personality and how the absence of memory strips one of their individuality. Through this senior project *Green Light,* I explore the hypothetical of a world with an up-and-coming cure for Alzheimer's Disease, while spinning off some images and themes from the classic novel *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Within this project, I attempt to challenge myself to write in the novella form, one I am not familiar with and eager to learn about. I experiment with an unreliable narrator and exploring relatable dynamics and character traits. It is my goal to represent my topic respectfully while also telling a captivating story.

Green Light tells the story of Louisa, an individual who lived with Alzheimer's for seven years, before the CDC released an approved cure. Mallory, her primary Companion Care worker, tells Louisa about the cure, prompting snippets of her memory to reappear faster than anticipated. However, Louisa begins to question the accuracy of her returning memories. She trusts Mallory to be honest with her about her troubling realizations, such as her late husband's alcoholism and the absence of her daughter Jocelyn for the past seven years. Mallory helps Louisa navigate this difficult recovery yet faces obstacles of her own when her job and ultimately her relationship with Louisa are put at risk. The two women form a friendship like no other. It isn't until Jocelyn's appears at the residency that Louisa discovers Mallory might not be as altruistic as she originally appeared.

When prepping to write about Alzheimer's, I had to make sure that I had the proper background knowledge to do so. This is to respect those who currently experience Alzheimer's, as well as those who have lost loved ones to Alzheimer's. To do this, I worked for *Home Instead Senior Care* as a Companion Care worker. The job involved working one on one with a client with dementia. In my writing, I don't disclose any of this client's personal story. However, my

interactions with him helped me to better understand how dementia effected his lifestyle, including his living habits and his relationships with his family. Another step I took in my research was interviews. Throughout the writing process, I actively messaged a friend of mine whose father had passed away with Alzheimer's. Her experience brought light onto Jocelyn's character, as well as the flashbacks from Louisa's past in order to make sure the family representation was accurate. I also had my cousin who has worked in companion care for years and has experienced losing clients to Alzheimer's read over the manuscript once I had a completed draft. Her expertise became vital in creating a compelling, authentic story.

The assisted living community is a hot button topic in society today. Many people fear sending their loved ones to retirement homes because of the horror stories they hear about abuse, theft, and unsanitary conditions. I felt this was also a crucial element that had to be represented in the novella, that those who work in these types of residencies are people we trust with our loved ones, so we want to make sure they are trustworthy individuals. By conveying Mallory as an unreliable narrator, I experiment with ways in which a caretaker can be a blessing and a curse.

Later in the writing process, I began creating parallels between my novella and one of my favorite novels *The Great Gatsby*. One of my favorite elements in Gatsby is the controversy of Jay Gatsby's character intentions. Some find him to be a romantic, other consider him a creep. I love the way Fitzgerald leaves this open-ended, that different readers can side differently with their opinions of Gatsby's actions. I wanted to create a similar effect with Mallory, therefore heightening her unreliable narration in the story. It is also through Gatsby that I choose my title *Green Light,* which is a primary image in Fitzgerald's novel.

Another major inspiration for me within this project was another one of my favorite novels, *19 Minutes* by Jodi Picoult because it tore me apart when I read it. The novel tackles the

event of a school shooting. But the shooting itself is only 19 Minutes. The rest of the book focuses on why the shooting took place. Picoult brilliantly writes the character of Peter Houghton, the school shooter, as the victim in the novel. It forces the reader to question themselves, how can you side with the school shooter? It forces you to be empathetic towards a truly terrible character. I admire this technique in her writing, and it is my goal to utilize this type of characterization in my own writing, specifically to Mallory's character in *Green Light.* Through the novella, I want readers to feel like they can trust Mallory, and that Louisa can trust Mallory. She's been there the whole time, with Louisa's best interest in mind. However, at the end of the book, when we discover ulterior motives, we empathize with Mallory despite the fact that we don't condemn what she does.

A major red flag I had when writing this novella is the awareness of the "magical cure" element. I spoke with a writer friend of mine who often writes about disability. Upon telling her about my idea for this project, she made sure to emphasize how written the wrong way, this novella could be interpreted offensively, especially without a thorough background behind the ins and outs of the condition. Due to this, I wrote the novella with the intention of representing how a cure would impact relationships and community instead of focusing on the scientific nature of the cure itself. There are a lot of uncertainties about how these people would rehabilitate into society. Do they regain access to their finances? Do they still have loved ones who can help them begin to navigate the world once again? Would most of them end up back in assisted living facilities due to old age? Where would all of these newly cured people go? What resources would be provided for them? The incorporation of world building allows me to put my characters in a place where these questions are answered.

In many cultures, it is up to the eldest daughter to take responsibility of caretaking for her parents once they reach a point where they are unable to maintain their independent living. This aspect inspires Jocelyn, Louisa's daughter in the book. Jocelyn makes all the executive decisions about her mother's caretaking needs and finances. However, Jocelyn's character is essential for posing the question of who is responsible? Not only is she starting a family of her own, but she has her own career to maintain. Should she feel guilty for not taking care of her mother, especially after how involved her mother was in her own upbringing? Is Jocelyn justified in not visiting her mother for seven years solely because of not wanting to witness her mother fall victim to this brutal disease? These are questions I want readers to be aware of when reading the novella.

As a writer, I lean towards topics that scare me. My previous writing tackles issues such as postpartum depression, the loss of a child, and rehabilitation from suicide attempts. These are important aspects of life that I have not personally experienced but fascinate me and frighten me. In order to conquer fears, I must write about them. Alzheimer's is similar in this sense. I do not have Alzheimer's, nor do I have any close family members or friends with Alzheimer's, but the fact that this is a real condition that exists in our world is unbelievable to me. I can't imagine how terrifying it would be to receive that diagnosis and make those arrangements for the rest of your life. And that's why I had to write about it. This novella is not about a cure. It's about companionship.

MALLORY

Louisa's hair is wrapped in small plastic curlers, pressed against her bed pillow. She lifts the cheetah-print mask covering her eyes, spotting me standing in the entrance of her suite. A bathroom branches off to the left, armed with railings on every wall. It's modest and comfortable, a beige comforter, an armchair in the corner.

"My name is Mallory, and I'm here to help you get ready for the day." I set my purse beside the door, and a cup of tea on the bedside table.

"Yes, Mallory." Louisa croaks and clears her throat. I help her sit upright against the pillows, trying to catch any hints of familiarity in her voice, any recognition of yesterday's conversation, but she masks her recovery so well.

"How are you feeling this morning?" Clicking each curler, I unravel thin white streaks of hair, framing the top of her head in small ringlets, and collect them in a wicker basket on the nightstand.

"Fine. Fine." She breaks eye contact, finding her reflection in the vanity mirror. She moves her hand across her cheek, as if smoothing out her wrinkles. Part of me wonders how much of herself she sees. I'd heard haunting stories of residents seeing loved ones in the mirror instead of themselves, reciting what they'd never had the chance to say.

Grabbing a bottle of rose lotion from on top of the dresser, I squirt some in my palm and rub my hands together. The cream collects under the wedding ring on my finger. Twisting the metal from my slick skin, I pull off the ring and tuck it into my front pants pocket and finish applying the lotion.

The ring belongs to Louisa, something she wore until the day he died, but soon became more of an obstacle to her recovery than an object of comfort. Sometimes she remembered he

was gone, others she assumed he was out for groceries or dropping their daughter off at school. Without the ring, he came up less often in conversation.

I couldn't let the ring fall into the wrong hands. Most of Louisa's belongings, though elegant, were modest. Tacky jewelry from craft sales, a collection of clay bead bracelets. Things that defined her character but irritated her skin, ones no one would find worth in except for her. The ring, on the other hand, was small enough to go unnoticed, and could easily be slipped by another companion care worker. Some objects had to be safeguarded, especially for the residents who had nowhere else to put their belongings.

At this point, with Louisa's memories returning to her reality, the sight of the ring could spark some misunderstanding. Better to be kept unseen, but not far away.

Taking hold of her foot, I maneuver my hands around the knots on her toes, the lotion collecting in the creases of her skin. Mind wandering, I brainstorm ways to trigger the past. How can I measure how deep the cure has traveled, and what amount of memory can still resurface?

Louisa sips her tea.

"Where did you get that mug?" I reach for her right foot. She lifts it on command like nailing horseshoes to an animal.

She scans the ceramic sides of the mug, eyes narrow. "World's. Best. Mom." She reads the blocky pink letters slow. "I would imagine it must be from my daughter." She smacks her lips. "That would make sense, wouldn't it?"

Flakes of skin loosen between her toes. I gently peel them off, collecting in a small pile on the rug. She remembers her daughter. That's a start. It's hard to know where to begin each day, what questions to ask.

"Jocelyn, right?"

"Yes. Jocelyn." Louisa sips again. "That would make sense, wouldn't it?"

I hadn't seen Jocelyn since the funeral. She'd sat beside us that day, pressed a clean tissue against her olive cheeks, blotting away smeared blush. She'd placed a special request for a companion care worker to bring Louisa, so she wouldn't have to manage babysitting her mother and mourning her father in the same day.

"When was the last time you saw Jocelyn?"

Louisa places the mug back on the side table. She ponders the question for a moment, and I see the blank in her mind. A patch of information she can't access. Roadblocks.

"Some time now." A vague response. These answers typically imply to change the subject. We're reaching dangerous territory in her brain. In my own experience, residents voluntarily change the subject on their own, move onto something they can talk about. Like the weather. Or what they want for dinner.

But today, I press harder. I want to know the border between memory and vacancy.

"Louisa, do you know that you have Alzheimer's?" I pump lotion into my palm and rub it on my own hands, trailing up my wrists.

Questions skim through her mind like a flipbook, too quick to grasp at any one idea. Maybe I've gotten in over my head in deciding to tell her, but after so long dodging explanations of the honest-to-God truth, keeping her happy in each moment at all costs, it was time she understood what they were doing to her. It was time to stop lying.

She shakes her head. "No one ever told me."

I hold back a small grin. Of course she was told. I imagine her and her husband sitting down with a medical professional, talking through care options, and I wonder how much of a say she had when Marcos decided he didn't want to be the one to deal with her forgetfulness. That

they better stick her in a home before it gets too bad. Plus, I told her yesterday. And the day before that. And a couple times before then, too.

The first time I told her, I'd gifted her a simple composite notebook for her to journal her thoughts into, conducting my own experiment of sorts. How would the entries change as her memory reappeared? What kind of secrets could come back to her? A way of tracking her progress in this messy experiment.

"You're enrolled in a treatment program, taking daily medication to help heal your brain and recover your memory."

The rusty gears behind her eyes slowly irk forward. She shies away from the gaps. A mental pushback. It's hard to approach ideas that don't make sense, like thinking about the size of the universe, or where our souls go after death.

"Yes, of course." She sips, not taking the bait. "That would make sense, now wouldn't it?"

She's lying. This cure is never going to work. Feeding her facts from her past isn't sticking. Even as a companion care worker, I recognize that some patients' brains are far too damaged. Like the wanderers, the nonverbal clients that roam the memory care floor in search for something. I'm waiting for the day these individuals can magically inform me what they were looking for all along.

I set Louisa's heel on the carpet and rinse my hands at the bathroom sink, brainstorming what other objects I can wedge into our morning conversation. If only I knew some of her mother's signature recipes she ate growing up or her go-to morning cereal.

Many families provided a series of objects from their past that meant something to the individual and gamble on the cure. Louisa, on the other hand, wasn't so lucky. Dead husband.

Absent daughter. There are sisters, somewhere out of state, but the childhood home is gone, as well as the knickknacks that filled it. Companion care workers with no scientific background are assigned to resurface their client's lost memories through objects. It was up to me to try and bring back Louisa's past without any clues of what was there to find.

I reach for one of the many novels on her shelf. Flood her brain with good memories, ones I know will keep her on the right track to recovery. Opening *The Great Gatsby*, I leaf through the pages, exposing a collection of fall leaves and wildflowers pressed between the paper.

"We often go for walks." I set the paperback on Louisa's lap, pages wrinkled from what I can only assume was several reads. "You love collecting colorful leaves on the trail in Mendon, and I don't have the heart to throw them away." Louisa should know who has been on her team since day one of this terrible journey.

The spine cracks and Louisa lifts a brown leaf from the crease of the book, careful not to let it crumble in her grip. The leaf twirls between her fingertips, and she studies it like the answers to her life were written on the backside.

Maybe a glimpse of memory is returning to her, one she doesn't share with me. I might not have given Louisa this leaf, but I've given her many others over the last seven years. It's become muscle memory on every walk, pick out a leaf from the gravel path, one that still has a stem, sometimes with a unique blotchy pattern, other times a solid burn red. I give her the leaf, so she has something to hold onto. It's all about remaining consistent, hand her the leaf, watch her twirl it between her fingertips, etching the motions into her brain, repeat the pattern.

She twirls the leaf between her thumb and pointer finger and looks up at me.

LOUISA

My husband sat at my bedside, like I was dying or something.

He held a small bouquet of weeds he collected from our yard. Dandelions and Queen Anne's Lace and Ragweed, things I used to go out of my way and pick before he mowed. I would press the flowers into books or put them in a small vase on the shelf above the kitchen sink and watch them until they wilted. There was no sense in buying flowers that were going to do the same.

The ends of these weeds were wrapped in a damp paper towel. He handed them over to me. Water dripped into the gap of my fist.

He told me about AA. *They're all children*, he said. He felt ridiculous, like he was at a college orientation or something. Those twenty-year-old kids sent there from frat houses, telling stories about waking up wasted on a stranger's lawn. How pathetic. Those kids didn't know real addiction. What it was like to work an actual job all day and then have the temptation to come home and drink a beer while watching the news.

But he couldn't fool me, even then. He and I both knew it was never just one.

I dropped the small bouquet of weeds on my lap.

He wanted to stop going, he decided. It wasn't doing him much good anyway. Somehow, a six pack of Genny appeared in the back of his truck about a week ago and he brought them home to drink alone. He had the whole house to himself, anyway, constantly searching for ways to fill the time and the empty spaces where I used to be.

"If only you were still there," he said, "to remind me to toss my beer in the trash, and take it out, too. Just like before."

The words slid off his lips, as if I had rubbed his back gently and told him *maybe you ought to not have a beer tonight, dear*. Like he didn't hurl glass bottles across our living room, screaming *shut up, dumb bitch*, and down another.

So, he decided to stop going. Somehow in his healthy brain, it made sense to him to quit AA and sit at home all by himself and drink himself to death. And for some reason, he wanted me to know that.

He took a book off the shelf under the windowsill, something he knew I could no longer read, and he crushed the flowers between the pages, moisture oozed out of the bottoms of the stems, ruffling the pages. Pressing flowers, the way I used to.

MALLORY

I watch Louisa pace around the small obstacles in her suite, rounding the bed, finding her slippers and wedging them onto her stubborn feet. Easing herself onto the salmon comforter, she takes a deep breath. "My husband will be home any minute." She runs her hands against her thighs. "Will you grab me my bag, dear?"

Excuses flood my mind. *Marcos's working late tonight* or *You said you'd stay for supper.* No, I promised myself. If I lie, that makes me just as bad as the rest of them. Building Louisa's trust is the most essential part of her recovery.

"Louisa, you live here now. Remember what we talked about yesterday?" I prompt her. Maybe if we click reset, put her back into the seat she'd been resting in, with the same mug holding the same tea. I'll rub her feet down with rose scented lotion again and the sensations will reverberate through her brain.

Without missing a beat, Louisa asks, "Has my husband passed away?"

I feel the indent of her wedding ring in my pocket.

"Yes. He passed."

Louisa nods, as if the news hadn't phased her at all.

I recall stories of gardening. Louisa and her late husband planting her favorite flowers, marigolds. The way their hands folded and packed dirt over each bulb. He watered, she weeded. Sounded like some old-timers' romance to me, something I'd tried to recreate with her in the community garden at Meadowview with no success.

Digging through my purse, I take out a five-pocket organizer, slipping the pamphlet from Marcos's funeral three years prior, his face printed into the paper in black and white.

Marcos stopped by Meadowview frequently before his death, and never empty handed. Not a box of assorted chocolates everyday type of thing, but sometimes a Tupperware with orange slices, or a bag of acorns he'd collected on a walk. At Christmas, when he learned we couldn't have a real Christmas tree in the facility, he brought Louisa a bowl of pine needles that'd dropped from his tree at home. She pressed her nose to the bowl, sucked the smell of Christmas into her lungs.

Louisa holds the pamphlet in both hands. The paper crinkles between her pinched fingers. She reels it up to her face, as if examining the blurry photograph, identifying the man as indeed her husband.

Her expression blanks in a way I've seen countless times before, sifting through clumps of confusion. She can't find him in there. The recognition is gone as quick as it came.

After several moments, Louisa looks up at me, laying the pamphlet on her lap. "Why didn't anyone tell me?"

Agitation churns under my skin. Of course we told her. “We went to the funeral together, hun.”

Licking her fingertip, she opens the pamphlet, scanning through the agenda of that day. The prayers. The speakers. The music played, songs that somehow defined her husband, *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* and *Amazing Grace*. Maybe if I looked up the music on YouTube, it would bring Louisa back to the funeral home, eating cheese off the end of a toothpick, the rows of chairs, the last goodbye I forced her to tell Marcos before they closed the casket.

I’d pampered Louisa a little extra that morning, blow drying her curls so she’d feel warmth against her neck. We’d picked a green blouse together and added some extra jewelry. I’d told her countless times how beautiful she looked, flooding her with positive thoughts to try and balance the uncertainty that would come when we arrived at the funeral home.

Family and friends hugged Louisa, kissed both her cheeks, squeezed her hand. She was glowing, collecting all attention in the room. I stood idly by, watching for her safety, for unspoken signals indicating a triggering moment. But it didn’t. I was just a stranger at a funeral, surrounded by the people who loved her.

“I have Alzheimer’s, don’t I?” she asks.

Her awareness catches me off guard. This was the first instance Louisa had ever asked me about her Alzheimer’s, the first of many questions. And of course, no one at Meadowview taught us how to answer. As if they didn’t believe in the cure they’d gambled on. Without knowing my expected reaction, I nod.

Taking back the pamphlet, I shove it to the bottom of the organizer. In between plastic dividers, scrapbook-like souvenirs clutter the pockets, each one for a different resident, but Louisa’s the fullest of the five.

