

## The New Refrigerator

The refrigerator was old. Fingerprints crawled with dirt and oil across the handle and the bulb inside had been smashed months ago. It reminded me of the blown light bulb in the upstairs hallway; the dark streaks it created outside my bedroom curdled my dreams into nightmares in which I'd turn on lights but no matter which light I turned on the room would stay dim. The inside of the old refrigerator usually smelled sweet like ripe meat or brown bananas. I wasn't sure if the shelves had ever been cleaned; something red and sticky covered them and glued the cartons and stray plastic wrap to their surface.

I used to have dreams about that refrigerator and in my dreams it was brighter and cleaner than I had ever seen it. In my dreams, the mother I had when she was thin would come home in her pretty white nurse's uniform. She'd open the refrigerator and inside, stacked as neatly as could be, would be piles of loose cigarettes from top to bottom. I could smell the tobacco in my dreams and sometimes wished the dreams were real.

I stood tall in the low-ceilinged living room with my lanky arms hung by my sides and my pajama pants that stopped short above my ankles. I was watching my sleeping mother. Sleep.

It was a habit that I don't even think she knew she had. Sometimes, I supposed, it was hard to tell the difference between unconsciousness and sleep.

"Mommy," I whispered.

I scratched the scalp under the mound of my nappy hair—I hadn't brushed it in weeks. I

was beginning to love how she used to care, how we used to argue about how I'd wear it to

school. I realized that it was too late to be feeling that.

"Mommy," I whispered again, afraid to hear that abrupt growl that would end her snoring. Her broken, chubby knees clutched at a small pillow and a heated bag of rice was

tucked behind her back. The living room smelled like her constant sleepy smell from the buckets

of pills she swallowed and sweated out, and that sad feeling I'd get when I looked at their orange

containers. When I'd look at the typewriting on the bottle, the doctors were all robots to me.

I walked back and forth on a spot I knew would creak, hoping the noise would wake her.

Her snoring stopped but no other movement was detectable. I leaned close as I dared to make

sure she wasn't dead—it's how I constantly feared I would find her. I would sleepwalk down to

the kitchen at night with a packed suitcase—pajamas, blanket, and a baby doll left over from

girlhood. I'd bang on that cellar door screaming for someone to release her.

I decided she wasn't going to wake up and I wasn't going to try any harder to wake her. I

was sure I hadn't heard my name said in days and if I were to hear it, I didn't want her to yell it. I

turned to face the kitchen entranceway, kept my gagging at bay from the brown peeling, greasy

wallpaper. That wallpaper had been there since the house was built. When no one was looking,

I'd sit at the kitchen table and peel off as much of it as I could. I walked on tiptoes onto the dull

yellow linoleum and watched the grey, pungent water leak across the floor from underneath the

refrigerator. Daddy wasn't home yet, so I guessed that we would have to wait for the entire

kitchen to flood. I imagined the entire house flooding and how glad I was for it. The dove would

come, the water would wash away and a new house would appear in place of the one I hated. I

watched the dark, sandy water crawl toward my feet. I remembered the family portraits that used

to hang on the refrigerator—Daddy took them down the day we stopped going to church.

I didn't want to get my feet wet so I left the kitchen. I flipped the light switch which no

longer worked—most of the time that florescent light stayed on. The yellow light was so

persistent across the other rooms that, for a while, I had forgotten that the living room was

painted white.

I waited upstairs in my room for Daddy to get home. My little sister was quietly playing

Barbies in the corner. I noticed she had destroyed another one to make up for the lack of a Ken

doll. It's what we had to do when we'd play out our soap opera stories and play who wanted to

marry whom. We'd take the ugliest doll—the one with the most dreaded hair or maybe the one

who no longer had a neck because her head had fallen off too many times—and we'd leave her

naked, instantly signifying that she had become a man.

I lay on my bed, sunk down in the middle, and put my headphones on. I had just bought

the bright red CD player with my babysitting money and my mother had just started letting me

buy CDs. I was sure Daddy hadn't approved of CDs yet, and for that I felt love for my mother.

An angry female voice soothed me until I was almost asleep, until I stopped mouthing the words,

until the floor reverberated with the shutting of the front door. My sister hopped up and ran out

of the room. I slipped my headphones off and stuffed my CD player under my mattress along

with all the other contraband—music magazines, CDs, a skirt Daddy didn't let me wear. I sat and

listened. My baby brother began wailing from his crib.

"Mary," Daddy said. I could hear him hanging up his coat—the closet door had fallen off again.

"What?" my mother yelled, "*I just* fell asleep!"

I rolled my eyes and moved to the doorway of my bedroom.

"What's that smell?" Daddy asked.

"Hi Daddy," my sister said, but she was ignored.

"What smell?" my mother asked.

Daddy's footsteps, the heavy ones that reminded me of bent blinds and my broken bed,

sauntered across the living room and into the kitchen. The suspense of it all had my head sticking

out of my room and looking down the hallway. My brother was still crying saying the only

jumbled, passive words he knew how.

"What the..." Daddy said sucking air through his clenched teeth, "How long has this been goin' on?"

"What James?" my mother whined in her muscle relaxant-heavy voice.

"What happened, Daddy?" my sister asked. I imagined her tugging at the hem of Daddy's

argyle sweater.

My brother sniffled, unable to keep his warbling loud enough for anyone to hear. I went

to his room and got him out of his crib. He clung to me until we were to the stairs. I put him on

the first step and with a chubby wobble he climbed backward down the steps. He was rushing to

worship Daddy.

"Elizabeth!" Daddy called. "Hello, son," he said.

My brother giggled at the attention. I meandered down the stairs and stood in the middle of the living room.

"Didn't you see this when you came home from school?"

"I tried to wake Mommy up," I said.

"No, you didn't," she said. She breathed heavily her traitor breath, giving me goose bumps.

I couldn't help but notice the water had started to empty from the kitchen making a mucky delta of the living room. It smelled like lettuce left too long in the crisping drawer. Daddy

commissioned us—me and my sister—to help him put old towels across the entire kitchen floor.

The kitchen, for a few moments, looked like a fairytale of a patchwork house. Hansel and Gretel.

The happiness of the colors was so tempting. Moments passed of me and my little sister keeping

our brother out of the kitchen, even though we both wanted to let him in. My mother had fallen asleep, or so I thought.

"Elizabeth," my mother said, startling me.

Her eyes were still glued with crust but she was now sitting up with her head tilted toward the ceiling. She was sucking air through her puckered lips and gripping the cushions

beneath her. My own body tensed at the dramatic position of hers. She was wearing a robe—the

one that was much too short for the volume of her curves, the robe that was the reason for me

always going to my friends' houses instead of inviting them over to mine. Her swollen legs

spread before me and like always, I caught a glimpse of places beyond my imagining. My ears

turned red as I said,  
"What?"

"Elizabeth," she said again, "would you get me my diet soda and my medicine? Don't forget the ice."

I crossed the threshold of the unraveling towels now dulled from being soaked through;  
immediately my socks were wet. I gagged as I took them off and threw them behind me. The  
towels squished and my body squirmed with the sensation. I opened the refrigerator to get the  
soda. The smell was atrocious and the dark of its bowels seemed to make the smell worse. It was  
warm sticky air that hit my face; I held my breath, grabbed the soda and slammed the door shut.  
My brother's magnetic alphabet fell on my feet. I pulled a glass from the metal sink filled with  
crusty dishes and stagnant water. I cursed the window with the grease-stained blinds above the  
sink—it no longer opened. The glass I held was slick with fingerprints and it dripped suspiciously with something I didn't want to identify. I walked to the counter and put it down. I  
opened the soda bottle and went to pour. I poured a few drops and stopped—my conscience  
getting the better of me. I listened for movement outside the kitchen. I took a sip for myself out  
of the bottle, took a peek into the living room, and turned back, reluctantly, to clean the glass. I  
made sure Daddy wasn't around and proceeded to use cold water, a soapless rag, and minimal  
time and effort.  
I went back into the living room with iced soda and medicine. I sat with a book on the  
smaller couch, my mother sucked on her pills and the dirty glass, my brother and sister played  
with the sharp and ancient Tonka trucks on the wood floor. My brother stuck his hand in his  
diaper and scratched with fury. I wondered when he had last been changed and was sure as hell I  
wouldn't be the one to change him.