"I'd like to be alone. Please." Louisa stares far off at her dresser. The gears spin in her head, creaking against one another. I give her the space.

LOUISA

I stared down at the man in the casket and wondered if he was my husband.

I imagined biting into a yellow gumball, the hard candy-coating shattering between my teeth. A young man at a diner floated through my mind, digging a second quarter out of his jeans pocket. Inserting the coin, he clicked the lever of the gumball machine. It dispersed another, this time, pink.

It tasted pink and I wondered, *how can something taste pink?* Gum snapped in our mouths. My chin rested on my closed palm. A leather jacket, brown beer bottle in hand. There was no chance he was old enough for beer, yet there he was, in public, holding it the way a grown man shows off his wife. He blew a pink bubble.

Twirling a curl around my finger, I told him my name, Louisa. His smile loosened and he took my hand in his, other hand clung to the beer like a jacket. His name muffled through my memory.

This must've been him, my husband.

He told the wildest stories of the men he played pool with on Friday nights, how pool was no game for a lady, but he'd teach me just in case. A badass woman, that was what he wanted. My jaw molded the gumball into a rubbery mess. *I could be badass,* I thought.

Before I knew it, the gum lost flavor. The pink morphed into grey, and I smooshed it into the bottom of the booth.

The next time I felt for it, years later at that diner, it was a hard caked on tumor dressed in junior high germs. His leather jacket draped over my shoulders where his arm should be, but instead he sat beside me, holding another Genny light.

Yes, I thought. This was my husband.

In the casket, a turtleneck hugged the collarbone I kissed between breaths every night. Real lovers don't cuddle, yet there I'd lay, holding onto him for dear life. I craved our bed again, where I could whisper to him that I missed the taste of pink and the rings of condensation on the table. Reckless nights of pool and play, memories I couldn't collect in time to morph them into a proper goodbye.

This was my husband. Yes, that would make sense, wouldn't it.

MALLORY

It isn't until afternoon that Louisa meanders out of her suite, shuffling across the community room, and settles in the seat by the window. I find her here every afternoon, like clockwork, waiting for the school bus.

Three residents sit in silence in the community room watching Ellen. Rogan Nichols shuffles a deck of cards at the coffee table, awaiting an opponent. Although cards aren't exactly my forte, I'd occasionally sit across from him. He'd deal me out a hand and play a sloppy game of rummy. I'm sure he has no recollection of the handful of times we'd played. He sits in the chair and waits for a body.

"Do you think Louisa's okay? She's been very distant." Pamela, the activities assistant, whispers to me in the kitchen. Her hair tied back into a neat ponytail; she dribbles a tea bag in a Styrofoam to-go mug.

I'd often found myself spending downtime in Meadowview's kitchen, sitting in the corner on the mopped white floor. The cooks, supplied with culinary degrees and chef-like experience, wore Meadowview scrubs and served cereal and eggs every morning. This place felt limiting to everyone, except Pamela, who made her own schedules of activities, picked crafts and games that she found fun. Her job was the equivalent of a preschool teacher but saying it out loud would offend anyone.

"Yeah, I think it's the cure settling in. It's a confusing process, for everyone." I reassure her, despite the fact I'd been wondering the same thing. Through our morning routine, Louisa hardly said a word. Part of me wanted to ask if she remembered, she must have by the way she was acting.

But here she was, waiting for the school bus.

Julie, another memory care resident, joins Louisa at the window seat. An emerald pendant necklace dangles from Julie's neck, thick orange sweater hanging loose over her shoulders. This is probably better for Louisa, I think, finding companionship in other residents instead of me sitting beside her, reminding her that the school bus will never arrive. That her daughter is 28 and hasn't visited her in seven years.

Julie shares about her father taking her into the City of Rochester yesterday. They'd purchased cotton candy from a street vendor. I imagine Julie, wrinkled and frail, as a little girl. Her grey mop of hair pinned onto a small child. Seeing her run around in penny loafers from the 1950s, what kind of street fairs they might've had. Where could this memory have sparked from?

Carrying two cups of hot tea on saucers, I hand one to each of the ladies, and they each eagerly accept.

“I’m sure my father would love tea when he arrives. He’s an Englishman, you know.” Julie presses her lips against the golden brim of the cup.

“Your father’s not coming,” Louisa says. “He’s dead.”

Julie chokes, tea dribbling from her bottom lip. Quickly, I fetch a handful of tissues from the side table, mopping the tea from the collar of her sweater.

“I beg your pardon?”

I take the tea from Julie’s shaky grip. *There’s my answer.*

“We have Alzheimer’s. All of us.” Louisa’s matter-of-fact delivery catches the attention of the Ellen-watchers.

Pressure condenses in Julie’s brow, unable to calculate the information presented to her. Nearby residents lean in, whispering among themselves. The word *Alzheimer’s* echoes across the community room like a curse.

A breath catches in my throat. This wasn’t part of the plan. My intention wasn’t for news of the cure to plague the whole residency. Tears line my eyes, and I’m sure Louisa’s catches note of them. I quickly wipe them away. *Maintain your composure,* I think. That’s the only way I’ll keep my job.

“All right. Let’s move onto our next activity.” Pamela jumps into the mix, clapping her hands together in the center of the community room. She glances at me, gesturing towards her. She mouths *Help me.*

But there’s little help to give at this point. Perhaps if Meadowview had considered the potential for an information outbreak, they would’ve given us a plan of action for this likely situation.

“Uh... uh yes. Who would like to take a walk around the community garden?” I chime in, but subject changes will only go so far once they’ve regained their awareness.

Julie shakes her head slowly. Setting her cup on the windowsill, she eases from her chair, attempting to bolt towards her suite. The chatter crescendos across the community room.

Nervousness flushes my cheeks. An image of all the memory care residents teaming up against us, like the undead, minds clogged with misunderstanding. *We are not the ones at fault. Blame your families.*

“She remembered?” Pamela whispers to me like an accusation, yet there’s no way she could pinpoint me as the source of this madness.

Throughout the afternoon, the companion care workers rotate from suite to suite, checking in on the residents. I skip over Louisa’s door, uncertain of the best approach, but I want to make sure I circle back to her before another companion care worker does. Who knows what kind of trouble I’ll get into if they find out? Potential consequences race through my mind like spinning the wheel on a gameshow, all resulting in termination.

Rogan Nicholas completely unfazed, asked to play a game of checkers, losing track of if he was red or black. I let him change it up. Maryanne, on the other hand, dug through her scrapbooks, asking for the contact numbers of her sister in Milwaukee, reaching for the information we’ve gently denied them. I spend extra time with Maryanne, calming her down, answering questions vaguely, uncertain how long the repercussions of the day’s conversation would last, or if they would be permanent.

Stepping out of Maryanne’s suite, the wanderer approaches me outside the door. She grabs hold of my arm, shaky grip tugging on me in alarm.

“What’s wrong?” I ask her.

Gibberish forms from her lips, incomplete thoughts dangling in her mind. Putting my arm around the back of her nighty, I walk her to the opposite end of the hall where her suite is. Twisting the knob, the door wouldn't budge. I pound on the door, and the wanderer jumps a little.

Megan, the new cleaning lady opens the door, an annoyed look splayed across her cheeks.

"You locked this?" I ask.

"I'm cleaning." She swings the cord of a vacuum at her side.

"The resident needs access to her suite." I trip over the words, the name of the wanderer blanking in my memory.

"She can't be in here while I clean."

"Then clean faster." I lead the wanderer into the room, walking past Megan, and settle her in the chair on the far side of the room.

Scoffing, Megan changes the small wastebasket in the bathroom and makes her way out of the suite. Across the room, I turn on calm music for the wanderer and brush her hair for a few minutes, wondering if she's at all in the same anxiety level of the other residents.

I find myself back to Louisa's door and craving to separate myself from the chaos. Knocking quietly, I enter. Louisa sits in the sofa by the window, scribbling in the margins of a jigsaw puzzle.

Stepping into the restroom branching off her suite, I pull the hair tie out of my hair and pull on a fistful of hair. Losing my job wasn't an option. I'd been counting down to the end of my lease, money draining from my account to pay for a two-bedroom, when the second bedroom was only used for a sitting room, one I only ever sat in.

I think back to the check I was written at twenty years old, my father's inheritance, deposited into a bank account and spilled into a new car, shoes that have long since worn, uncomfortable clothing that couldn't be resold no matter how many times I posted them on Facebook Marketplace. My father's legacy wasted on disposable items I couldn't bring with me after the last move. A new beginning, seven months into a lease I thought I could pay, and now my job is dangling on a limb. Not to mention the risk of losing my closest friend in the mix.

I pull out my phone and Google David's name, praying I don't find an obituary, or worse, an engagement announcement. It had become routine over the last six months to periodically google his name, searching for any trace of accomplishment or strife. A police report pops up, David Nicholson, 48, allegedly stabbed his girlfriend within the last week. Part of me wished it had been my David. At least then I'd known he's alive somewhere.

Deep breaths, in through the nose, out through the mouth. I stare into my reflection, daring my puffy eyes not to shed a tear.

LOUISA

Curlers snapped beside my skull. Slowly, Mallory twirled my hair off the foam. Holding a golden mirror out in front of my face, a pale complexion stared back, wrinkles imprinted into my skin like rings in an aged tree trunk.

Twisting my wrist, I caught a glimpse of Mallory out of the corner of the mirror, her face swollen and puffy, I could've fried an egg on her cheek.

I set the mirror back on the bedspread out of respect. Who wanted to talk about why they were crying anyway?

As the last curler dropped into the basket, I heard a sniffle, and Mallory rounded the bed in front of me. She squirted a pump of foundation onto her hands and with her fingertips, gently massaged the cold makeup into my skin. Her familiar touch traced down the folds of my neck.

Unscrewing the purple top off the mascara, Mallory dipped the brush into the black liquid and stared into the vanity mirror, mouth agape, focused on tracing her own lashes. She scraped her thumb underneath her waterlines, wiping away the old, smudged makeup. Then, she turned to me.

I blinked into the mascara brush three times, and she twisted it shut.

"There we go. Beautiful." She scrunched her nose.

"Thank you." The words tasted like frost.

Mallory dropped each pallet back into the floral makeup bag and zipped it tight. She fiddled with a pearl necklace dangling from the vanity mirror.

"My fiancé has answered my texts in like a week." Mallory dropped the pearls, clinking against the mirror. She organized the dresser, lined up perfume bottles with hairspray, collected makeup brushes in a cup. "I don't know if he's safe, or alive."

She made her way to the bed, tucked the fitted sheet around each corner, and flattened the comforter across the top. "We'd been together for three and a half years. And all of a sudden, poof. Gone." Her eyes caught different objects in the room, holding on for several moments to avoid meeting mine.

"How unfortunate." I smacked my lips, if only a more genuine response had raced across my mind.

Mallory nodded, slashing her hands across her cheeks to rid her face of tears. She blinked hard. She sat beside me. Soft sniffles tested the quiet every few minutes. Mallory's head slumped over to my shoulder; the warmth of her cheek soaked through my sweater. I stroked her hair.

MALLORY

The companion care workers sit in a circle around a conference table. Women swivel in their chairs with anxiety. We sip water out of small plastic cups towering at the water cooler. An emergency meeting, all on the account of my irresponsible actions.

My boss Laurie rushes in, a woman opposite of what you would expect when you think *Companion Care*. I've seen her outside smoking a cigarette more often than in the memory care wing. She huffs out a breath, setting her oversized black purse on the table at the head of the conference room, fit to match her black curly mop of hair and thick black eyeliner.

"Whoo, it's hot in here." She fans herself with a handful of flyers. "Here, pass these around." She sets the papers in front of Pamela, who eagerly gets out of her seat and hands them out teacher-style instead of just passing them around the table like a normal person.

I chew on the rim of my water cup.

Pamela promptly takes her seat and Laurie starts the meeting. "So, I don't want this to drag on too long. Basically, as you all have probably seen, the cure is working. Like, really well."

Everyone glances around, nodding in agreement. I nod along. I guess that's one way to look at it.

"So, we're changing our approach to a more jumpstart type of technique. Apparently breaking it to the residents that they have Alzheimer's kind of forces the memories to reappear."

Frustration burrows in my chest. Because of me, this cure is proving its effectiveness. Laurie doesn't even see the way the cure affects the residents, yet someone gave her the seat at the head of the table and signs off on her checks.

"We are already in contact with the families to plan move-out day."

Murmurs rise around the table, chairs shifting from left to right.

"Move-out day?" One of the night crew workers chimes in, a woman with peppered hair twisted into a long braid on her shoulder.

"Yeah." Laurie's expression flattens, as if what she said was obvious. "If they're cured, they have no reason to stay at Meadowview."

"What about our jobs?" Pamela chimes in, standing from her seat like she's ready to start a revolution.

"I suggest you all look into your HHA certifications." Laurie heaves her purse back onto her shoulder, as if she carries the weight of this place buried underneath the tube of lipstick and pack of cigarettes. "For the residents without family connections, our aftercare department will assist them on getting back on their feet. So let them know that, too. All right."

Unlocking the door to the memory care wing felt like returning home from war. The other companion care workers take a few extra moments to glance around, smile a little broader when greeting residents. Pamela immediately deals Rogan Nichols a game of rummy.

I find Louisa sitting in the corner of her suite, a stack of novels piled on the side table. Her copy of *The Great Gatsby* is open in her hands. She leafs through the pages backwards, as if the goal were to reach the beginning of the story. A hole between novels marks the spot on the shelf where the stack must've come from.

A cup of tea one of the nurses must've made sits on the mahogany dresser. I wonder if she has any idea how many cups I've made her over the years. Maybe this was the only one that matters in the grand scheme of navigating her memory. Remember the tea, not the person who made it.

Louisa hisses back a cry, tears flush across her cheeks. She licks her fingertip and moves back another page.

"Louisa?" I sit on the bed beside her. "Hun, what's wrong?"

She closes the book, hand grazing the cracked blue paperback. "I loved this one."

She stops there, setting *Gatsby* on top of the rest of the novels. Memory triggering objects were all around her. I just wish I knew what types of memories would arise. Maybe I needed to read through her collection, find the themes and genres that sparked her interest to pull her past forward in her mind.

It's hard to know where to begin if I don't know where we left off. Part of me wonders if she even knows why she sat at the window countless days at the residence, if the expectation of the school bus is gone, and now it is simply routine.

"Do you know why you're here?"

"I have Alzheimer's."

"You *had* Alzheimer's."

"I'm being cured."

"And it's working. Really *really* well."

"I don't understand."

I don't understand it either.

How could they encourage them to move out? Especially when the cure is still so unpredictable. It's a trial phase. Who's to say it's not a temporary fix? Bring them back for a day, and slingshot them back into a disease.

"We're going to have to start looking into your options."

Desperation highlights red veins in her eyes. "I don't want to call my husband."

"Louisa, Marcos is dead." Part of me realizes how insincere I sound, but I've already told her this. Forget the gentle approach, they say.

She blinks twice, recognition rolling through the back of her mind where she'd hidden the realization, withholding the things a little too unbearable to understand when your brain is being chemically reorganized. "You showed me the program." Louisa points to my purse.

I nod.

"I'll need to call Jocelyn."

Regret charges my emotions. Why did I have to be the one to tell her? The news might turn her against me. I don't want to be associated with this place anymore, with the people who did this to her.

"You can't."

"Why not?"

"Jocelyn never authorized your cure."

"What does that mean?"

Defend my employer? They won't even defend my job. Get a HHA certification or get out. Forget Laurie. "The cure is still in its trial phases and written permission from a beneficiary is required to administer the medication. Jocelyn refused to sign."

"But now I'm cured?"

"She must've had a reason to want to keep you at Meadowview."

Louisa runs her hand across the salmon bedspread, flattening the sheets. "So where will I go?"

"You can go anywhere you want, hun."

Louisa huffs a small laugh.

"I'm serious. This was an obstacle, but you've gotten past it. You're only in your sixties. There's still so much life for you to live. You can live anywhere. Travel. Enjoy life outside of these walls."

She smirks. "Life outside of these walls? I wouldn't know life outside of these walls if it hit me in the head."

"I'll show you. We're rehabilitate you back into society. Hell, you can stay with me if you like. Just until you get back on your feet. I've got a spare room." Words tumble from my lips, an inappropriate offer for a caregiver to give to a resident. But who cares? My job is on the line either way. "If you want to talk to Jocelyn, her phone number is on file. I can get it for you. She has a house in Brockport now, and a husband."

"I need to sort through some things." Louisa fluffs the bed pillows with borderline aggression. "You'll be back tomorrow?" A question she asks frequently when I announce it's time for me to leave for the day.

"Yes. I'll be here tomorrow."

"Will I remember you tomorrow?"

The question braids through my mind. Normally, I couldn't tell you if she recognized me or not when I enter her suite every morning. But now, with her memory quickly bouncing back, something about our routine over the last seven years tips the scale.

"Yes. I think you will."

Walking out of the memory care wing, the lock clicking shut behind me, I think of how ridiculous I must sound. Alzheimer's doesn't give a damn about our morning routine. That woman is sick, and I won't let myself get worked up tomorrow if she has no recollection of our conversation.

Eight and a half hours of built-up heat in my car grapples my skin like clingwrap. I roll down all four windows and pull out of the parking lot. Lifting my phone from the cup holder, I log into Indeed and search keywords. *Caretaker*. *Assisted Living*. *Home Health Care*.

Results pop up, and I scroll through the options at red lights, skipping ones I'm not certified for. Sending my auto-saved resume to the ones who might consider a companion care worker. Avoiding key words such as *line cook* and *waitress*.

Taking a sharp turn onto McGreggor Street, the car drops over a speed hump in the road, slowing down beside the multi-family home. I pass David's once a week now, right after dinnertime, once it's too dark for natural light to stream in, but not too dark he'll already be in bed. His LED lights shine through the blinds, this time green, and of course if he were dead, someone would've at least unplugged the lights.

LOUISA

I braided my seven-year-old daughter's beautiful blonde hair, twisting three strands into a long rope down her spine. She was a patient little girl, still like a display. Tying off the end of her hair, I stretched the braid over her shoulder so she could approve. She smiled, glancing back at me. *It's perfect*, she said.