"Elizabeth," Daddy called. He was upstairs as usual, in his room praying, coming up with

new ways to scare me into submission. Submission of what, I wasn't sure. It seemed to me that

Daddy was my only god.

"What?" I said. I didn't yell hoping that I had mistakenly heard my name.

"Come up here," he yelled back.

I didn't want to. I already knew what he'd ask and I didn't want to do it. I kept reading my book.

"Elizabeth!" he called again, "You get up here now and do what you have to do. You need to do it now because I'm gonna need your help soon when the movers come to take the

fridge."

I thought of the old rosaries in my vanity drawers, the scapulars, the pocket Bible and its

wanton brother, the Qur'an. I had ripped pages out of both and dreaded the day Daddy would

find out.

To avoid his demands, I went outside on the front step and waited for the movers to come. It was freezing but I would've rather suffered a cold butt than sore knees and some

religious lecture afterward. I sat outside for a long time and fell half-asleep. I dreamt over the

traffic of the main street beyond our house. I dreamt of a fire swallowing our house and Daddy

left standing as a blackened devil amidst the rubble. I startled when the big white van screeched

into the driveway.

My face turned red at the sight of strangers in the house. The lopsided couch was swelling cartoonishly before my eyes. The crayon on the walls morphed into dirty words. The

area living room carpet with bits of food trampled into the fibers began to smell and the light

spots across the walls where our pictures used to be danced and taunted me, telling all of our

secrets. The console television with the discolored screen played out all of our criminal and

embarrassing moments. The enemy of my dignity—the kitchen—pulled imaginary laughter from

the throats of the movers.

I stood petrified holding my brother. My sister held on to his foot and we watched the

movers take the refrigerator out—food and all. A brand new one took its place, white and tall. I

hated it.

“Elizabeth,” Daddy said, “Help me get these towels up and don’t let ‘em leak on anything.”

I helped him and afterward tried escaping to my room. “We need to have a talk, Elizabeth,” he said in that godly voice that had a way of clogging my reasoning.

I ran upstairs, Daddy following.

“Don’t you dare run into that bathroom!” he yelled.

I ran into the bathroom; put my back against the door and my feet against the tub. I knew

Daddy was upstairs, but I didn’t know where. He said nothing after a few harsh raps on the door.

I was convinced he was trying to scare me, but most likely he stopped to save my mother from

any more heartache. They already argued constantly over me and the ways about which Daddy

went to save me from that devil that was always in my ears.

I wasn’t sure how much time had passed when I attempted to leave the bathroom. I discovered I had jammed the door shut; the hinges were halfway broken free of the wood and

nails they were held with. I looked through the thin slit in the door where the paint had rotted the

wood through. The hallway was empty, my parents’ bedroom door was shut. I turned the handle

and pulled. Nothing happened. I pulled again and again and lamely began to cry. I looked at the



green moldy walls around me, the mildewed tub that I had begun to avoid and the towel beside it

that absorbed the leak from the shower pipe. The towel was soaked so that the water had created

a puddle underneath it. I cried harder, Daddy heard me from his bedroom and prayed louder. The

sultry, dark melody of his Arabic raced my heart until it began to palpitate.

I yanked again at the knob and it flew right off taking me with it. It flew out of my hands

and into the bathtub and I flew backward onto the floor. The clanging of the knob hitting the

porcelain startled me. I clutched my chest and listened for Daddy. All was silent save for my

mother's snoring. I wiped my eyes and kneeled down to look out of the hole where the knob had

once been. I waited hoping that my sister would come upstairs and rescue me, but after a while

my knees began to throb. I sat with my back against the door, the puddle spreading to soak

through my pajamas. With my head in my hands I heard my parents' bedroom door open. I

scampered away from the bathroom door. With a shove that nearly cracked the door in half,

Daddy got the door open. I walked out with a shame I was taught to feel. This time, Daddy only

slapped the back of my head.

"Do you wanna come shopping with me?" he asked. "We gotta fill this new refrigerator."

I thought of the cigarette dream.

"No. I have homework to do."

"Okay."

When Daddy left, I went into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator and basked in its new light, wanting it to stay empty forever.

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## The Piano

I look over at the piano. The bench is pushed in, the keys are still. Its upright face is dark

wood and the keyboard is open. The white plastic on the keys has started to chip away and the

wood is cracked underneath. I can pick out the keys that no longer work. Their hammers no

longer have spring and lean against their strings inside the piano. The keys that don't work are

sunk lower than the rest. They're mostly the lowest and highest keys. On top of the piano is an

arrangement of pictures with mine in the middle. I am ten years old in the picture. I am smiling

and wearing green. My skin was smooth back then, my hair was calm. 'Jesus Loves Me' is

painted on the snow globe music box that stands beside the pictures. A statuette of a nurse who is

my mother in miniature form twirls on a pedestal to a melody I don't know the name of. The

gold knob in her back spins slowly. Other things cover the top of the piano. When I do my

weekly chore of dusting, it's a pain to remove and replace everything. I am allergic to dust but

my father doesn't believe in allergies. If I pray, they will go away. When my eyes are puffy and

my nose is running, I take a break from the dusting and play with all of my mother's tinkers that

cover the piano and the shelves in the corners of the house.

The piano was free. One of my mother's friends said we could have it because they were

replacing it with a grand piano. I was six years old and my first piano lesson had already been

scheduled. When my father and uncle tried to bring in the piano, they broke the frame of the

front door in several places and my father almost threw out his back. I watched them struggle

and when they lowered it onto the floor in the middle of the living room, I stood at the keyboard

and pressed all the keys my fingers could reach at once. It was out of tune. While my father and

uncle moved the piano to the corner of the living room I brought out my small tape player and

pressed play. The tape inside was white and filled with Shostakovich. The piano trio filled the

living room and I pretended I was already a world-class pianist.

I am sitting on the couch and twisting the hem of my old oxford shirt that is part of my

old elementary school uniform. I had tried to squeeze into the plaid skirt this morning but found

that I was growing curves and could no longer fit into it. My chest has started to grow and my

father says I need to shave between my legs and under my arms so I'll be clean. But he says I

can't shave my legs. He says it's all in the *Surah*. I'm never sure what it means that something is

in the *Surah*. But I sometimes do what it says because my father says I'll go to hell if I don't.

I'm in the seventh grade, now. It's my first year in public school and I don't like it. I miss

the routine of my Catholic school—the uniforms and the heavy load of homework. I already

learned all the seventh grade work last year. The kids make fun of my clothes at the new school.

I don't tell them that I wore uniforms for seven years and don't know what the fashion is. I don't

tell them that I'm not allowed to watch television and read the magazines with cute boys and

pretty girls on the front. I don't tell my parents that they make fun of me behind my back.

"We're getting rid of it," my father says.

Every time I try to argue him out of his decision, my throat closes and my face burns. I

can't let him see me cry anymore—I am too old for that now—and I keep my thoughts to myself. "Don't even try to argue with me. That stupid piano is a distraction from what you should be doing. Your prayers, reciting *Surah*, making Muslim friends."

He says that any distraction from *Allah* is evil. Religion must be in everything I do. I must pray five times a day and fast on Thursdays, on my birthday, during *Ramadan*. I must be

modest, cover my hair and my curves. I can't hang out with boys. Last summer I was walking

home with a boy and I had shorts on. My father was standing in the front yard waiting for me. I

could see him from the top of the hill our street was on and so could the boy I was with. The boy

turned around and left when he saw my father, and I walked the long road myself.  
My father

took me by the arm, pushed me into the house and grounded me for the entire  
summer. I couldn't

be with my friends or talk to them on the phone, I was only allowed to swim in the  
backyard

pool at night and I couldn't listen to my tapes.