Christmas morning was for anything but play in our household. My daughter, who's stocking was filled with oranges instead of chocolates, who would rather deliver holiday cookies to the neighbors than open her own presents, stood at the counter dicing bacon with a deep bellied knife and scraped it off a cutting board into a skillet of scrambled eggs.

She swore she heard Santa walk across the house late last night, that his heavy footsteps woke her, but she didn't dare check in case he decided to take the gifts back.

Matching aprons tied over our pajama pants, we ladled pancake batter speckled with chocolate chips, taking turns to grease the pan. When my turn came, she ran into the other room.

Sausage sizzled on the backburner. I cranked down the heat. Links rolled across the pan.

Upon returning, an awkwardly wrapped package in her hands, she insisted I opened the gift, even though it was too early, and of course I couldn't resist just one.

I allowed her to pick one too, any present to her liking under the tree. She selected one from Santa, wrapped in newspaper. Together, we opened the packages. For her, a new Barbie. For me, a ceramic mug reading *World's Best Mom*. Something from the Christmas shop at school. I'd sent twenty dollars in a change purse for her to do her own shopping, the wrapping probably done by the PTO volunteers. The only way I'd receive a Christmas gift.

For your Christmas morning coffee, she told me. I wrapped her in a side hug.

Pouring coffee, I added peppermint creamer and let her sneak a sip. Her lips curled into a scowl, and she eagerly passed the mug back to me.

The bedroom door creaked open across the house. Heavy footsteps trampled the living room floor. Her father asked about the batter smeared across the stove and the black marks on the sausage where they sat in the hot pan too long. The weird taste in the coffee.

It's Christmas, I told him. He sucked his teeth.

Sitting down to breakfast, my daughter kicked her legs under the table and squished a sausage link between her fingertips. Her father, holding his head with what I could only assume was a pounding hangover headache, tipped the table under his heavy elbows. The pancake platter chased gravity, crashed on the hardwood, syrup collected in a sloppy puddle with the coffee. Breakfast splattered his worn kakis.

He threw his napkin into the mess and walked off.

MALLORY

I round the side of the bed, tucking the fitted sheet under the left corner of the mattress in the second bedroom. Despite never having visitors, I keep a spare set of sheets in the linen closet in the bathroom. A twin bed occupies the bonus room, one I'd used myself until I decided it was time for an upgrade. Hopefully a twin is suitable for Louisa. Anything has to be more comfortable than the beds at Meadowview.

I'd never really wanted to live with another person. I thought that'd changed with David. Despite both our needs for personal space, a place to escape one another and say *not tonight babe*, every evening I found myself parking on his street, texting him upon my arrival, and waiting at the side door for him to let me in. Once David disappeared, already having a separate space to fall back on became a blessing I tried my best to count every day. The online blogs say breakups are a great opportunity to rediscover yourself. I'd just wished for an official breaking, the words in a text thread to solidify the closure.

Maybe that's just it. My calling is to help others, and Louisa is the ideal person to start with.

Flapping the comforter through the air, the floral print tops baby blue sheets. My hands spread across the surface, tugging here and there at the corners. *Perfection*.

When I'd moved to Rochester for college, originally a degree in biochemistry from RIT, talking to my father was last on the priorities list. I'd rented an off-campus apartment in college town and commuted, using the money from my mother's inheritance for security and first-month's rent. Between studying for courses I couldn't imagine ever passing, I'd created a new family of dumb college kids, all of which I hadn't heard from in at least three years. With no desire to tell my father any of my business, never did I imagine that not answering my father's phone calls, would lead to him not being found for two weeks after the heart attack, body sinking into the green armchair he always waited in for me to come home. The neighbors said he smelled, and that's how they knew.

Only live alone if someone will notice you're gone.

Adding a spritz of Febreze to the corners of the room, I open the curtains to get a glimpse of spring sunlight. Maybe Louisa will sit at this window, reading one of her novels. I'll cook stuffed shells for both of us, my favorite dish, but there's always too many to cook for just me, and the leftovers get soggy in the fridge. David hated stuffed shells.

Arriving at work, I spend a few extra moments in the lobby. I admire the stone fireplace on the far side of the room, surrounded by red velvety chairs like we're in some sort of castle. They were the same seats I sat in as I filled out the paper copy of my job application, nearly identical to the PDF version I'd filled out online.

Joan, the cranky middle-aged receptionist, offers a form over the counter for an old man. At his side, the Wanderer stands, her peppered hair pinned back neater than I'd ever seen it. The

woman excuses herself from the man and steps in my direction. Neither the man nor Joan takes their eyes off her.

She hugs me close, shaky grip squeezing around my middle, crunching my spine into her. I hug back, wishing I remembered her name besides “the Wanderer”.

“Thank you. For everything.” The words escape her lips easily, as if they’d always been on the tip of her tongue. Perfect English.

The man links his arm with the Wanderer’s and escorts her out of Meadowview. Glancing back at Joan, a smile pressed into her face. Apparently, I’d done something right all these years.

Entering my code into the keypad, the lock clicks. I set my purse down at the communal table and throw my hair back into a ponytail.

“There she is now,” a shrill voice calls behind me.

Spinning around, Laurie stands with a young woman, maybe close to my age, her olive skin shimmering with powder and golden-brown hair cascading down her shoulders.

“Jocelyn, this is Mallory. She is your mother’s primary companion care worker.” Laurie gestures to me, as if she knew anything about Louisa and my relationship. She probably had no idea until she checked the schedule. “Mallory, this is Jocelyn, Louisa’s daughter.”

“Yes. We met at your father’s funeral.” I finish looping the band around my hair.

“Right,” says Jocelyn, a hint of annoyance pressed into her voice.

“Well don’t let me keep you waiting. I’ll get Louisa up and ready. We have a morning routine. Louisa wouldn’t want to be caught dead with curlers still in her hair. I’ll have her out in twenty minutes.”

Before Laurie could make some fake, bullshit comment, I heave my purse back onto my shoulder and escape down the hall, unlocking the door to Louisa's suite.

There's no way Meadowview contacted Jocelyn. They would've had to tell her they'd administered the cure without her written consent. And Laurie is never in office. The only reason she would personally accompany Jocelyn to visit Louisa is if there was a risk of her losing something.

Louisa lays in bed, cheetah print mask enveloping her eyes. I nudge her shoulder, and she lifts the mask, eyes adjusting to the light.

"Good morning Mallory."

"Louisa, you have to get up." I fluff the pillows behind her back, quickly easing her from her sleeping position. "Jocelyn is here to see you. Do you know anything about this?"

"Of course. I called her."

Called her? Why would she need Jocelyn to come to her rescue when she hasn't been around for the last seven years? Maybe this is just part of the process, give Louisa the family closure so she can move on with her life.

Who was I kidding?

"I suppose this means we'll need to start packing up your things." Opening the bottom drawer to the vanity, I lift her makeup bag speckled with little bicycles and unzip the top, its contents clacking against one another in the small pouch.

"Mallory, how well did you know my husband?"

"I know he loved you." I select a makeup brush from the cup and rub it against Louisa's favorite pallet, that one worn down more than the others. Cupping her chin in my hand, I scrub the powder onto her cheeks. "But I also know he put you in here."

Louisa swallows. “What did he look like?”

I click the pallet shut, sympathy swelling through my chest. David and I weren’t even together exceptionally long in the grand scheme of things, and I can’t fathom not being able to remember what he looks like. I can picture every angle of him, the tattoo stamped into the dark skin on his inner arm. I’d trace it at night, unsure what language it was or what it said, but knowing it would always be the same.

I push my memories away. “He was handsome for an old guy.” I smirk, untwisting the cap off the lipstick. Steadying her chin, I blot the stain over her mouth. “Very traditional. Wanted you to have all the best, and checked in to make sure you did.”

Contemplation muddles my thoughts. That was the husband I’d seen, stopping by every day with little gifts and holding Louisa’s hand and singing to her. But whenever I reminded her of his next visit, she warned me to hide the Genny in the fridge, that she didn’t feel safe around him. Part of my protective instincts forced me to hover over their intimate moments, the times he sang in Spanish and braided small stands of her hair between his nimble fingers.

“But you’d voiced some concerns about him, before each visit.” I blot her lips with a tissue, and she bites down, a pink rim staining the paper. “He scared you for some reason. Any time I mentioned he was coming to see you, you became very… manic. And at Meadowview, your safety is of upmost importance.”

Louisa pressed her lips together. “Mallory, what happened?”

Dropping the lipstick back into the bag, I zip it closed and leave it on the desk, grabbing the can of hairspray. “He was unpredictable. I tried to keep a close eye on you while he was around, since you seemed to be that worried. It was repetitive, every time he showed up, it was

like you were afraid he'd hurt you or something. I didn't know what to do, so I brought it up to my higher ups. After that, he didn't stop by anymore."

Louisa folded her hands in her lap, cracking her knuckles in her own grip. Her lips fold within themselves, rubbing the stain together. "You banished my husband from visiting me?"

"I don't know the procedures. I just brought it to my higher ups. They took care of the rest." I unclip the first curler, slowly rolling it down her peppered hair. "I just wanted you to feel safe here."

"I am safe here. But he was my husband. And now I can't see him ever again."

Maybe for the best. My toes curl. She must know I had all good intentions. How could I know if the way he braided her hair made her tick, or the gifts he brought in were threatening in some way, opposed to simple hallmark gestures. What if she was there, she doesn't remember the fear in her eyes when I told her that her husband was coming to visit.

I remember the DARE program in elementary school, the cop that came to our school preaching that he'd never touched alcohol in his life. I'd pestered him with handwritten questions dropped into the coffee can he brought, labeled Questions Jar in sharpie marker on the side, a slit cut in the top. I'd stuffed so many questions into the jar, all of which he'd had to answer, had to read out loud and answer. How they monitor drunk drivers, what they do to drunk drivers when they catch them, if they hurt them the way drunk drivers hurt good people.

Everyone else in my fifth-grade class knew they were my questions. Who else would they be, but the girl whose mom was killed by a drunk driver? Who'd watched their family Sedan crumple like a wad of used wrapping paper, tossed across the curb like litter.

I finish unraveling her curls in silence, the smell of hairspray cluttering the room.

“Does Jocelyn drink tea?” I break the silence, running my fingers through the ringlets in Louisa’s hair, fluffing them around her ears.

Louisa takes a moment to respond. “She takes it the same as I do.”

Of course she does. Like mother, like daughter. Makes me wonder if there are any traits I shared with my own mother, and if there was anyone out there who could tell me what they were.

I’m sure Louisa doesn’t know that I also take my tea the same way she does.

JOCELYN

You’re not sure how your dad let your mom move into a space like this. Pink curtains, pink bedding. Even the lotions and perfumes on the vanity are sealed with pink labels. This is not the mother you remember. She sits across the room in a pink blouse that clashes with all the nonsense pink around her. Her hair is curly, the way you remember playing with it, bunching it into your fist as a child, but it’s much lighter now.

“Hi mom.”

Her face twists in a sort of awe. Maybe she’s noticing the small puff of your early pregnancy. Or maybe she has no idea who you are and will call security.

“I’ll let you two get acquainted.” Laurie says, the faint scent of cigarettes radiating off her clothes, chased down with the smell of mom’s hairspray.

It’s not normal to receive a phone call from your mother, but when she called yesterday, you left a piece of your childhood spring through your body. Your mother talking to you, telling you she missed you, that she wanted to see you again soon. You’re smart enough to know it’s not

real, or it is real, but your mother doesn't understand the reality of it. She felt it in the moment and said it, like a toddler, but as quick as it came, it could be gone.

With all that's happened in the last few weeks, hearing your mother's voice was the one thing that told you, somehow, everything was going to be okay.

You shut the door and sit on the edge of the bed, across from your mother. Her face is the same, but wrinkles creased deeper into her skin. It must be stressful, waking up every morning not knowing.

"Mallory's making tea," she says.

You nod, rubbing your hands across your belly, trying not to glance at your watch. Your mother always noticed subtle gestures like that, hiding chewing gum in church or tipping back your chair at the dining room table. Your impatience got on her nerves the most growing up. But she's slowing down, you think. Wouldn't notice your timekeeping.

"I have so many questions," she scooches to the edge of her seat. "You're all grown up."

"Yup. I'm a dentist now. Got out of school about three years ago. Married, too. His name is Tom." She's probably wondering if she came to your wedding, but you decide not to include that detail for the sake of her feelings. You couldn't bring your mother on an airplane, you remind yourself. Your wedding on the beach in Hawaii, surrounded by a small group of close friends. You couldn't babysit her while you were trying to create lifelong memories. "And we're expecting a baby this December."

Excitement heats her complexion, but you don't allow it to fool you. She can't be involved in a baby's life. Image taking your child to visit their grandparent, and each time having to explain to the child why grandma doesn't remember you, or them, while also instilling in your

child that they are one of a kind, and special and loved. How do you balance the love between your mother and your baby when neither is a love you understand?

"That's very exciting." She answers, also simple.

You want to share your excitement with her. All you know about motherhood were the examples she showed you, late in the game, making her almost more dedicated than the other, younger moms. You want your mom to teach you how to be a mom. What childbirth is like since you'd never talked about your own birth before besides the simple fact of the date and time you arrived. You don't even know if you were breastfed or not, and the idea of a tiny thing sucking on a sensitive part of your body makes you cringe. Questions you're not sure how comfortable you are asking your mother-in-law, yet she craves this relationship in a way your own mother can't.

There's a knock on the door, and Mallory enters, carrying two mugs of tea. One of them with the words "World's Best Mom" printed across the side. Thinking it's some sort of surprise gesture towards your pregnancy, you smile, until she hands the mug to your mother instead.

"Mom, where did you get that mug?"

Your mother freezes, the mug suspended between Mallory and her hands. "I thought you'd given it to me, for Christmas one year."

You clamp your teeth, a habit you've been forcing yourself out of. "Mom, I didn't give you that mug."

"I've always drank my morning tea from this mug," she defends, taking a small sip.

Mallory hands you a mug, but you set it on the side table and stand. "Mallory, may I speak to you in the hall?"

“I think whatever you have to say, you should say in front of your mother.” Mallory’s snarky attitude bleeds into the words, the same one you remember. Your mother wouldn’t remember what you say anyways, right? Knowing your luck, this would be the one moment that pinned in your mother’s mind, a thesis to all the supporting claims Mallory has been force feeding her about you for the last seven years.

“In the hall, Mallory.” You insist, excusing yourself from your mother’s company. You shut the door behind Mallory. The hum of the television echoes down the hall. Smells of eggs and bacon trail from the communal kitchen.

“You gave my mother that mug.”

“No…” Mallory stumbles, obviously caught in a lie.

“My mother might not remember what happened at my father’s funeral, but I do.” Stop grinding your teeth, you tell yourself. Let your jaw relax. “I want you off her care. And I’m going to make sure it happens.”

“It will.” Mallory smirks a God-awful know-it-all kind of smirk that makes your toes curl. “Your mother is cured. She doesn’t need me anymore. Didn’t they tell you that when you agreed to come see your mom?”

“You’re bluffing. You’re full of lies. I—”

“Didn’t authorize the treatment? Yeah. Louisa knows.”

“They don’t know what kinds of permanent effects it’s going to have on these people. My mother is not a guinea pig.”

“No. She’s a breakthrough.”

“What have you been telling her?”

“The truth.” Mallory leans against the wall, arms folded. A protective instinct, you think. Kind of pathetic.

Hormones shoot through your bloodstream. Maybe it’s the pregnancy, or the sudden desire to sue Meadowview to the ground. But in all reality, it might be the hope that you no longer have to learn how to be a mom from books.

You find your mother sitting in the same seat in the corner of the room, and you wonder if she remembers hating all the pink.

You kneel beside her, taking her hands in yours, similar to how she did when you were a child, teaching you how to write. “You’re cured?”

“I’d like to think so.”

She has the same wit as your mother.

She squeezes your hands, and you feel the way her skin has loosened, the way it bunches around her knuckles, but still holds on. “Can you tell me about your father? Before he passed?”

You don’t know how to approach this one. Mallory was spilling drama that was none of her business, putting stories in your mother’s head when she already had enough to worry about.

“I think he always loved you.” What a terrible response. Not a particularly good new impression to make on her.

Your parents had been married for years before you came around. They always seemed happy, but your mother was always very private. Any issues bubbling under the surface of their marriage were never discussed in front of you. Sometimes, if you woke up early, you’d overheard them sitting at the breakfast table, discussing finances or what was happening at the mill where your father worked. But once you entered the dining room, your mother’s spread of muffins and jellies toppling on the table, everything became about you.

It was always about you, wasn't it?

"Do you remember how his drinking was? Towards the end?" Mom asks.

Questions swarm your mind like mosquitos.

"Dad didn't drink."

LOUISA

"We were married right over here." Marcos pointed to a cleared area carved into a blanket of brush and trees. We walked down my favorite trail in Mendon, as a family.

Teenage Jocelyn with her phone gripped in her right hand like a shank, ready for use in a split second, examined the bare piece of land that somehow meant something to her father and me. "You got married in the woods?"

"Sure did." Marcos unloaded his backpack off his shoulders, Unzipping the top, he pulled three bottles of water out of the pocket. Tossing one to Jocelyn and one to me, neither one of us caught it.

The details of our wedding skimmed across my memory. My mind begged Marcos to say more. Tell her the story of that day so I can get a refresher on my I dos. The *for better or for worse* we'd once promised, now coming back to bite us in the ass.

Kneeling down, I plucked a dandelion out of the grass and combed it behind my ear.

Jocelyn typed on her phone. "Mom, can we open my debit card on Friday?" She asked without looking up from the screen.

My mind shifted through what Friday might bring, estimating how far away it is, when my husband interjects, eyeing her cellphone. "Jocelyn, are you present in the moment?"

"I have a lot of things to figure out before move-in day."

Don't we all, I thought. "Friday should work." I answered for the sake of dismissal. To enjoy our walk.

Marcos took hold of my hand, giving it a squeeze, grounding me back to this moment. He was right. I needed to be here, too.

On the outer edges of the trail, a family shared a picnic lunch on a grey blanket. The mother spooned fruit out of a Tupperware onto a toddler's plate, balancing another young child with his fist in a bag of chips. A tiny dog slept in the grass. The mother must've imagined this going much differently in her head. My heart hurt for her, navigating the now.