My father leaves the house in shorts. He's going to play basketball with his friends  
from

the Mosque. My mother doesn't like his friends from the Mosque. She comes  
downstairs still

dressed in her nightgown and carrying a blanket even though it's warm. She lies on  
the couch,

the one that no one is allowed to use because it's where she sleeps. She sleeps all  
day because

she says she doesn't sleep at night. But I hear her snoring at night. It wakes me up  
and registers

as a lawn mower in my head. She sleeps all day because she doesn't work anymore.  
She used to

be a nurse. One day she lifted a patient that was too heavy and hurt her back. At first  
she still

woke up in the morning and she still drove me and my sister and my brother to our  
activities—

she still played piano. She used to garden the rose bushes in front of the house. Now  
some of the

roses have died. Now she says it's her knees, too. The only time she wakes up is  
when she needs

her pills and her soda. All she drinks is soda. I never see her eat. "Can you get me  
some more soda and my pills? I need two of the white, two of the pink and one of the  
other white."

I watch her waddle over to the couch. She's fat. She used to be thin when I was little.

Since she never eats I think it's because of the pills. They make her swollen. She  
sucks in her

breath between her teeth as she lowers herself onto the couch. I look at my legs and  
I'm glad I'm

skinny. Sometimes I don't eat for days. I'm afraid to be like her. I also don't like when  
my father makes me say *Bismillah* before I put anything in my mouth. Sometimes I  
don't eat so I don't

have to say it.

“Please,” she says. “Get me my stuff.”

Tears leak from the corners of her eyes. I get up from the couch and walk into the kitchen. I open the cupboard next to the stove and grab three orange pill bottles. There are many

more piled behind these three. I wonder what they’re for. I count out the pills she needs in the

palm of my hand and then pour the soda. I bring them to my mother and she takes them. She

closes her eyes.

“Can I play a little piano?”

She sighs loudly but doesn’t open her eyes.

“If it’s quiet. I have a migraine. And just for a little while.”

I open the piano bench and take out my favorite sheet music. I set it up above the keyboard and sit. The keys are grimy around the edges and white and smooth where my fingers

always touch. I pound the keys with my elbow—one loud bang. My mother hisses and yells my

name.

“Sorry,” I say. “I slipped and fell against the keys.”

She sucks her teeth and then is quiet.

When I play I always begin with the music I first learned to play and work my way through the hardest pieces I am learning now. When my mother starts to snore I make sure to

bang out whatever note I’m playing. She wakes up and yells out my name. I apologize and start

to play quietly again.

My brother and sister are at a birthday party. Lijah is four and Andra is six. Their real

names are Elijah and Sandra but my father said he doesn’t like those names anymore so we took off the first letters and everyone was happy. When they’re home, I play Chopin’s Impromptu and

they dance behind me—slowly in the beginning and fast through the loudest and most exciting

parts. I can't play it perfectly but they don't know. They like it anyway.

My father comes home. He yells at me to stop playing but I don't. My mother yells at me

again. I press the keys hard and play the wrong notes so that the song is as ugly as her voice.

"If you don't get your narrow behind off that bench," my father says.

"I'll play softly."

"Don't make me."

I play and watch his hands at the same time. He reaches for the waist of his shorts. He

undoes his belt buckle and I'm not sure what to do. He might hit me with it if I stay. He only hits

me when my brother and sister aren't around. I've never seen them get hit. But sometimes the

belt is only a threat. He rarely hits me in front of my mother and he usually hits me with his

hands. The nuns at my old school would twist our ears or pinch our arms but that wasn't so bad.

Mostly my friends and I would laugh about it afterward. It's different when it happens at home.

It's different when my parents do what the nuns do. I don't love the nuns. I play a few more measures before he slaps me on the back of the head. He slams the keyboard shut barely missing my fingers.

"This is ridiculous," he said. "We're getting rid of that stupid thing tomorrow."

I stand up from the bench and take a step away from him.

"You know what you should be singing, huh?"

"Stop it, just stop it," my mother says.

"It's almost one-thirty. Go do your prayer."

"I don't want to."

He reaches for his belt again. I run upstairs and into the room I share with my sister. My

prayer rug is balled up in a corner but I don't lay it out facing east. One time, my aunt—who is

my father's adopted sister and the reason why he converted to Islam—came over to our house.

She asked me what direction to face during her prayer. I told her the wrong direction and

watched as she prayed facing west instead of east. I wondered if this new *Allah* would be upset

with me and what would happen if he was.

I plug in the headphones to my radio and listen to the tape that's in the deck. I turn it up

loud because it's mostly tape-hiss. The woman starts singing and she's angry just like me. I stare

at the posters and magazine pictures of bands and actors I'm not supposed to have on the wall.

My father says they're idols and that the Devil's in their eyes. He took down all of our family

photos, too. He thinks the Devil's in my eyes. When I refuse to get up at five in the morning for

prayer, before he pulls me out of bed, he bends down close and tells me that the Devil's

whispering in my ear and that the words that come out of my mouth are his. He says that the

Devil pisses in my left ear whenever I don't get up in the morning to pray. I get scared because

there's usually more earwax on the Q-tip from my left ear than there is from my right.

Sometimes I try to sleep all night on my left side just in case. Mostly, I get up after my father

goes to the mosque and I lay on my prayer rug half-asleep and mumbling out the prayer. Singing

the Arabic words embarrasses me. They sound like nonsense verse from a Dr. Seuss book.

Sometimes I recite a limerick I wrote back at my old school—there once was a girl named Erin,

her feet were so smelly she couldn't bear 'em—and sometimes I don't say anything. I wish my



father hadn't thrown away my rosary beads.

I have my door closed but there's no lock. I wish there was. I have the music up loud and don't hear my father coming in the room. He takes the headphones off my ears.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm listening to music."

"Did you do your prayer?"

"Not yet."

He looks at all the pictures on my wall. I know he won't hit me. I know he's going to do something worse—confiscate my things or ground me from my friends.

"You know," he says, "I was scared when you were born because we weren't expecting

you. You were an accident. But then I was happy. Me and your mother got married and you were

my number one."

He starts to tear the pictures off the wall.

"And I know I haven't always been the best father, but I tried. And then I saw that shadow, that *Shatan* in the doorway."

The story of seeing the Devil in my bedroom doorway always scares me. Every night I

beg my father to leave the hallway light on just in case the Devil is still lurking around, but he

never lets me leave it on.

"And I got my act together. I found my faith. Allah. And your mother was still sending you to that Catholic school."

The pictures in his hand are crumpled. He tears the last one down and looks at me.

"I'm trying to keep your heart open. Once Allah seals your heart it can never be opened again. Look at your nails."

I look at my nails. They're dirty.

"See that? Non-believers have dirty nails. Is my daughter a *kafir*?"

I don't tell him that I was playing outside this morning. I was riding my bike and the handlebars are dirty.

"Look at my nails. I was playing basketball all morning. No dirt. Look at my forehead.

That's the mark of the believer."

I look at the dark spot on his forehead. It makes his already dark skin look darker and

rougher like a callous. It looks like the ashes I used to get from church on Ash Wednesday.

He unplugs my radio.

"No, Daddy. Please. I'll do my prayer."

"You don't need this thing."

I don't cry even though I want to. The CD player that I wasn't allowed to buy is under my mattress with the CD I wasn't supposed to buy.

"You're my biggest disappointment. A lost cause. I'm glad I have two other children who

will believe and love their father. You expect too much. You forget that I will never love you as

much as I love a believer."

He leaves my room with the radio and ruined pictures. Stray tape sticks to the wall. I hear my mother snoring downstairs. When the front door slams shut it shakes the whole house.

My brother and sister are home. My father just came back from picking them up from the party. I walk downstairs. I whisper to Andra to request a song on the piano. "The heaven song! Play the heaven song."