"Jocelyn." Marcos's voice snapped me out of my stare.

My daughter, phone gripped between both hands, looked up. "I didn't really have time for this whole walk thing in the first place."

"It's just one walk, dammit. We've been gone, what, twenty minutes?"

Had it only been that long?

"Let's head home now, Marcos. It's okay."

My husband, silent with defeat, led us back towards the parking lot.

I sat in the backseat of the Toyota, giving my daughter the passenger's seat. She pressed her knees up against the glove compartment, phone in her lap. Marcos drove down South Avenue. Staring out the window, little shops littered the town, one with glass beads dripping down the windows. A liquor store with the streetlights reflected off the bottles. Couples dined outside at the village gate, consuming margaritas and Mexican food.

My husband passed Jocelyn his set of keys, and she took a head start inside the house. A cozy cape cod, brown shutters, and a two-door garage. Marcos turned around to the back seat, like disciplining a child. "I thought you wanted a walk. That's what we talked about."

Thoughts tumbled over one another like a pair of wrestlers. I couldn't pinpoint what I had done wrong. He held the back of the passenger's seat, other arm rested on the center console, waiting for a response.

After several moments, he sucked his teeth. "We need to tell her. Who knows what your condition will look like by Thanksgiving."

Jocelyn's shoes kicked off in the walkway, I shrugged off my coat and hooked it on the hanger in the corner. Marcos sorted through the mail, peeling the corner of the envelope, and slicing his fingers through the seal.

Rinsing a glass from the dish drainer and filling it with water, I took a sip. Room temperature water settled in my stomach. I took a breath. Marcos came around the corner with a bill and flailed it in front of me, asking about the two-hundred-dollar Amazon charge on my credit card.

I sifted for an answer with no clear path. Backtracking, before the walk, before today. Marcos folded the bill back on its creases and slapped it against his hand. Without a word, he retreated to our bedroom and closed the door.

Jocelyn thanked me and hugged me, also escaping into her bedroom.

I pull up amazon on my phone, scrolling through a list of recent purchases.

Sometime last week, I sat beside Jocelyn on barstools at the kitchen island. Laptop open in front of her, she scrolled through Amazon.com faster than I could follow, adding to cart a colorful bean bag chair for eighty dollars, a purple twin bedding set, including sham and pillowcases for two hundred dollars, a whiteboard calendar and markers for twelve dollars, some decorative frames for another price. Passing her my credit card, she typed in the numbers like she'd worked as a typist for twenty years. Estimated delivery for Monday.

Jocelyn, overhearing her father's calmly presented question, chose not to speak up in fear of her father's guilty temper. He wasn't one to yell, but he could make you feel like a sack of shit for the simplest mistake with good intention.

Jocelyn anticipated the dorm she would live in, called West Wing, imagining where each item she ordered online would fit in the cramped, shared space. She checked her degree progress report with only pending credits, counting the empty boxes that would lead her to graduation, already googling dental clinics in Chicago, a place for some reason that was so much better than here. The college offered some sort of messaging service, where the students could contact their assigned roommates prior to the start of term. Somehow, without even meeting this girl, Jocelyn already had a best friend. Becky or Bianca or Bethany.

In the same breath, I scrolled through related items and suggested purchases and joined Marcos in the bedroom. Together, we added another two hundred dollars' worth of items to the cart, and Marcos, without pausing a beat, clicked *check out*. A space that felt like home, that's what I needed to create in this assisted living facility. I didn't want to rob my house of the picture frames and shelving units that collected our dust for the past twenty-five years. Marcos needed to feel at home still, somehow without any of the people he called home.

We moved Jocelyn into her dorm without telling her, without giving her the option to change her mind even if she wanted to. She hugged her roommate immediately, a girl with a pink bandana wrapped around her head and a neon green tank top. Now I relied on this teenage stranger to help protect my easily distracted daughter from the pressures of college.

MALLORY

“Mallory, be honest with me.” Louisa sets her notebook on the windowsill. Jagged cursive letters stutter across the page, something that would take examining to read. Part of me wants to understand the way she’s processing information. Who knows, maybe somewhere down the line, Louisa’s notes will become evidence. A case study on the Alzheimer’s cure. Ways in which it went wrong. Factors to manipulate for next time. Something of value to others besides me. “Did you buy me that mug?”

The lie tempts me. I wish I could take the credit. “No. I didn’t.”

Louisa nods, sipping down more of her tea like taking a shot. “I want you to take me somewhere today.”

“Where?”

“Anywhere outside of Meadowview. I have to reacquaint myself with the outside world.”

But Louisa has been out of Meadowview within the last seven years. For the funeral, sure. But also to buy groceries and run errands, to go for walks, to get maple walnut ice cream. Maybe this is one of the unanticipated limitations of the cure. Maybe Louisa will never grip the memories of during Alzheimer’s. That eliminates all traces of me. I had to take her somewhere with positive Mallory memories, ones she might hold onto once Jocelyn takes her home.

The Lowes parking lot is nearly empty, despite the start of spring fast approaching. We park close to the entrance. Louisa snags a shopping cart from the lineup, yet I can’t imagine we’ll buy enough to fill the basket.

Leaning against the handlebar, Louisa pushes the cart towards the greenhouse. Upon entering, a rush of warmth consumes me like a hug. She walks down aisles of marigolds and petunias, lifting some of the plastic holders and taking a glimpse at the roots.

She asks me if there's a place to plant flowers where I live. I think of the balcony, a very cement, rusted railing kind of spot, but within another week or so, the mornings will be warmer. We could sit out on the patio. The flowers would make her feel more at home, would give her something to nurture and care about.

She sets a tray of flowers in the cart.

Louisa also picks out a small trowel and a bag of potting soil. I help her lift it into the cart. She examines seed packets, shaking them like a maraca. She tears one open, pours tiny brown seeds into the palm of her hand, and runs her finger over them.

We check out, Louisa carefully unloading each item onto the counter, the cashier using her scanner to reach over to the barcode on the potting soil. When asked if she had a rewards card, Louisa shoots me a look, and recites a phone number I've never heard. The membership popped right up, the cashier confirming the name, Louisa McIntosh. Must've been her maiden name.

I arrange the items into the trunk of my car.

"I used to work at Lowes." She says, leaning against the car. "This is where I met my husband."

My ego deflates. Maybe this is why we come here every year. It's a reason she'd never explained to me, or maybe one she didn't realize herself. Somehow, she knew Lowes was a familiar place, despite not being able to reach the core of the familiarity. I can't honestly remember why we first started coming, or when it became a tradition.

"There's somewhere else I want you to take me." Louisa says, buckling herself into the passenger's seat.

The drive to the cemetery is short. Luckily, Louisa banked on the fact that I went to the funeral with her and would remember where her husband's plot was. Parking the car nearby, we walk down the row, carrying a trowel and flowers on my hip.

Stopping in front of the grave, her husband's name is frosted over in lichen, Marcos Perez. Her own name, engraved beside his, a birthdate without a death date. She kneels before it, tracing the letters with her fingertips. "Trowel?"

I pass it to her, and she scrapes away the debris with the edge of the tool. Letter by letter, the grave becomes cleaner. She forces the trowel into the dirt, tossing newly thawed ground to the side, until a small hole forms at the base of the stone. Reaching out to me, I pluck one of the pre-grown flowers from the plastic holder and hand it to her.

Louisa tears at the roots and dirt under the plant and places it in the ground. She repeats the process over and over, with the same attentiveness and care she'd given the flowers in the Meadowview community garden.

Once all four flowers are in the ground, she touches the stone again, tracing his death date, as if the more times her fingers touched it, the better grasp she would have on what happened, how long ago it was in terms of her time. Did she even remember the funeral?

She steadies herself with the top of the stone and stands, staring at it with the same perplexity as before.

The wedding ring weighs heavier in my pants pocket, now even more valuable than before. Soon enough, she'll realize it's gone. She'll start searching for any traces she can of her late husband. I'm already at a disadvantage now that she can place the blame on me for the lack of visits for the last three years of his life.

Looping my thumbs into my pockets, I finger the ring, feeling the tiny engravings on the inside.

"I have to tell you something." *No more lies, I promised.*

I hold out the ring. Recognition twists her facial features.

"I didn't want it to fall into the wrong hands. And before now, before this moment in history, Alzheimer's was deadly, and I just wanted to remember you. I'm sorry."

Louisa takes the ring, adjusting it on her ring finger. She twists it a few times, as if it didn't fit just right. Maybe my chubby fingers stretched it out, or I wore it washing the dishes too many times.

"Thank you, Mallory." She slips the ring back off and drops it into my palm, warm from her touch. "For helping me grieve."

The walk back to the car feels shorter than the walk to his grave. We each sit, Louisa's gaze caught out the window, staring back at her work.

"Louisa." I take her hand. "You're not doing this alone."

She looks to me, tears she's trying to hide lining her eyes.

"My spare room is still available."

"No, Mallory." She wipes her eyes with her knuckles. "I don't want to be—"

"You're not a burden. Hell, if it makes you feel any better, you can pay rent. I could use a roommate." Why did I say that? This woman hasn't had a job probably since she worked at Lowes. Jocelyn's in charge of the finances, and if she knew Louisa was paying me, all hell would break loose.

But what do I care? I'm most likely losing my job anyway.

"Okay," Louisa says. "I'll move in."

LOUISA

My ex-husband sat at my bedside, like he was dying or something.

He held a small bouquet of dandelions and Queen Anne's Lace wrapped in a damp paper towel. *For you*, he says, and drops the fistful of weeds across our bed as if they were rose pedals.

I asked him about AA, the meeting he had left for last night.

Carl buried his face into my pajama shorts, vomit caught in the crook of his lip, smearing against my thigh. I imagined puddles of vomit across our lawn, marking his territory. *Terrible*, he said. *They're all children. Don't know what it's like to work a day in their lives.* I stoked his hair, hand pressed against the nape of his cold neck.

He picked weeds for her grave, too, he told me. Stopped at the cemetery on the walk home. Knew better than to get into a vehicle, thankfully. We'd bought two plots in Mt. Morris. Next to hers, a stone that read *Carl McIntosh* and *Louisa McIntosh,* with a smooth space next to our birthdates, prepping for the day each of us are dropped six feet under. I didn't think most people wondered where they'd be buried.

He had nowhere else to go. The house was in his name. I had a sister in Rochester with a spare bedroom. It only made sense for me to leave, and in more or less words, that's what I explained to him.

His hot face pressed into my abdomen. I let him settle for a moment, almost missing the comfort of another body, my husband. My fingers through his hair, rubbing pressure into his meaty shoulders. All I wanted was this kind of closeness while I had mourned our daughter alone.

I was supposed to help him, for better or for worse, right? Ignore the cracks in the drywall where beer bottles catapulted across the living room.

I grab my duffel from the closet. Lifting paperback novels off the floor, I pack only a handful of books into the bag. I pick a dandelion from the comforter, fanning the yellow pedals with my finger. I leaf through the pages of *The Great Gatsby* and tuck the flower in, pressing down for dear life.

JOCELYN

They smear warm jelly across your abdomen, and you hear a heartbeat.

The tech turns the monitor towards you this time. You can see the white and black swirls on the screen, the curvature that is somehow your baby. You're somewhat embarrassed, considering last time the two of you were in this spot, you told her you didn't want to see it. At that point, you were still on the fence.

There was no one to let down but yourself. Your father was dead. Your mother-in-law lived in D.C. and would never find out. Tom told you it was your decision, how sweet. He always respected your autonomy more than most of your touchy ex-boyfriends ever did. But this wasn't just your decision. You wanted him to weight in, to want this baby. Maybe then, you would want it a little more, too.

Tom didn't come, despite you bargaining with him to take a half day. If you were going to keep this baby, you wanted him to be at least somewhat excited about it. But what do women do to get men excited about children? Name their sons after them? You never liked the idea of naming a child after someone else, binding a child to someone else's legacy. Carrying a last name was enough responsibility.

Dragging the tool across your abdomen, you feel like the scanner at a cash register. The nurse captures images on the screen, clicking keys here and there for the perfect shots.

You know you made the right choice. A two-income household, a newly married couple, thirties quickly approaching, a baby was right on cue. You know that even if your mother was around, she never would've pestered you about starting a family. Something about your relationship never budded to that point, or maybe she was just robbed from you before you had the chance. But now you have to worry about your mother.

Her treatment might've been a blessing in disguise, but you knew Tom wouldn't want to convert his home office into a bedroom. What if this cure wasn't all it cracked up to be, and she'd take a turn for the worst? Balancing a newborn on top of losing your mother all over again were hurdles you'd never trained to climb.

The tech points out the baby's foot on the screen. Your baby is highlighted in chalky white on the screen, and you, the woman holding it, are black nothingness. A background to the focal point.

The tech wipes away the jelly, but a cool damp spot remains. Grabbing your jeans, you excuse yourself into the small bathroom branching off the exam room.

Your jeans hug your hips. You force the buckle to clasp and breathe. Your stomach just barely hangs over your belt. Looking in the mirror, you frown. Nothing felt right about this pregnancy.

LOUISA

Mallory balls up all my valuables in a sock drawer.

"It's safer this way, for both of us," Mallory says, picking out two pink socks from the laundry basket. She folds a diamond necklace into the toe. "I would hold onto all of your jewelry

for you, but if someone noticed, they might misinterpret my intentions." Tossing the pink socks aside, she digs under a heap of clean towels for another pair. "Men will go through your jewelry box or your underwear drawer, but they never check your socks."

Mallory examines each piece of jewelry with care before dropping it into the sock. Methodically, as if she'd done this many times before. Her hands knead the fabric into tiny knots. A thief would have to pick away at the seams to get to the jewels.

I mimic the process, matching two like socks together from the laundry basket, and selecting emerald earrings from the jewelry box. Dropping them one by one, they skim the elastic around the ankle and roll to the bottom. The rolling of the socks feels familiar under my fingertips.

"Louisa, is this your wedding ring?" Mallory twirls a gold wedding band in the pinch of her fingers.

She sets the ring in my palm. I turn it over twice, studying the engravings on the inner band, *Love always.* "Yes, I think it is."

Mallory takes the ring back and stands. Walking across the room, she unzips her over-sized purse, removing a divider from the inside. Unclasping the button, she drops the ring inside. "I would hate for this one to get stolen."

MALLORY

I park three lots over and shove tiny bottles of White Cat in my hoodie pocket. My knees wobble in the cold, exposed under the seams of the hoodie, a black cocktail dress hidden perfectly underneath. Walking down the sidewalk, I chug one in four PM daylight, toss it, and

have another finished before I hit the next can. Checkpoints. The taste warms my throat, reminding me of being young.

David told me to always enter the side door of the casino. It's closest to the rewards desk. So today, I walk through the front and loop around. The employee behind the counter wears an embroidered golden vest. Marge. Her name fit her, glasses perched on the bridge of her nose, slowly typing in the number off my driver's license to redeem an old account. She comments on how it's been a while, but of course, that's none of her damn business.

Stepping foot on the mesmerizing carpet, the game floor glistens with twinkling slot machines. Old women sit, pull a lever, eyes pasted to the screens. Lights flash. Loser.

When I was eighteen, the casino smelled like Christmas. A gingerbread display lined the lobby, icing piped against life-size houses. Other girls scrunched themselves into tiny little cocktail dresses, slits creeping up the sides. David paraded me across the casino floor in a similar getup, ankles wobbling over my heels, and the other girls disappeared.

An old man coughs on the slot machine.

Slipping into the women's room, I pull the last White Cat from my hoodie pocket and chug it, watching in the mirror the way the liquid drained from the bottle. David's hoodie fit me perfectly. We were about the same size. I took his jackets; he sometimes wore my skinny jeans. Our wardrobes intermingled, making it easier when I spent the night.

Peeling off the hoodie, the mirror reflects a low-plunge pink top. The warmth in my head makes it feel less ridiculous.

The bottle bounces off the trash can. I leave it.

A dealer stands behind a blackjack table, fifteen bucks minimum bet written in red blocky letters. His golden plated nametag read *Jafar*. Sitting down, I slip a pair of hundred-dollar

bills onto the green tabletop, soft like a mini golf course. He shuffles. I unclasp my wedges and kick them off.

Back then, the blackjack table was community. Lurking the game floor was the only way to catch an available spot. Standing behind David, my body pressed into his back, I watched a strangers pound their hands on the edge whenever someone was dealt an ace. Asking one another when to double. *Do you always double an eleven?* I couldn't remember.

Tonight, Jafar and I sit across from one another, rusty memory fogging my better judgement. We swap chips back and forth. His dealing is slopy, cards skimming the green in the wrong direction, flipping one card with another and it landing crooked. I ask Jafar how long he's been a dealer. He tells me to split my eights.

David would've liked Jafar. He liked everybody, really. Even when David was mad, it was always out of love. He expressed his grievances in the gentlest ways, my face pressed within his collarbone, legs wrapped around him for dear life anytime he told me about how lost he felt in this world. He aspired to open his own restaurant with recipes for his mother's chicken and dumplings and baked mac and cheese.

I loved David's lack of effort, the way he told me about his dreams without actually following them. How finding himself meant searching within me, even though we both knew I didn't have any answers. When he started to take risks was when we started falling. Upon discovering himself, he must've found the lack of need for me.

Jafar finds me later in the back seat of my Civic. We fuck in the empty parking lot to a six PM sunset, and I try to forget every trip to the casino before now. It burns. I let him finish. He uses David's hoodie to clean up and tosses it on the floormats. New partners never know what to do, or maybe that's just men.

David once gave me a pencil and a piece of graph paper and told me to illustrate an orgasm. Not draw hard nipples and squiggles between spread legs, but to show him my own journey. Embarrassment flushing my cheeks, I crumple the paper and toss it on the floor.

Jafar balls up his golden vest in a fist and carries it across the parking lot.

Flipping open the center console, a stockpile of miniature bottles of White Cats, the size of travel shampoo, stack on top of spare cash and a pouch of emergency pads. I crank off the top, chug the bottle and call David on the drive home.

JOCELYN

You sit at a community table that seats twelve with only two place settings. Upon check-in, the receptionist informs you many families have already retrieved their loved ones and continue treatment at home. You wonder if selling the house after your father's death was a bad idea. Maybe it would stunt your mother from her recovery, taking her to a brand-new place. Nothing in your house came from your mother's house. It started with an estate sale, and then you sold the house as is. It was hard enough to try to figure out who your mother and father really were. It was too hard to sort through twenty-five years of stuff.

"This is my son. Thank goodness I have him, big, tall and strong, just like his father, to help move out all of my things." A woman walks alongside your mother. A young man, probably about your age, stands with a pink luggage set, waiting at the exit for the woman.

The woman locks onto her shoulders and looks into your mother's eyes. "This will be such a great opportunity for you to grow closer with your children, Louisa." The woman nods towards you, and you crack a forced smile. "Stay in touch?"

You watch the woman hug your mother. Mallory types in her code and the door hisses in release, as if it were the door to a different dimension. Mallory mumbles a goodbye to the woman, her name Julia or Jules? The woman follows her son out to freedom, and the door locks behind them. Your mother's the only one left to lock inside.

Your mother swings her arms at her sides, collecting herself. "I'll be back." She excuses herself into the other room.

You cross your legs, sitting back in the chair. Their friendship could've only grown so much considering the condition. How could they miss one another? The only thing they had in common was the disease they'd both ridden themselves of.

Mallory carries in two paper plates with tuna sandwiches cut in triangles. She sets one on the other placemat and one in front of you. A wedding ring glistens on Mallory's finger, and you wonder who would want to marry someone like Mallory, until you recognize the ring.

"Why are you wearing my mother's wedding ring?"

Mallory pours you a glass of lemonade, parading the ring over the table like she's proud of what she's done. Some nerve to wear your mother's stolen ring right in front of you, as if you wouldn't be able to tell.

"Your mother gave me this ring." Mallory mumbles, caught in the act.

"What?"

"Your *mother*," she annunciates, "gave me this ring."

You don't appreciate her attitude. Glancing around, there are no other companion care workers close enough to overhear the disrespectful nature behind Mallory's tone. Two women stand together in the kitchen, a loaf of sandwich bread on the countertop. Arms cross, the women chat back and forth. If you speak loud enough, maybe they would overhear you.

“You’re telling me that my mother with Alzheimer’s told you that you could have her wedding ring?” A giggle escapes your lips. “You think my mother is in any state of mind to gift you such an expensive item?”

Mallory’s face bubbles with anger, a smartass comment smeared over her lips, but you speak first.

“I’m pretty sure it’s a bit unethical of you to take such a valuable item from one of your residents, especially in a place of employment.” Your chair scuffs back and you stand, baby bump hovering over a pile of potato chips on your plate.

Not soon enough, your mother approaches the table, a fresh layer of lipstick smudged over her mouth.

“Mom, where’s your wedding ring?” You cross your arms, shifting your weight to one side. No use wasting time.

Your mother’s pale confused complexion wrinkles her crow’s feet. You won.

“In the suite.” Louisa stutters.

Bingo.

“Show me.” You round the corner of the table, following your mother across the community room towards the hall. Mallory follows, a scared energy attacking behind her.

You stand next to the vanity, rubbing circles into your belly. Mallory waits in the doorway, giving space where space is do. It’s time she knew her place, you think. Finally after all the disrespect she’s inflicted upon this family, Mallory’s knocked off her snarky pedestal.

Your mother sifts through the top dresser drawer. She unfolds a knotted pair of green socks, pulling a golden wedding ring from the inside and sets it in your hand.

Breaking eye contact, you focus on the ring. Pinching it out of your mother's palm, you study the sides, studying the little details. You're not sure how to tell if a diamond is real, but the one in your hand is pretty convincing, and familiar. Definitely unique from the one on Mallory's finger, but somehow, you remember this one too. When your mother took it off before a bath, she'd leave it on a cup on her dresser, and you would go into her bedroom and wear it, imagining what getting married would be like. You'd seen your mother and father's wedding photos, studied their smiles, as if it would help you figure out who these people were in a time before you.

Of course, no one at Meadowview would be able to identify your mother's wedding ring. "Ma, this isn't your ring." You present the ring to Mallory, confidence sly in your voice. "Did you swap out my mother's wedding ring, thinking nobody would notice?"

"You're out of your mind." Mallory shakes her head, but her complexion says it all: *guilty.*

You raise your voice. "If you're going to steal, you might want to get your stories straight." You grab hold of Mallory's hand, slipping the golden ring into her palm. You cup one hand and pry the ring off Mallory's finger. "Taking advantage of a woman with Alzheimer's—"

"I used to have Alzheimer's." Your mother pipes in. She approaches you, holding out her hand to accept the ring, the way she would when you stole cookies from the cupboard as a child. She never had to say anything, the simple gesture of an open hand told you that you were in trouble.

You hand her the stolen ring and she passes it back to Mallory. "I'm not just here so you can prove a point and sue this residency."

Your face flushes with warmth. You cup your belly, glancing past your mother directly at Mallory. “What have you been telling her?”

“I have eyes, Jocelyn,” your mother retorts.

Your eyes crease with tears. Whatever unnatural chemicals the residency is pumping into her must be working, but at what cost? Next thing you know, your mother will sprout a third arm, or grow cancer cells. Didn’t everything cause cancer now a days?

You approach your mother, grabbing her by her hands and rubbing your thumbs against her knuckles. She squeezes and presses your hands to her heart.

“The cure really worked, didn’t it?”

Louisa nods.

You cower into your mother’s arms, something you haven’t felt since you were a child. She folds your hair behind your ear and hugs back. You feel Mallory’s gaze from the doorway, twiddling the ring on her finger as if she’s won this, but really, you’re the one who’s winning.

Your mother releases you, gripping your shoulders like she’s giving you a pep talk before a ballet recital. “I’m not going home with you today.”

The news takes you aback. Of course she’s coming with you. There’s hardly anyone left here at Meadowview.

“I’m going to stay with Mallory for a little while, just until I get everything sorted out.”

Mallory continues to fidget with the ring on her finger, smiling in the doorway, and you’re overwhelmed, maybe with anger, maybe it’s the pregnancy brain.

“She’s not your family, mom. She doesn’t care about you.”

"That woman at Marco's funeral wasn't family either." Mallory pipes in. You turn to her, face so hot steam might be blowing out of your ears. Mallory sucks her teeth. "I'm going to go clean up the kitchen."

You sit with your mother in silence, side by side without touching. Your mother is always supposed to pick you. That's the rule. You're supposed to be her favorite girl, her number one. You swear when your baby comes, no one will take priority over her. No one.

LOUISA

No, this might not be my husband.

Peering over the side of the casket, I'd never seen Marco's face so still. He was always so animated, pulling on his ears and sticking out his tongue to make Jocelyn laugh when she was a baby. He'd been an actor in a previous life. He'd told me of all the high school plays he'd been in. *The Music Man* and *Anything Goes.* I'd seen photographs where his eyes lined with stage makeup, always making a weird face for the camera when everyone else was smiling.

Marcos made people laugh. The husband I remembered made people cry.

I'd wanted to grab hold of his hand but didn't fully understand dead bodies. If I squeezed too tight, would his fingers snap clean off, no more blood to spill? I wanted him to grab my hand and kiss it again, the way he would when we sat across from little Jocelyn in a restaurant, her whining testing me for the last time. The hand kisses refueled my patience, a silent way of reminding me I'm a good mom.

"Who are you, the widow or something?"

Spinning around, I look for the instigator. No one is speaking to me. Stepping away from Marcos, I veer the corner, Mallory facing Jocelyn and an old woman with golden rim glasses and a checkered blouse.

Jocelyn lurches between the woman and Mallory. “Who are you to—"

“You’ve got some nerve showing up to this funeral knowing Louisa is here.”

“You’re right.” The woman’s jaw lifts an inch.

“No, Pam. She’s not.” Jocelyn dismisses the comment, her hand grazing the air like pushing the doubt aside. “My father was a good man. You’re the reason he stopped visiting. Does my mother know that?”

“Jocelyn, let it go.” Pam grabs Jocelyn by her shoulders, but Jocelyn resists.

“Your job is to be helpful. You’re not in this family.” Jocelyn nods towards me, and Mallory spins around fast, staring at me with sad eyes. “You’re lucky she won’t remember this.”

Mallory ushers me out of the conversation. Staring back, I watch Marcos’s family approach Jocelyn and the unknown woman, offering words of comfort. Mallory pulls the door shut behind us.

MALLORY

Tonight, I park across the street and watch the green LED lights shine from his curtains. Maybe he’d look out the window and spot me this time, waiting for somebody else. What have I got to lose anymore?

Seven months ago, I stood in his bathroom trying to bring him back to my reality. Four electric blue straps crisscross over my belly button, parting my cleavage, looping around my neck. I bought the strappy lingerie for seven dollars online. Spinning in front of the bathroom mirror, I search for the problematic areas, but the straps magically lift and hold my figure in a

flattering form. The cheap getup wouldn't last any woman more than one night, even with the wimpiest lover.

Wrapping a grey towel around myself, the bright neon straps web across my bare shoulders. Unlatching the door, I peer around. His roommate across the hall yells at a video game. Tiptoeing, I twist the brass knob and enter, David distracted by a video on his phone.

I drop the towel.

Eyes caught on mine, he swipes up on the camera app on his phone, positioning it like a weapon in his grip, but I'm quick to swat it away. The phone flops over the side of the bed, rolling on the carpet.

Leaning over, he wipes the screen with his sleeve, examining for cracks. He asks me why he can't take my photo, but all I can think are horror stories of women losing jobs, remembering girls in high school sending nudes to fake teenage boys on *Kik*, the idea of the creepy government officials that may or may not have access to all our camera rolls. This surprise was meant for just David for this moment. Not to throw in a spank bank with other comparable photos.

He doesn't understand. I'm supposed to trust him. We turn on a movie instead.

In bed, I toss and turn within his grasp. Elbows nudging his ribs, face nuzzling into the same fold of his neck, my toes wiggling outside of the covers. I want him to remember I'm still here. I want him to take my picture. Want him to not give up so fast on showing me he adores me. His breathing heavies and lessens. A borderline snore sends a pang of disappointment through my backbone. I readjust again. *Please don't fall asleep yet.*

I wish David had photographed me from all angles around the apartment. I imagine myself, fingers grazing the full body mirror hanging off the back of the bedroom door. Sitting in

the oversized leather chair, his glasses perched on the tip of my nose, leaning in, ready to share a secret. We both knew I already was, if electric blue wasn't already out of my comfort zone, the straps wrapped around me like duct tape on an old bumper was not my typical look. He knew this was hard for me.

Lines trace my skin the next morning of where the straps were a little too tight. Next time, it wouldn't be a surprise. I throw away the electric blue lingerie, wadded in a plastic bag so it won't be as noticeable in the trash.

A shadow casts across the curtains, a swift movement across the room, and somehow, that's enough for tonight. I pull off the curb.

LOUISA

The Great Gatsby, by F. Scott Fitzgerald. A story of long-lost love, or so Jay Gatsby thought. But then again, who dies in the end, and who lives happily ever after? I set the paperback aside on the table, completed in one sitting. I can't remember the last time I read a book. Maybe that's how I'll live out the rest of my days, sitting in someone else's apartment reading novels.

I'd moved into Mallory's apartment three days ago and seldom wanted to leave. Partially unsure where to go or how to get there, but also unsure where to put my things. Mallory wasn't the type to own saucers, and each time I placed a glass of water, I wondered the consequences of the little rings of condensation on her coffee table or windowsill. A corner shelf housed a collection of books, many appeared to be college textbooks she still held onto. Part of me wanted to ask to use one tier of shelf but wasn't sure where she would put her books. If she sold them or threw them out and I left, what would she fill the space with?

Traffic buzzed outside the beige curtains. I wandered off into the kitchen and look in the fridge. A loaf of Italian bread, Tupperware filled with stir-fry, a package of bologna sealed shut with a price sticker. Meadowview always had a variety, tailored to your taste. Mallory, an excellent cook, baked ziti and lasagna, all dense, wet noodles I tried to force swallow.

Little magnets scattered across the door, one holding up a wedding invitation for a few summers back, another a photograph of a teenage Mallory hugging a shiatzu, sitting on the arm of an old recliner with an old woman sunken to her side.

The door on the other end of the apartment opens. Mallory tosses a newspaper on the ottoman; red ink scribbled across the classifieds. Pushing her fingers through her hair, she sets her purse by the door and offers me a glass of wine.

We sit and talk about jobs. Order-taking in a drive-thru, substitute teaching at a local high school, sweeping up popcorn at a movie theater. Mallory's lips graze the rim of her glass, pulling away before a sip to add another detail about some horrible previous job.

She empties the glass and announces she needs a hot bath. Twirling her thick brown hair into a bun, she walks across the living room, shutting the bathroom door behind her, something she comments on not being used to after living alone for so long. A smile escapes my lips, lifting my glass once again until the showerhead squeaks.

Changing couches, I heave her purse onto the cushion beside me and unzip the top. Unclasping the button on the five-pocket divider, I reach my hand inside like a treasure box, remembering prizes for being good in elementary school classes, a surprise on Fridays.

Packed on the far left, a ladybug broach made of rubies sinks to the bottom. Followed by a tiny wax ballerina figurine missing a foot, something that looks like it had been torn off a

pedestal or an old birthday candle. A newspaper cutout of an obituary for Jane Schneckenburger, age 79, who'd died of Alzheimer's.

The name bounces around in my head. I must've known Jane if we'd lived at Meadowview together, but I couldn't pinpoint her from the crowd. That was our purpose in Meadowview though, to forget and be forgotten.

The second pocket with similar relics, school photographs of three children dated 2014 in the curling bottom corner, a prize from an old crackerjack box, a handwritten sympathy card that read: *Thank you for being there for mom. Best wishes, Susan*.

The fullest pocket by a landslide held my emerald earrings. I tried to wedge them into my closed-up holes. Maybe my body was still trying to heal itself.

Marcos's funeral pamphlet lines the plastic side. Marcos Perez, the man who knew me better than anyone. I can't be angry if he had another woman in his life. I crave to know the moments she shared with him, his last years of life. If he was still spry, coming up with a dance move off the top of his head, parading himself across the grocery aisles. I can't imagine a Marcos who wasn't full of energy. I'm thankful someone loved him until the end, I convince myself.

Also shoved into a pocket was a large turkey feather from a walk we'd taken at Mendon, a tiny *Dora the Explorer* sticker, a pink barrette, a tiny plastic bag with a small, white stones wedged into the corner. I peel the bag open. A stone rolls out, but it is no stone. It's a tooth, so small, it has to be a baby tooth, one the tooth fairy must've slipped from under a pillow. All the items struck familiarity; they must've been mine, but they didn't come from Jocelyn.

There was a difference between my pocket and the others. Past patients who didn't make it long enough to see a cure, other women Mallory must've massaged the feet of, or driven to

Mendon. How many morning routines had there been? How many sick women in Mallory's life? From the pockets here, she'd lost at least four, me remaining the lone companion.

Warm mist accelerates through the bathroom door. Mallory pats her hair dry with a damp towel. She wedges herself onto the couch, the purse between us. I hadn't hidden my discoveries. The objects in the divider belong to me. Water streams from the peaks of her hair onto her t-shirt. She grabs a deck of playing cards from the desk drawer and shuffles.

Dealing seven cards each, we play King in the Corner. A stack of cards balanced on the couch cushion between us, the piles slipping through the cracks.

I remember hiding behind a door with large windows, watching the school bus stop down the street. A little boy with a spiderman backpack getting off the school bus. Jeremy Newvine, I think that was his name. His mother sat on a swinging bench on their porch, pregnant belly swollen under a floral dress. The boy ran up the front steps and embraced his mother's belly in his little arms. She waved to the bus driver.

Mallory stacks one pile onto another, starting a new row with a queen of diamonds.

The stop signs folded back, and the bus puttered forward a few yards and stopped at the end of my driveway. A burst of energy leaped into my heart. I imagined Isabel racing down the gravel driveway into the house, her pigtails bouncing on each side of her head, wearing the same white ruffled shirt I sent her to school in yesterday morning.

Nobody must've told the bus driver.

I set the king of clubs in one corner.

After a few moments, the doors enveloped shut once again, and the bus resumed its route. Dora sang from the living room, waiting for Isabel to sit on the carpet in front of the TV with a handful of graham crackers and repeat back Spanish to the television.

I draw a card and can't play.

Maybe Mallory knew there was another daughter and that's how she ended up with a collection of a past life I'd kept secret from my identity. Marcos had brought the items to Meadowview, a way to hold onto myself while I lost everything. They weren't his to keep.

Maybe nobody knows, besides me. But honestly, I don't know at all.

Mallory goes out. She scrunches all the cards together, creating a jagged pile when I ask her if I can keep my things here for a little while.

"Of course," she knocks the cards down into an even pile and shuffles again. I stand, shoes already on, and heave a coat over my shoulders. She asks where I'm headed to, but I don't tell her. I'm not really sure myself where I'm going, but I have to find answers.

MALLORY

This time, he answers.

"How many women have you fucked this week?" Scooping chocolate ice cream out of the pint, I shove the spoon between my lips. "How many men have you fucked this week?"

"See, this is why I don't answer your calls."

"The cure worked."

David pauses for a moment. "Yeah?"

I flick the arrow button on the remote, hoping to find a sappy title to wallow alone in. Part of me had never thought of what I'd say if he actually answered, the rest of me already knew. Everything was make or break. One wrong word and he could hang up forever.

"Do you think I should go to dealer school?"

"You out of a job?"

“Casinos are kind of like retirement homes.” I gulp the rest of my wine, tongue tracing the rim of the glass. “You watch everyone hit rock bottom, even if they seem like they’re doing real good for a while.”

“I got a cat.”

I roll my eyes, tongue pressed against the back of the spoon. “I hate cats.”

“I know.”

“I love you.”

“Goodbye Mallory”

I hang up first, so he can’t. At least this time he said goodbye.

Despite having the whole bottle to myself, I pour my wine in a glass, and sip like I’m at a dinner party. Staring back in my reflection in the TV, like someone who matters.

LOUISA

A few college boys sit in the back of the public bus, cords to earbuds dangling from their ears. A homeless man sits across the aisle, a scent ripe as rotten cheese radiating off him. I rest in the closest seat I could find to the door, watching out the window at the corner of South and Clinton.