She means "Stairway to Heaven." My mother used to play this song and we would dance

wildly around the living room. Andra starts jumping around the living room. My mother wakes

up and tells her to be quiet. Lijah imitates her and screeches. He doesn't talk much, but he makes

a lot of noise when he's excited. My father hears Lijah.

"Make the boy happy. He's only got today to hear the damn thing."

"Can't you see I'm sleeping?" my mother yells.

"Woman, you're always sleeping. Why don't you go up to bed and leave us in peace.

Come on, Lijah wants to hear a song. One song and then you're done."

Now I don't want to play the song. When Lijah was born my father changed. He had his

son and now everything revolves around that. He needed us to convert so that his son would

never be a non-believer. He never gets angry with his son. He buys his son nice clothes while

I'm afraid to show myself at school. It brings me comfort that my mother doesn't seem to care

either way. Before Lijah my mother was pregnant with twin boys. At six months they died inside

her. She still had to go to the hospital and give birth to them naturally. She said she held the dead

babies in her arms and named them. I sometimes imagine her still holding them. Even when we

planted a crimson maple tree in the backyard in their memory I would dream that she was still

holding them like they were attached to her arms.

I play the song. It's an ugly song from my beginner's piano book. I watch Lijah dance.

He stomps one of his feet in rhythm, throws his head back and screeches. I want to kick his legs

from underneath him. Andra sits next to me on the bench. I stop playing the ugly song and we

play a duo we made up. Andra is only six but she already plays well. She plays better than I did

at that age. Pictures of war protesters run through my head—the ones who lay in front of the

tanks—and I want to chain myself to the piano if only for Andra to have the chance to play.

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Two men from the mosque are in the house. I still have my hand over my chest. It still

hurts from this morning when my father pushed me into the dining room window and held me

there. I could feel the blinds bending against my back as he yelled at me. I was lying underneath

the piano, against the pedals, so that he couldn't move it. He pulled me out from underneath it

and I cussed at him. I said that *Allah* was stupid if he didn't like music. I shouldn't have said it.

My mother yelled at him to stop hurting me but he didn't until my chest was bruised. My father

called his friends from the mosque. They're going to take the piano out of the house and destroy

it.

The one man is wearing a dress and he smells like the oil that sits on my father's dresser.

The smell gives me a headache. My father says it's the smell of paradise. He also says his bad

breath during fasting smells like roses to the people in paradise. Sometimes I think I don't ever

want to go to heaven if *Allah* tricks people like that. The other man has a beard like my father

except it's spotted with orange. It's henna. My father says it's the only *halaal* way to color the

skin and hair. Whenever I go to his friends' houses I have to wear *hijab* and hang out in the room

with the women. One time the women decided to have a henna party. I didn't want henna on my

hands because I thought the kids at school would make fun of me even more. But the women

grabbed my wrists and put henna on the palms of my hands anyway. I kept my hands in my

pockets when I went to school and scrubbed them with scalding water and soap every morning

and night.

My father is making jokes about the piano because he's embarrassed he has it in his house.

"You know, my wife. She likes her music but I told her if she loves Allah, she will get rid of it. You know how silly women can be, how sentimental."

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I hate when he talks to his friends. His accent changes as if English is his second language just like his friends. He rolls his r's and puts inflections on the wrong syllables. "Brother," the bearded man says, "Allah doesn't blame you for your wife's frivolity, so neither do we. Alhamdulillah."

"Allahu Akbar. Subhanallah," my father says. "I pray. It is the most I can do."

I roll my eyes and sigh heavily. My father turns to me. I can tell he's embarrassed that

I'm not obedient. That I was Catholic before I was made to be Muslim. That my name isn't a

Muslim name. That I don't have my head covered. He slaps me in the mouth in front of his

friends for sighing and rolling my eyes.

"They can be hard-headed, brother," the one in the dress says.

I hold my mouth. I don't move from my spot. I watch as they begin to move the piano.