The bus hisses to a stop, and instead of smelling weed wafting off the boy sitting in front me, I gladly take this stop. Behind me, a park decorated with lilac bushes. Children round a wooden playground, a mother pushing a little boy on a swing.

Down the street, a two-story corner house sits on the curb, a wraparound porch with wispy curtains brushed to the sides by the bushes. Twinkling lights line the railings. I imagine

myself watering the garden, tugging on the blue spiral hose and spray the marigolds. But I'm not certain. Maybe my brain is simply painting alternate realities.

With no car in the driveway, I walk up the front steps of the porch and sit on the wicker furniture. I remember sitting on the porch, reading *Good Night Moon* to Isabel on my lap. She'd flip the page and we'd say another goodnight. My brain craves answers, the familiarity of our first home, wanting to explore the house and find memories like a treasure hunt. Some things better left unremembered.

I walk a block down to Elmwood, passing a garage and a pizza place. At the end of the road, I discover cemetery surrounded by a large metal fence. Following the sidewalk, I search for an entrance. Stone pillars guard the gate. A couple walks hand in hand in front of a line of gravestones.

Following the pavement, I meander into the depths of the cemetery. The walk feels routine. My body is guided by an instinct, every corner I turn into a new familiarity. I'd walked this path many times before, collecting red leaves off the path on rainy days and setting them on old graves.

This is where I find her. The name Isabel McIntosh etched into the stone. Birth date May 1st, 2012. Death date March 20th, 2019. I scratch the lichen on the stone, small flakes catching beneath my fingertip. I wipe them on my pantleg.

As daunting as my long-lost daughter's grave is, the grave beside her is all I need to remember her by. A stone divided in halves, Louisa McIntosh on one side, Carl McIntosh on the other. Smooth stone next to both birthdates.

Flashes of broken glass over the shoulder. A flipped SUV. The car seat broken into plastic pieces across the gravel. A DWI, my first husband, Carl, hospitalized. I never visited him,

just left town, and mailed him the divorce papers. Maybe there's a kindness to Alzheimer's. God picks the people who have something to forget.

Maybe he was still at the corner house.

Legs arching, I sit against the stone. My hands find the grass beside me and yank at the blades, wishing I could pull them all up, dig into the dirt. Her chunky baby smile, the way it surprised her when she sneezed. I can't remember what we buried her in. Something tells me it was yellow.

I'm lost in the sunshine, unmotivated to stand, not sure where I'll end up or where I go. Here she is, just where I left her. She is my consistency, the only thing that didn't change while I was sick.

Carefully forcing my weight against the stone, I stand.

JOCELYN

"Where's my mother?"

You're holding a packet of marigold seeds. Although it's too early to plant them, you know your mother will enjoy it when spring rolls around. Who knows, maybe she would invite you over to help plant them with her, the way you did as a child, pulling the bulbs from their plastic containers and ripping apart the springy roots between your fingers.

Mallory guards the doorway to 2E in leggings and an oversized college t-shirt. You imagine her lounging on the couch with your mother, eating lightly buttered popcorn with marshmallows and peanut butter chips. The way you used to.

You press your hand against your belly, hoping to make similar memories someday.

Mallory opens the door wide, as if she notices how winded you were from that one flight of stairs. You waddle through the doorway. It's important, you think, to know where your mother will be living. When putting her in Meadowview, you were allowed to tour the property first.

You considered the sight you might walk into before making the trek up the stairs, as if Mallory would have a map taped to the wall, pushpins pricked into the locations of the patients she'd buried. But Mallory's apartment was exceptionally ordinary. A brown sofa faces a small television at the front of the room. An open bottle of wine, and a nearly empty glass on the side table. A paperback copy of *The Great Gatsby* that you could swear belongs to your mother was splayed open on the couch cushion, cracked spine like breaking a wishbone.

You lower yourself onto the sofa, lifting the book, worn cover curled at the edges. Skimming the pages, you find a small brown and white turkey feather. You tuck the packet of seeds inside the book, too.

Mallory fills a wineglass with tap water from the kitchen sink and brings it to you. "It's water," she verifies. "Just feels a little fancier to drink it out of a wine glass."

You take hold of the stem, swishing it around, and peer inside to ensure it's not contaminated. Who knows what kind of water they have in this neighborhood?

"Your mother's not here." Mallory sits across from you, palming her own glass.

You sip the water. It tastes coppery. "She didn't give you her copy of Gatsby too, did she?"

Mallory grins. The lighting is poor and orange.

"I'm merely storing it for her."

You want to know why your mother didn't ask to keep her things in your house, but of course, you think of the way your mother's things would clash with your things. Like the little ceramic figurines she lined on the piano in the old house that you constantly bumped into and broke. Your shampoo bottle and her shampoo bottle wouldn't both fit on the ledge in the shower. One would always fall off. There never seemed to be enough room for the both of you.

"Do you know my mother no longer has a valid driver's license?" You stroke the stem of the glass to keep your hands busy.

You remember trying to navigate road trips with your mother, holding a map in the passenger's seat before either of you had a cellphone. Your mother could never figure out how to claim an intersection, but the second the light turned green, would stomp the gas pedal into a left turn.

"Or access to a bank account."

Mallory ties her dark hair back into a messy bun. "Do you want French toast?"

You stroke your belly side to side. Before you can answer, Mallory's on her feet, migrating into the kitchen off the living room. She knees to a lower cabinet, pots and pans clashing around, until she removes a long griddle. Unwinding a twist tie off the bread, she lays out four slices on the countertop, and you wonder what else has touched that counter.

You decide to push yourself off the couch and follow her lead. She hands off two brown eggs and you crack them one by one into a small bowl. Without measuring, she sprinkles in a little bit of cinnamon.

"You must like to cook."

"You must not." Mallory chops butter off the stick like slicing a cucumber, letting blocks slap against the hot griddle and melt into a puddle.

"My husband does most of the cooking in our house."

Mallory dips the bread in an egg mixture and slaps into onto the griddle. Hints of cinnamon warm the air. You wonder if her mother taught her how to cook or if you really care enough to ask. It seemed odd to ask anyway. You came here with a purpose and now she's cooking your French toast. It smells like home.

LOUISA

Behind the barn, there was an old shed with real windows, but the windows had always been broken. Brush grew up along the walls and pushed into all sides of the shed, forcing its way in. I'd always wanted to use the shed as a playhouse, to bring my baby doll down and raise her away from everyone else.

I walked down by the shed when I tried to escape my mother. Pushing the carriage through the ruts, we'd settle behind our little house and snack on the cherry tomatoes from the garden, the ones my mother had wrapped wire around, maybe to stop animals from eating them.

The top of the carriage crunched up or pulled down depending on how sunny it was outside or if I wanted to talk to baby. Usually when we went for walks, she slept. Her eyes really blinked, and bristle-like eyelashes poked out of her moving eyelids.

Sitting in the grass, I lifted baby out of the carriage and cradled her. Baby's father was always at work. She had a father because all babies had fathers. Sometimes his name would alternate with the boys I crushed on in my class, but that didn't matter. Daddy works all day, so it was always just me and baby.

Up by the barn, my mother walked down the hill towards me in nylons, but no shoes. She carried a novel in the crook of her arm. Every time I tried to play without my mother, she

appeared with something new for me to see, rather it be cutting chives from her garden or peeking at stray kittens under the barn.

This time, she ushers me back to the house, telling me she doesn't want me playing by the old shed. Sometimes she would see woodchucks running around by the shed, but I wasn't afraid. She made me follow her anyway and pulled the carriage up the hill behind her.

I carried baby to the backyard where my little sister does cartwheels across the lawn in her yellow jumper. Mother pulls the two of us towards her and we sit in the lawn next to a pile of old encyclopedias. With a small handful of buttercups and ironweed, my mother laces one stem into the crease in the book, careful to place the flower on the page and slams the book shut.

I give it a try, picking Queen Anne's Lace from beside the garden and cram it between pages. I shut the book quickly, leaning all my weight into the cover, and peel back the pages to see what I'd done. The green stem oozed against the page, creating a ruffle in the paper. My mother tells me to be patient, to leave it shut for now, and so I do.

I use her method of hiding for all my treasures, pressing dollar bills and bad report cards and hiding them in the bookcase. My collection grew into stamps I stole from my father's desk, doodles from a boy in my reading group, anything I might find useful later on.

When mother boiled down her tomatoes to make sauce, the kitchen was unbearably warm. Leaving baby home, I wandered back down to the shed and yanked on the door. The wood, swollen with moisture, scraped against the floorboards. Afraid mother would hear the scuffs, I pulled harder until the door opened.

A step up, and I was inside. Dry potting soil everywhere, a tin soup can full of murky water. Broken glass sprinkled the floor. This was no safe place for baby. The game changed, and

instead of playing mommy, I was a detective investigating a murder case. The shed turns into a crime scene, a new place to hide secrets.

No Clean Clothes

By Misty Yarnall

Misty Yarnall
Purchase College Senior Project

CAST OF CHARACTERS

EMILY MCINTOSH, early 30s, studying for the BAR exam to become a divorce lawyer. Luke's girlfriend.

LUKAS LONGHORN, early 30s, Johnny's biological father. Manager at a restaraunt.

JOHNNY LONGHORN, 6-year-old boy, son of Luke and Katherine, has selective mutism.

KATHERINE LONGHORN, 30s, mother of Johnny, Luke's wife.

POLICE OFFICER/BARTENDER/OLDER JOHNNY- Actor doubles with Johnny.

SETTINGS

- Emily and Luke's dining room, apartment on the upper west side, present day

- Katherine's second story apartment, Brooklyn, past and present

SCENE 1

Lights up on Emily and Luke's apartment, present day. A dining room with a hightop table and two chairs. A bar in the background with assorted wines and liquors.

Luke and Emily enter, Johnny trailing behind them. Luke carries Johnny's backpack.

LUKE
(enthusiastic)
All right Johnny, welcome home.

Emily goes straight to the bar and pours herself a mixed drink.

EMILY
(Sarcastic)
Yup. Welcome.

LUKE
Can't you at least act a bit excited? For the kid's sake?

EMILY
The kid's already fucked.

LUKE
And could you watch your language? He's right there.

Johnny stands awkwardly in the center of the room.

EMILY
You're right. How could I forget? At least he's a quiet one. My sisters were always so loud. And if you told them to stop talking, they'd start singing. I can still hear Twinkle Twinkle Little Star on repeat in my nightmares.

LUKE
Johnny, you can go play.

Johnny wanders into the bedroom.

LUKE
(To Emily)
We're gonna have to get him some toys or something. And probably buy some food. I don't think I can bring all three of us dinner from the restaurant every night.

EMILY
I have to give up my bacon cheeseburgers too?

LUKE
Not give up, just fewer.

Emily takes a sip.

EMILY
Was he home? When she did it?

LUKE
It sounds like he was at school. She didn't show up to pick him up, and that's how they found her.

EMILY
At least he didn't walk in on it. Imagine the kind of trauma that would cause. Almost as bad as having to move into some stranger's house who expects you to call him daddy.

LUKE
(Dismissive)
That's enough, Em.

Emily sets down her drink and surrenders her hands in the air.

EMILY
Oop, hit a nerve.

LUKE
Listen, I know I should've told you about this earlier.

EMILY
Yeah. Like six years ago would've been good.

LUKE
Would you let me apologize?

Emily sips her drink.

LUKE
I effed up. I get it. And I'm sorry. I don't know what I'm doing either. And I could really use some support right now. Please.

EMILY
Just a couple weeks.
Then I'm back to my nightly bacon cheeseburgers.

LUKE
(hesitant)
Or months...

Emily spits out her drink.

EMILY
Months?

A crash sounds from the other room.

Emily and Luke look at each other, then run off stage.

LUKE (O.S.)
My hooka!

EMILY (O.S.)
Looks like somebody didn't childproof the house.

LUKE (O.S.)
I wasn't exactly anticipating this either.

EMILY (O.S.)
Watch out, Johnny. Let Auntie Emily clean up the mess.

Johnny enters the dining room, looking around on stage for some water.

LUKE (O.S.)
Auntie Emily? That's what you want him to call you?

EMILY (O.S)
Calling you daddy is enough of a stretch.

Johnny sees the drinks on the bar. Yes!

LUKE (O.S.)
I think he should know who we really are.

Johnny climbs up onto the bar.

EMILY (O.S.)
You didn't seem so worried about that 24 hours ago. God Luke, you could've at least called the kid every once in a while.

Johnny grabs the cup and drinks. He realizes immediately this is not water.

LUKE (O.S.)
And said what? What am I supposed to say to a six-year-old over the phone? Hey kid, by the way, I'm your dad. So, how are the ABC's coming?

He spits it back into the cup. It spills over his shirt.

EMILY (O.S)
Luke, where's the kid?

Luke and Emily run into the dining room, finding Johnny up on the bar, alcohol all over his shirt.

EMILY
No no no no no no!

Emily lifts Johnny off the bar. She immediately reaches for her glass.

EMILY
This glass was almost full. The kid's probably already drunk.

LUKE
Here, I'll make you a new drink.

Luke takes Emily's cup.

LIGHTS SHIFT

Johnny wanders off into the audience and watches.

EMILY
What's next? I won't be able to drink in my own apartment?

LUKE
You can drink, you just need to be a little more cautious about where you're leaving your alcohol.

EMILY
I don't want to be cautious. I shouldn't have to tiptoe around my own apartment for Christ sake. We agreed from day one, that first date at the bar, no kids. And you didn't think to tell me you had one in storage somewhere--

LUKE
I'm not trying to raise the kid. I just don't know how long it's gonna take for Katherine to recover and all.

EMILY
Don't tell me you're trying to fight for partial custody. Luke I'm telling you, custody battles can be a bit---

Luke stops her.

EMILY
B-I-T-C-H.

LUKE
Just til Katherine gets back on her feet. I swear.

Luke hands Emily her newly made drink.

Emily eyes the drink, then Luke.

EMILY
Okay.

She snatches the drink.

LUKE
Okay?

EMILY
(Redundant)
Okay.

LUKE

Thank you thank you thank you.

Luke picks up his own drink and sips. He leans against the bar for a few seconds.

EMILY

So, where's the kid?

Luke almost spits out his drink. He scans the room.

LUKE

Johnny!

LIGHTS SHIFT

Johnny returns to the stage.

LIGHTS DIM.

SCENE 2

The next week, Emily and Luke in the dining room. There is another chair at the table that doesn't match the set. An overflowing laundry basket sits on the table.

Emily sits on the floor with a pile of change sprawled in front of her. She's sifting through it.

Luke enters with a large paper grocery bag in his hands. He's wearing a dirty restaraunt manager uniform.

LUKE

(Overly excited)

Em! Em, check out what I picked up on my way home from work.

Luke sets the bag on the bar. Emily stands and follows him.

EMILY
(Excited)
Please be a bacon cheeseburger, please be a bacon cheeseburger.

Luke removes an expensive, interactive child's toy from the bag.

Emily's excitement deflates.

LUKE
Isn't it awesome?

EMILY
It's a toy.

LUKE
Well, yeah. It's for Johnny.
I figured if he had some toys, it might make him feel a little more at home.
Temporarily at home.

Emily walks back to her pile of coins. Luke is preoccupied with the toy.

EMILY
I can't find any quarters.
I always keep all my loose change on my dresser, and look.

Emily rubs her hands through the coins.

EMILY
No quarters.

Beat.

EMILY
You don't get it, do you?

LUKE
Huh?

EMILY
If you ever did the laundry, you would realize that we need quarters to do laundry. And you know where all those quarters went?

Emily walks upstage, pointing down to the heat vent.

LUKE
The heat vent?

EMILY
Your son rolled all my quarters down the vent.

LUKE
No way.

Luke looks down the heat vent. He smirks.

LUKE
Huh. Well would you look at that.

EMILY
You think this is funny? You can take off the grate and fish them out yourself.

LUKE
I can run to the bank this afternoon and get more quarters.

Emily grabs the overflowing laundry basket from off the table.

EMILY
Great, and you can wash all your clothes, too.

Emily shoves the basket into Luke's chest. She looks him up and down.

EMILY
Including the ones your wearing.

LUKE
Em. Emily. C'mon. What's got you pissed?

EMILY
Ever since he started staying here, he's gotten into all my stuff. All of it. He bent up the pages in my BAR prep book, even ripped one.

Luke sets the laundry basket back on the table. Emily is pacing.

EMILY
He used my toothpaste last night, and there's dry toothpaste everywhere in the bathroom. On the tub. All over the sink. On my hairbrush, for Christ sake.

LUKE
Better than shit. Just be grateful he's out of diapers.

EMILY
He tried to wear my blue nighty to school this morning.

LUKE
He likes you.

EMILY
I'm serious, Luke. I wanted to use the time while Johnny's at school to get caught up on studying, and now I'm here digging through couch cushions and junk drawers for spare change just to do the goddamn laundry.

LUKE
Emily, the language--

EMILY
Fuck shit damn the kid's not even home.

LUKE
Okay, okay. You're right. I'm sorry.
Here, I will do the laundry. And I'll make dinner. Johnny and I can play with his new toy and you can focus on studying. Okay?

EMILY
And you'll pick him up from school at 3:30?

LUKE
Sure.

Emily grabs the toy, glancing at the box.

EMILY
Is that toy really for Johnny, or for you?

LUKE
I thought you had some studying to do. Get to it.

Luke shoos Emily away. She rolls her eyes and walks into the other room.

LIGHTS DIM.

SCENE 3

That night. Lights up on the dining room. Emily is tidying up after dinner. To-go containers are all over the table. The new toy is out of the box. Toy cars litter the floor. Emily steps on one. She jumps and screeches. There's a glass of wine on the bar.

EMILY

Johnny!

Johnny enters, wearing her blue nighty.

EMILY

Will you please pick up all this shi-- I mean, your toys.

(Takes a breath)

Will you please pick up your toys?

Emily continues to clean. Johnny picks up the little toy car. He begins to play with the toy car around the bar. Emily nearly steps on Johnny.

EMILY

The bar is not a place to play.

Emily sighs.

EMILY

What if we compromise? Do you know what the word compromise means?

Emily moves the dining room chairs, creating a split in the room. The bar on one side, Johnny's toys on the other.

Emily references the bar.

EMILY

This side, no playing.

Emily hops to the other side of the chair fence.

EMILY

This side, play.

Emily gets down on the ground, pretending to play with one of the little cars.

EMILY
See? Play over here. Not there. Here. Okay?

Luke enters, in casual clothes.

LUKE
Whatcha doin'?

Emily quickly stands up, brushing herself off.

EMILY
Cleaning.

LUKE
What is all this?

EMILY
We have created a divide in the dining room.

LUKE
Excuse me?

Emily points to the side with the bar.

EMILY
Luke, please meet me on the adult side.

LUKE
What?

EMILY
(through her teeth)
By the bar, Lukas. Meet me by the bar.

Emily and Luke scoot over to the other side of the chair divide.

Johnny plays with cars on his side.

EMILY
My nice wine glasses are over here. Kids break things. It's not safe for him to play around the bar. Now we just have to keep his side childproofed. Think you can manage that, skipper?

LUKE
I told you, I would take care of the cleaning.

EMILY
And yet look at my apartment.

LUKE
It's takeout, you just have to throw everyting away.

EMILY
Then do it.

LUKE
Okay, I will. Go back to your little game then.

EMILY
What? Don't be silly.

LUKE
I bet playing with him on his side is going to make him feel even more welcome here.

EMILY
I don't even know how to play with him.

LUKE
You've never played with toy cars?

EMILY
I grew up with three younger sisters.

LUKE
So? You were still a kid once.

EMILY
Barely.
Besides, the kid won't even say a word to me.

LUKE
When I picked him up today, his teacher mentioned that he hasn't been talking in school either. I'm glad you're interacting with him. This is all a big change for the kid.

EMILY
A temporary change.

Luke and Emily both look over to Johnny playing by himself.

LUKE
You cannot tell me that toy I bought isn't the coolest thing ever.

EMILY
Then you go play with him.

LUKE
Come with me.

EMILY
That's all you, daddy. I've got studying to do.

Emily grabs her glass of wine and walks into the bedroom.

Luke continues to tidy up the kitchen, watching Johnny play from a far.

Before finishing the cleaning, Luke makes his way to Johnny's side of the room. He bends down.

LUKE
Hey Johnny. Whatcha playin with?

Johnny looks up at him, then continues to play with his cars.

Luke isn't sure what to do.

He decides to sit on the floor beside Johnny and starts to push one of the cars around.

Luke and Johnny play in silence for several moments. They gradually grow more comfortable with one another.

Smiling.

Giggling.

It's working.

Emily peeks out of the bedroom, noticing the mess that still isn't cleaned up.

Her focus shifts to watching Luke and Johnny play. She retreats back into the bedroom.

LIGHTS DIM.

SCENE 4

A week later, Emily sits at the bar with her laptop, studying. The space is messier than before.

There is a knock at the door.

EMILY
(Mumbles)
Hold your horses. I'm comin. I'm comin.

Emily steps on a toy car. She curses, realizes she just cursed, and curses again.

The knocking continues.

KATHERINE stands on the other side of the door.

EMILY
Can I help you?

KATHERINE
I'm looking for Johnny.

EMILY
Are you from CPS?

KATHERINE
I'm Katherine.

Beat

EMILY
Luke's not here.

KATHERINE
I'm not here for Luke. I'm here to see my son.

EMILY
I really don't think that's a good idea. How did you even know where to find us?

KATHERINE
Old friends.

Emily's caught off guard.

EMILY
Listen, Luke will be home later. I'll tell him you stopped by and have him give you a call or something.

KATHERINE
Is Johnny here or not?

EMILY
This is not a good idea--

KATHERINE
And who are you to say if that's a good idea or not?

Emily's taken aback.

EMILY
(Calm, aware of Johnny in the house)
You should go.

Emily begins to shut the door on Katherine. Katherine sticks her foot in the door.

KATHERINE
Emily wait.
Please.
He's all I've got left. I just want to make sure he's okay. And I need him to know I'm okay.

Emily looks back toward the bedroom, contemplating for a moment. She opens the door.

Katherine comes inside. She shoves her hands in her pockets.

KATHERINE
Nice place.

EMILY
Thanks.

KATHERINE
How long have you lived here?

EMILY
About six years.

KATHERINE
That adds up.

EMILY
Does it?

KATHERINE
Luke left about six years ago. Johnny was only about a month old.

EMILY
It was only one month?

KATHERINE
Well yeah, how old did you think Johnny was?

EMILY
I guess I didn't really think about it...

KATHERINE
...Well?
Johnny?

EMILY
Yeah, of course.

Emily turns and walks away, but stops.

EMILY
How long were you and Luke dating?

KATHERINE
Emily, Luke and I are married.

EMILY

Oh, I...
I'll go get Johnny.

Katherine catches sight of Emily's studybook.

KATHERINE

The BAR? You a lawyer or something?

EMILY

Trying to be.

Katherine stiffens up. She remains on guard for the rest of the scene.

Emily peeks into the other room.

EMILY

(Gentle)

Johnny.

Johnny enters, wearing Emily's blue nighty. Katherine's face falls when she sees what he's wearing. Johnny catches sight of his mother and is quick to embrace her. Katherine kneels down to his level.

KATHERINE

Oh honey.

(Deflating)

What are you wearing?

Katherine looks to Emily for answers. Emily shrugs.

EMILY

He likes it.

Johnny stares at his mother.

EMILY

He hasn't said a word since he got here.

KATHERINE
(To Emily)
Yeah, that happens.
(To Johnny)
Listen to me, okay? I'm not picking you up yet. You get to spend a little more time with your dad. Won't that be fun?
Momma loves you so much, okay? I'll be back soon.

Katherine gives Johnny another hug. She holds back tears.

KATHERINE
Go play now, okay?

Johnny holds onto his mother for a few extra seconds, then goes to his cars in the floor.

Katherine stands.

KATHERINE
Thank you.

She walks towards the door.

KATHERINE
Don't use this against me in court.

Katherine leaves.

Johnny's upset.Emily sits at the bar, resuming her studying. She can't help but to watch Johnny.

Emily moves to the floor with Johnny. She plays with the cars.

EMILY
I never had cool cars like these when I was little.

Beat.
When you go back to live with your mom, you can take the cars with you, if you want to.

Beat.
You know, I grew up with three sisters, and we used to have these Barbie dolls with these tiny little shoes.

And every time we went from one parent's house to the other, we would dress up our dolls to take with us, and we could never keep track of their shoes.
And then our parents would fight about how my mom would buy us new Barbies and then we'd take them to my dad's house and lose them there.
So finally she decided whenever we went to dad's, she wouldn't let us take anything inside except our backpacks and homework. And that seemed so unfair. But when she came to pick us up, all the Barbies would be buckled into our seats in the car, waiting for us.

Beat

I don't think your dad gets it.

Emily continues to play with the cars.

LIGHTS DIM.

SCENE 5

Later that night.

Emily sits on the floor, playing with the cars alone. An empty bottle of wine is beside her. She's been crying.

Luke enters in his uniform. He slowly settles in, kicking off his shoes and his coat, setting down the bag on the bar.

LUKE
Hey, whatcha doin on the floor? Johnny's gotta be asleep by now.

EMILY
(mumbling)
Where's the ring?

LUKE
(distracted)
What happened?

EMILY
(Clearer this time)
Where's the ring?

Luke is caught off guard, not sure if he heard her right.

EMILY
You moved in with me because you walked out on your wife. You used me.
No wonder you were so persistent on never wanting to get married. Meeting an aspiring divorce lawyer in a bar was just like winning the fuckin' lottery for you, wasn't it?

LUKE
Emily, I can explain.

EMILY
Clearly, you can't. Because you've had plenty of time to explain.

LUKE
I'm sorry.

EMILY
I'm leaving.

LUKE
You're what?

EMILY
I only waited so Johnny wouldn't be left by himself.

LUKE
Emily, please, no. I'll go. Okay? Johnny and I can find somewhere else to stay.

EMILY
And move the kid again? God Luke, don't you get it? This whole mess is already hard enough on him.

LUKE
Then what do you want me to do, Em? Undo the past? I can't fix this.

EMILY
Do you regret it?

Luke stops in his tracks.

Beat.

Beat.

Emily smirks in frustration.

EMILY
You need to figure this out, Luke. Take care of your family.

Emily grabs her coat and purse and leaves, shutting the door quietly behind her.

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 6

Flashback, six years earlier.

Katherine's livingroom. Second floor apartment in a house. Katherine isn't wearing pants. She squats on the ground, a cooking pot in front of her catching rain water. We can hear the drips. There is dirty laundry everywhere. A couch faces away from the audience. This is supposed to feel closed-off.

Luke enters, still wearing the same restaurant manager uniform, but now soaking wet. He pushes in a stroller with Baby Johnny sitting inside, covered by thick blankets. The baby is crying.

LUKE
(angry)
Katherine.

KATHERINE
There's a leak in the ceiling.

LUKE
Did you forget anything today?

Katherine looks down at her legs.

KATHERINE
Would you look at that. How silly of me.

Katherine plucks a pair of pants from the laundry dispersed throughout the living room.

LUKE
Anything else?

KATHERINE
I think I moved the...

LUKE
Johnny, Katherine.
What about Johnny?

KATHERINE
He's right there.

LUKE
He was outside. In the rain.

KATHERINE
Oh.Yes.
That was intentional.

LUKE
Intentional?
Leaving our newborn outside in the cold rain?

KATHERINE
He wouldn't stop crying.
He loves to watch the rain.
Fresh air calms him down.
I do this often.

LUKE
You leave our son out in the cold, unsupervised, often?

KATHERINE
Usually it's not raining. When it's not raining, I sit outside with him.

LUKE
But because it is raining, you decided to stay inside?

KATHERINE
The roof is leaking.

LUKE
He could've gotten hurt.

The crying stops.

KATHERINE
The flooring under the carpet is going to rot. And then the water will drip to the first floor tennants. We'll loose our security deposit. I'll need to tear up the carpet and fix it.

Luke grabs Katherine by the shoulders.

LUKE
Katherine. You're not listening.

KATHERINE
I hear you.
Are you listening to me?

LUKE
I don't give a damn about the carpet.

KATHERINE
Well maybe if you paid the security deposit, you would care.

LUKE
You can't leave the baby outside alone. You just can't.

KATHERINE
If you were here more, you would've found him sooner.

LUKE
I'm taking Johnny to my mom's house tonight.

KATHERINE
No. You're not.

LUKE
I can't trust you with him anymore. You need to find help.

KATHERINE
Why aren't you helping me?

LUKE
My mom's home all the time anway. She can watch him while I'm at work.

KATHERINE
What about the leak?

Katherine splashes the water from the bucket on Luke.

Luke scoots the stroller behind him, protecting the baby.

LUKE
We're leaving.

KATHERINE
How are you going to feed him?
He wakes up every three hours to eat, Luke.
Did you know that?

Luke pulls Katherine to the couch. He holds her hand. The audience is visually omitted from the conversation, but can hear everything.

LUKE
Have you spoken with your doctor?

KATHERINE
Johnny's healthy as a horse.

LUKE
I'm not asking about Johnny. I'm asking about you.

KATHERINE
You don't care about me.
Look at this mess. You don't even care.

LUKE
Then come with me.

KATHERINE
While this slow drip destroys the apartment? Absolutely not.

Katherine stands.

KATHERINE
I have to start patching the hole.

LUKE
It's still raining. Patching the hole now isn't going to fix it.
Please come with me.

KATHERINE

All Johnny's things are here.
His blankets.
His clothes.
His/ diapers.

LUKE

I'll pack a bag/

Luke begins to walk around the room, collecting items and piling them, as if he is going to pack them.

KATHERINE

His crib.
The rocking chair.
His Pack 'n Play.

LUKE

Where's the diaper bag?

KATHERINE

The diaper bag?

LUKE

Yeah, to put his things in.

KATHERINE

Do you even know what color the diaper bag is?

LUKE

What?

KATHERINE

Do you know
what color
the diaper bag is?

LUKE

No.

KATHERINE

I don't own a diaper bag.

LUKE

Of course you do. Didn't my mom give you one at the shower?

KATHERINE
We don’t have a diaper bag, Luke.

LUKE
Why don’t I get you one? Let’s stop at the store. We can grab one.

KATHERINE
I don’t want one.
I don’t need one.

Luke pulls Katherine back down to the couch, the audience closed off again.

LUKE
Katherine. Please.
It’s perfectly normal for moms to need a break every now and then. I can help.

Johnny begins to cry.

Katherine stands.

Luke stops her.

LUKE
No, I got this. See? Let me take care of it.

KATHERINE
You can’t. He’s hungry. He needs to be fed.

LUKE
I can bring him to you.

KATHERINE
No, just leave him for a minute. I need a minute.

LUKE
You’re just going to let him cry?

KATHEIRNE
He’s fine. Nothing’s wrong with him.

LUKE
Let me at least change his clothes. He’s got to be freezing.

KATHERINE
No. He’s just going to spit up again and we’ll have to change him again.

LUKE
We can't leave him in wet clothes.

KATHERINE
We?

Luke stands.

KATHERINE
Don't touch him.
Don't.

Luke proceeds to walk towards Johnny.

KATHEIRNE
(yelling)
Just listen to me!

Luke stops.

Now he's listening.

KATHERINE
There are no clean clothes.

Beat
The washer and dryer are in the basement.
I can't leave Johnny alone in the apartment and I can't lug him down to the basement every time I need to grab the laundry, and I can't carry both the laundry basket and the baby back up to the top floor.

LUKE
Do you want me to go get the laundry from the basement?

KATHERINE
No. I'll do it.
I never get to get out of the apartment anymore.
You get to leave every day.

Katherine walks towards the door.

LUKE
Katherine, shouldn't you feed him first?

KATHERINE
He just ate a few minutes ago. He's fine.

LUKE
Just like you only left him outside for a few minutes?

There's a knock at the door.

Luke answers it.

A Police Officer stands in the doorway.

POLICE OFFICER
Good afternoon. I'm Officer John.
I'm responding to a call about a neglected infant.

KATHERINE
Fine, I'll feed the kid.

Katherine stands and takes Johnny out of the stroller. She exits.

LUKE
I'm so sorry for the trouble, Officer. The baby is just hungry. It's time for his feeding.

POLICE OFFICER
The call mentioned the baby was left outside unattended in the rain.

KATHERINE (O.S.)
It was just a few minutes!

LUKE
Again, so sorry officer. As you can see, Johnny is inside, accompanied by both his parents. Katherine just ran inside to grab his pacifier and left the baby outside.

POLICE OFFICER
Make sure it doesn't happen again. The downstairs tennants were worried.

LUKE
Of course, officer. Thank you.

Luke shuts the door behind the officer.

Katherine enters without the baby.

There is still crying.

LUKE
I thought you were going to feed him.

KATHERINE
I thought you were going down to get the laundry from the basement.

LUKE
Do you want me to go get the laundry, or not?

KATHERINE
No. Just forget it.
I'm going to bed.

LUKE
When was the last time you fed him?

KATHERINE
Earlier today.

LUKE
How much earlier?

KATHERINE
This morning.

LUKE
What time?

KATHERINE
This morning.

LUKE
Then could you please at least feed him before you go to bed?

KATHERINE
I'll do it later.

LUKE
He's hungry. You can't just not feed him.

Katherine flashes her breasts at Luke, facing away from the audience.

Luke makes a disgusted face. He immedaitely regrets it.

LUKE

They hurt?

Katherine nods, crying.

LUKE

Bad?

Katherine nods again.

LUKE

Don't they make some sort of ointment or something for that?
I can run to the store and grab some for you, okay?
Do you want me to take Johnny with me?

Katherine shakes her head.

He stands up and leaves. The crying ceases.

Once out of the apartment, he pulls out his phone and makes a call.

LUKE

Hey, mom.
To be honest, no. Everything's not okay.
I just--
Katherine's sick and I'm scared, and I don't know how to help her. I just--
I know that.

LIGHTS FADE.

LUKE

A cop just came to the house.
Maybe I should've just let him take Johnny from us.
We don't seem to be doing anything right.
I don't seem to be doing anything right.
Katherine won't listen to me.
I don't know what to do anymore, mom.

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 7

Present day. A spotlight shows Emily sitting in a bar, tipsy. BARTENDER stands behind the bar, drying a glass.

Emily finishes her drink and slides it across the bar. It slides off the side of the bar and shatters.

Emily smiles, embarassed.

EMILY

Refill?

Bartender flings the towel over his shoulder and pours Emily another drink.

EMILY

Do you guys have food here? I'm dying for a bacon cheeseburger.

BARTENDER

Kitchen closed at ten.

EMILY

Well fuck shit damn.

She slams her cup on the bar.

EMILY

Sorry, I'm not allowed to swear in my apartment anymore.

BARTENDER

Says who?

EMILY

My lying, married, son-of-a-bitch boyfriend.

Emily finishes her glass and this time gently places it in front of Bartender.

EMILY

Refill.

BARTENDER

Where does your lying, cheating, son-of-a-bitch boyfriend think you are right now?

EMILY

Doesn't matter.
We both have our secrets.

BARTENDER

C'mon Emily. I'll get you a lyft.

EMILY

I'm not ready to go home. The kid is there.

BARTENDER

Ah yes, wouldn't want a child to see you all drunk like this.

EMILY

Oh please. It's my apartment. I can walk around drunk all the time if I want to.

BARTENDER

But you can't swear?

EMILY

I guess it's some sort of compromise.

Beat.

Emily finishes her drink. She wipes her mouth dramatically.

Bartender offers her another.

Emily contemplates this one. She takes it.

EMILY

It's not even my kid. Why should I care?
My mom and her boyfriends used to drink in front of us all the time. And I turned out just fine, didn't I?

Bartender gives Emily a skeptical look. She shies away.

EMILY

Don't look at me like that.

BARTENDER

My mother was an alcoholic. That's how I ended up on this side of the bar.

EMILY

I'm not an alcoholic.

BARTENDER

You sure?

Bartender offers her another drink. She accepts it without hesitation.

EMILY

I just need to get Johnny back home to Katherine. And that's what she wants anyway, I think. It should be simple, minus the whole CPS thing.

BARTENDER

Then why don't you just talk to Katherine?

EMILY

Because that's not my job. I'm not his parent. Why am I always the messenger? God, did you know I've had a cellphone since I was seven years old?

BARTENDER

I don't see how I could've possibly known that.

EMILY

(disregarding the comment)

My mom would text me what time she was picking us up, and I would have to tell my dad. And then my dad would have some shit to say back to my mom. And if one of my sisters had a slumber party or something to go to, I would have to be the one to make sure dad didn't forget to take her or that she packed socks to go ice skating or whatever the fuck it was that time.

BARTENDER

Does this kid have any siblings watching out for him?

EMILY

God, if he does, Luke has a lot more explaining to do.

Emily finishes her drink.

BARTENDER

I'm just saying, doesn't sound like he has anyone advocating for him in this mess.

Bartender offers her another.

EMILY
(Reluctant.)
No.

Bartender smiles. He continues to dry glasses.

EMILY
I bet I could figure out where Katherine lives.

Emily pulls out her phone.

BARTENDER
I wouldn't recomend dropping the kid on her doorstep.

EMILY
No no no, of course not.
Just a quick visit, you know? Stop by and say hey, see how her progress is going, how soon she might be able to take Johnny back.

BARTENDER
What if she's not ready?

EMILY
(Disregarding the question)
I found it!

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 8

The next morning in the dining room.

Luke is dressed in work clothes again. They're clearly smeared with dried-on food. He checks the time on his phone, rushing throughout the scene.

LUKE
Keys. Where are my keys?
Johnny, c'mon. I'm already late for work.

Johnny enters, wearing the blue nightgown.

LUKE
Stop messing around. Change your clothes.

Johnny sits on the floor, on the verge of a meltdown.

LUKE
You're going to have to be a big boy. Auntie Emily isn't here.

Johnny shuts Luke out, slouched over, hiding in his arms.

LUKE
Johnny, what did I say?

Johnny is unresponsive.

LUKE
Listen to me, I'm your father.

Luke hovers over Johnny, arms crossed. Johnny won't look up.

LUKE
Why are you crying?

Luke tugs on Johnny's arm, trying to get him off the floor.

LUKE
Hey. I need you to talk to me, okay? What's wrong?

Johnny pulls his arm back, burying his face into himself.

LUKE
You want Auntie Emily? Is that it? Me too. But sometimes we have to fend for ourselves.

Johnny runs back into the bedroom.

Luke scrounges around for his coat and shoes and phone. He reaches in his coat pockets.

LUKE
Keys keys keys.

Luke looks around the bar for the keys. He starts sifting through the mess on the table.

LUKE
I bet when Auntie Emily left, she took the car. That little-- stinkerbug.

Luke pulls out his phone and makes a call.

LUKE
C'mon Em, this isn't funny.

Luke tosses his phone in frustration.

He sits on the floor where Johnny was, head resting in his hands, unsure what to do.

Luke grabs his phone and makes another call.

LUKE
Hey, Mike.
Yeah, I'm not going to make it into work today.
Em took the car and I have to find a way to get my kid to school.
Yes, I have a kid. It's a long story, okay?
Sorry.

Luke hangs up.

After a few moments, Johnny returns, dragging a laundry hamper with dirty clothes on stage.

LUKE
Are all your clothes dirty?

Luke sighs

LUKE
Mine too. Think you can wear them anyway?

Luke starts sifting through the basket, looking for the least soiled clothing.

LUKE
You're kind of a messy kid, aren't you?

Luke smells the shirt Johnny wore in Scene 1. It reeks of alcohol.

LUKE
They're gonna call CPS on me if I send you to school smelling like vodka.

Beat

LUKE
What if we both stay home today and get this laundry done for Auntie Emily? Think we could do that?

Luke grabs his phone and makes another call.

LUKE
Hi, this is Lukas Longhorn. I'm calling to let you know Johnny Longhorn will not be in school today.
Is he sick?
Yes. Yes he is sick.
(whisper to Johnny)
Cough into the phone.

Johnny fake coughs into the phone.

LUKE
Hear that?
Yup.
He'll be back tomorrow. Probably.
Thank you.
Bye.

Luke hangs up his phone.

Luke and Johnny look at one another in silence. This lasts for several moments.

LUKE
Why don't we start by picking up some of your toys?

Johnny gets down on the floor and starts organizing his cars. He finds KEYS in his pile of toys and hands them to Luke.

Luke is annoyed.

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 9

Same day, Katherine's apartment, neat and tidy. Katherine sits on the couch, which is now turned towards the audience, on her phone.

There's a knock at the door. She answers it. Emily is on the other side, drenched, wearing a rain coat.

KATHERINE

Emily?

EMILY

It would be awfully unfair for you to not let me in.

Katherine opens the door.

Emily enters, rubbing her hands together for warmth.

The ceiling begins to leak.

KATHERINE

Sheesh, the rain must be bad. Hold on, let me grab a bucket.

Katherine exits stage right. Emily stands under the drip, cupping her hands, trying to catch the water.

Katherine returns with a small cooking pot.

KATHERINE

What are you doing?

EMILY

Trying to stop the rain.

KATHERINE

That's not a very effective way of doing that.

Emily shrugs.

EMILY

I'm already wet.

Katherine puts the bucket under the leak.

EMILY

Nice place.

KATHERINE

(annoyed)

Thanks.

EMILY

You and Luke lived here together?

KATHERINE

I don't have to answer any of your questions, Miss Lawyer.

EMILY

I'm not out to get you.

Another leak springs on the opposite side of the stage.

KATHERINE

Goddamnit. Hold on.

Katherine exits.

Emily attempts to cup the dripping water again.

Katherine enters with another cooking pot.

EMILY

Do you still love him?

KATHERINE

I plead the fifth.

EMILY

No, really.
Do you?

KATHERINE

Someday, I'll find Johnny a father, one who loves us both. One he can depend on.

Katherine puts the pot underneith the second leak.

EMILY
Johnny's not going to forget about Luke. This is different than when he was a baby.

The first cooking pot begins to overflow with water.

KATHERINE
You've got to be kidding me.

Katherine dumps the water from the first cooking pot into the second on the other side of the room. In the meantime, Emily catches the drips in her hands.

KATHERINE
I don't need your help.

EMILY
I'm not trying to steal your family.
I want you to take Johnny back.

KATHERINE
Johnny and I got along just fine without Luke, or you. I don't need him asking me every five seconds for the rest of his life when daddy's going to come back. Because I know Luke. This is temporary.

EMILY
I'm sorry.

KATHERINE
Cut the crap.

EMILY
I don't know what Luke wants anymore.

KATHERINE
It doesn't matter what Luke wants. It matters what's best for Johnny, and what's best for Johnny is a consistent parent in his life.

EMILY
You've got a lot of nerve saying that.

KATHERINE
If you want the kid so bad, why don't you just have one yourself?

Beat.

Emily wipes the water off on her pants.

Katherine continues dumping water from pot to pot.

EMILY
You want Johnny back, he's yours.
But don't start crying that you're some victim when you refuse to let Luke be a parent to his kid.

Emily sees herself out.

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 10

That night. The dining room is trashed. Toys are everywhere. There was a long day of wild play in this space.

Luke sits at the table, drinking. He looks exhausted.

Emily enters.

Luke turns around, sees her, stands, and hugs her for several moments.

LUKE
Fuck, Emily.

EMILY
I thought we weren't allowed to say fuck anymore.

Luke gestures to the play side of the dining room.

LUKE
Only on that side of the room.
Drink?

Emily shakes her head.

Surprised, Luke puts his glass away behind the bar. They take down the chair divide and pull the chairs to the table, each taking a seat. Emily takes off her coat.

Luke pulls out a ring and hands it to Emily. Emily is caught off guard.

EMILY

Woah, what's this?

LUKE

You asked to see it.

EMILY

Oh. Right.

LUKE

We spent the whole morning cleaning. All the laundry is done, just needs to be folded. But I could only keep Johnny occupied for so long.

EMILY

It's okay.

LUKE

I thought about what you said. And yes, I do regret leaving. But I don't regret us for one second.

EMILY

Why didn't you ever tell me?

LUKE

It didn't seem like something to bring up on a first date. And after that, it felt too late.

Johnny enters, wearing the blue nightgown.

LUKE

Hey buddy, what's going on?

Johnny passes Luke and goes straight to Emily, leaning against her. She lifts him onto her lap.

Emily, adjusting, starts to rub his back.

EMILY

Can’t sleep?

JOHNNY

Will you sing me a lullaby?

Emily and Luke look at one another. This is the first Johnny has spoken to them.

EMILY

I don’t think I know any, buddy.

LUKE

Sure you do.

Luke begins to sing Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.

Emily jumps in.

Somehow, the audience should be engaged, joining in to the song.

They finish the verse, together.

It takes a whole audience to raise a child.

LIGHTS DIM.

EMILY

Goodnight, Johnny.

SCENE 11

This is a dream. Dream-like music might play. The lighting should be dreamy and different.

The movements in this scene are overly dramatized, sit-com like.

Emily sits at the bar, typing on her laptop. We hear an error sound.

AUTOMATED VOICE

Sorry, can’t do that.

She continues to type. Another error sound.

AUTOMATED VOICE
Sorry, can't do that either.

She tries typing again. There's another error sound.

AUTOMATED VOICE
Sorry, you're never going to pass the BAR.

Emily rolls her eyes and shuts her laptop. She grabs her drink and stands up. She is very visibly pregnant. Looking down at her belly, her reaction is just as surprised as we are.

Luke enters. He wears a suit.

LUKE
Better not drink that, honey.

EMILY
Luke? I'm... pregnant?

LUKE
Well of course you are. It was only a matter of time.

EMILY
But... I thought we agreed. No kids.

LUKE
You're right. We did.
That's why I'm leaving.
Oh, Johnny!

Johnny tries to drag his suitcase onto the stage. Luke goes over and helps him.

LUKE
Woah, careful there, son.

EMILY
What do you mean you're leaving?

LUKE
Johnny is my son. It's about time I became a father to him.

A cheerful doorbell sounds.

LUKE
I'll get it.

Luke opens the door. Katherine is on the other side, wearing a pretty dress.

JOHNNY
Mommy!

Johnny runs to Katherine and hugs her.

KATHERINE
(To Luke)
Hi honey. Ready to go?

EMILY
Wait, you're going with her?

LUKE
Of course. We're a family. You wouldn't want to break up a family, now would you?

Luke walks up to Katherine and kisses her passionately. It lasts an excessively long time.

Meanwhile Johnny walks up to Emily and puts his hand on her belly.

JOHNNY
Why don't you want your baby, Auntie Emily?

LUKE
She's not really your aunt.

Emily yells. She's in pain, as if having a contraction.

EMILY
Owe. Luke. I... I think the baby's coming.

Emily eases herself onto the ground. Her back is to the audience, facing Katherine and Luke. She's in labor.

KATHERINE

Yikes.
You know, that hurts.
Like a ton.

LUKE

Good luck, Em.

Luke, Katherine, and Johnny exit.

Emily lays on the ground, legs spread away from the audience. She imitates giving birth.

EMILY
(Yelling)

Luke!
You can't leave me like this!
Lukas!
Owe fuck!

A really ugly looking creature comes out of Emily's pregnant belly.

It makes a scary crying sound.

She tries to cradle it.

EMILY

It's okay little one. It's okay. Mommy's here. Everything's fine.

The creature screams louder.

EMILY
(singing)

Twinkle Twinkle Little Star

SHRILL CHILDRENS VOICES

Twinkle Twinkle Little Star
How I wonder what you are

AUTOMATED VOICE

You'll never pass the BAR now.

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 12

The dining room, continuous.

Emily is asleep at the bar with her book and laptop in front of her.

Luke enters, carrying a laundry basket of clean clothes.

Emily abruptly wakes up.

LUKE

Oh, sorry. I didn't realize you were asleep.

EMILY

It's fine, I just had a really weird dream.

Luke sits on the floor with the laundry basket in front of him. He poorly folds the laundry.

EMILY

What are you doing?

LUKE

Folding the laundry.

EMILY

That's not how you fold laundry.

LUKE

I got this. Just, keep studying.

EMILY

I could use a break anyway.

Emily sits beside Luke on the floor. Together, they fold.

EMILY
What's your favorite color?

LUKE
(Caught off guard)
My favorite color?
Probably red.

Beat.

LUKE
Red seems fast. Dangerous. Like red sports cars.
The coolest Power Ranger was always the red one.
What about you?

EMILY
It's yellow.

Luke gestures for more.

EMILY
It's a color I wish I could pull off in an outfit, but it always feels too flashy and bright.
But it's a happy color. Like the sun and dandelions.
What's your favorite movie?

LUKE
What's the meaning of this?

EMILY
I feel like I'm getting to know you all over again. I needed someplace to start.

LUKE
You're being extra.

EMILY
All right, I'll cut to the chase. What do you want in life? The perfect family? A happy marriage?

LUKE
I'm not trying to get married. You know this.

EMILY
Because of Katherine, or because you don't want a marriage?

Beat.

EMILY
You see the issue here? How are we supposed to build a relationship if I don't know the fundementals of what you want in life? Not to mention the secrets.

LUKE
If we're going to talk about this, why do you have to come at me like that?

EMILY
I'm not ready to have a baby.

LUKE
Who said anything about having a baby?

EMILY
I'm not ever going to be ready to have a baby. And I need to know if you're going to be okay with that, or if ten, fifteen years down the road, you're going to resent me for it.

LUKE
I don't want to have another kid, but I do think I want partial custody of Johnny.
I know, you said custody battles aren't easy. And I've got the world working against me right now-

EMILY
That's a weird way of admitting you messed up.

LUKE
I owe it to Johnny.

EMILY
You owe it to Johnny, or you just want those little voices of guilt to get out of your head?

Beat. They continue folding.

LUKE
Maybe you're right. Maybe I'm trying to feel better about my choices. But what's wrong with that? I have to live with them. You don't. You can leave anytime you want.

Emily gets up.

Beat.

LUKE

Em, that's not what I meant.

EMILY

No Luke, see, this is where we're different. You don't know what it's like to have people up and leave you in your life. Good thing we're not married, right?

LUKE

You literally left two days ago.

EMILY

And guess who didn't want Johnny to have another goddamn person walk out on him?

Beat.

EMILY

This isn't what I signed up for.

LUKE

I know. I'm sorry. I'm not gonna leave you, okay?

Luke embraces Emily. This lasts for several moments.

EMILY

Luke, I lost a baby.

Beat

EMILY

Lost is a stretch. I purposefully didn't have a baby.

Luke pulls away

LUKE

I don't understand.

EMILY

After our first date, after dinner. Remember?
I didn't know if we were going to last. I had to protect myself. I'd just moved to New York, just accepted into law school.
And we agreed, right? No kids.

LUKE

And you never told me?

EMILY
Would you have wanted me to keep it?

LUKE
You made a big deal about how I kept secrets from you that didn't impact your life in the slightest, yet you kept this from me for all these years?

EMILY
I would argue your secret has made a huge impact on my life.

Emily gestures to the toys and mess around her

LUKE
Then I guess nothing's really changed. You didn't trust me then, you don't trust me now. Me telling you my favorite color isn't going to fix any of this.

EMILY
Would you have wanted me to keep it?

LUKE
No.
No.

EMILY
Would you have walked out on me, too?

LUKE
That's not fair.

EMILY
None of this is fair. None of it. Especially not to Johnny.

Beat.

EMILY
You stay with me, and someday, that little guilty voice in your head is going to hate me. We're not married. You can easily walk away with a clean concious.

Luke holds Emily.

LIGHTS DIM.

SCENE 13

The dining room, weeks later. There's a knock at the door. Luke and Johnny enter, Luke carrying Johnny's backpack.

Luke answers the door. It's Katherine. Johnny quickly embraces his mother. It's heartwarming and lasts several moments.

KATHERINE

I've missed you so much.

Katherine lets Johnny go.

KATHERINE
(Hesitant)

Can you give your dad a hug?

Luke and Johnny hug.

JOHNNY

Wait. I forgot the cars.

Johnny runs off stage.

Beat.

Luke passes Katherine Johnny's backpack.

Beat.

KATHERINE

Where's Emily?

LUKE

She had class.

KATHERINE

Ah.

Beat.

LUKE

So, how'd you do it?

Beat.

KATHERINE

Pills.

LUKE

You're okay now?

KATHERINE

(annoyed)

Yes.

LUKE

But for real.

KATHERINE

I'm fine.

Beat.

KATHERINE

I'm not looking for an apology or anything. I would've left me too.

LUKE

But I shouldn't have.
How did CPS find me?

KATHERINE

I put your name in the note.

LUKE

All good things, I hope.

Johnny carries an armful of toy cars.

KATHERINE

Oh honey, no. Leave those here.

JOHNNY

Auntie Emily told me I could keep the cars.

LUKE

It's okay. It's not like they'll be of any use here.

Katherine helps Johnny shove the cars into his backpack. She and Johnny walk towards the door.

LUKE

Katherine?

Katherine turns around.

LUKE

I know you don't need my help, but I'm here. If you ever want me to be involved.

Johnny and Katherine exit through the door.

Luke carries Johnny's chair offstage.

Luke slowly cleans up all the toys and Johnny-related items around the dining room.

LIGHTS SHIFT

OLDER JOHNNY enters, taking down the bar.

OLDER JOHNNY

He reached out to me a few weeks back. Wanted to grab a drink or something, get to know me. But he made his choice. It wasn't my fault.

Johnny moves back to the seat in the audience from Scene 1.

Luke dismantles everything they have built throughout the play, the mess, the toys, all signs of Johnny.

This goes on for several minutes.

LIGHTS DIM.

SCENE 14

The next day in a clean dining room. The bar is gone.

Emily and Luke sit across from one another at the table, eating bacon cheeseburgers.

Luke wipes his mouth with a napkin.

EMILY

Thank you for dinner.

LUKE

Are you going to study tonight?

EMILY

I was hoping to watch a movie or something. Maybe something rated higher than PG.

LUKE

I'd like that.

Emily takes another bite of her burger.

LUKE

I almost forgot, I got you something.

Luke grabs the paper grocery bag across the room.

EMILY

What is this?

LUKE

Open it.

Emily opens the bag, pulling out tissue paper, until she finds a yellow nighty.

EMILY

It's beautiful.

Emily folds the nighty and sets it aside. Luke continues to eat.

EMILY

You never told me.

LUKE

What?

EMILY

What your favorite movie was.

END OF PLAY