They struggle. I will the girth and weight of the instrument to break all of their backs. They have

to drag it across the living room and it tears the carpet. I wish my mother would come down from

her bedroom and see the damage. She would be very angry and yell. My father would be

embarrassed in front of his friends. But my father knows that would happen. That's why he told

my mother that she's not allowed to be seen by his friends.

I watch as they maneuver the piano through the tiny entryway. The chips in the door

frame are still there from when the piano was moved into the house. My father's fingers hold on

to a corner of the piano and that corner comes closer to the wall. I hope his fingers will be crushed between the piano and the wall.

"Watch out, Brother Ahmed."

My father moves his fingers just in time. I don't like that the man used his Muslim name.

Our mail comes to our house repackaged and the FBI sometimes sits in a black van outside our

house. Since the - attacks last year, my father has been investigated. My mother told him not

to send money to Iraq. My father sent money to his friends' families in Iraq and Afghanistan as

relief funds. My father protests outside the prison in our town because one of his friends is being  
held without being charged for anything. He gets packages in the mail from his Muslim friends  
addressed with his Muslim name. The men in the black van knock on the door when he's not  
home. They once tried to question me without asking if my parents were home. My mother tells  
my father that he's putting us danger. He says *Allahu Akbar* and smiles. He says this is his *jihad*.  
He sometimes walks around the house chanting a song he said he learned from the Taliban  
websites calling US Muslim citizens to arms—*Allhamdulillah-i, we jihad-i*.  
After leaving another crack in the doorframe and scratches on the walls, my father and  
the two men carry and drag the piano down the asphalt driveway. I can hear the low hum of the  
strings protesting the abuse. I can hear the wood leaving its streaked marks along the ground.  
They put the piano in the garage. I watch from the window and hear them make plans on how to  
destroy it.  
My father gives the men a ride home—he drives his friends everywhere but refuses to let  
my mother use the car—and I go out to the garage. The piano looks deflated sitting in the middle  
of old lawn mowers, books, pool supplies and rusted tools. I press my fingers onto the strings.  
The notes are unrecognizable. I play a song in the major key but what comes out is a dark  
melody like the ones I hear in scary movies sung by children in acapella. I lift the long and thick  
piece of wood that opens to the place where the strings and hammers are housed. I pull on the  
hammers that no longer have spring. I pluck the strings and think of Shostakovich's dreariest  
compositions.

I notice something that I never have before. On the other side of the lifted wood is a detailed carving of a rose garden. I run my finger along it. I feel every curve and crevice. The

wood is dust-free and almost shines. I remember how full the rose bushes in front of the house

would bloom through the spring and summer. I remember digging the weeds with my mother. I

wonder why the carving doesn't face the outside. Why it's been hidden all of these years. I run

my hand along the wood until I find the hinges that connect to the rest of the piano. I lift a rusted

screw driver from the pile on the ground next to the piano. It takes me a long time to unscrew the

hinges and I worry that my father will come home and catch me. He doesn't come home and,

sweating from the effort, I pull the carved wood from the rest of the piano. It's heavy and one

side drops to the ground. A small piece chips and falls away from the corner. I look at the piano.

It looks like it has been cut open and ready for an autopsy. The bronze strings are taught ribs.

Behind the strings are more wood and a contraption to keep the hammers in place like ligaments

and organs. I lift with all of my strength and carry the long slab of wood into the house.

My mother is asleep on the couch and doesn't wake as I struggle to carry it past her and

up the stairs. I put the wood down at the top of the stairs and peek into the first bedroom. Lijah is

asleep in his crib. I drag the wood to the next bedroom, the one I share with Andra. She's playing

with her dolls and doesn't ask what I'm doing. She just watches me as I put the wood down and

move my bed so that there's a space between the head of it and the wall. I move my mattress

down so that there's an empty space on the bed frame. I lift the wood and put it on the frame, the

rose garden facing the room. It just fits. I push the bed against the wall and the mattress as far as

I can. I lie on the bed on my stomach and admire my new headboard. I fall asleep and dream of

my father tracing the wooden roses. His skin rubbing against the wood makes the notes of the

piano play and he sings his Arabic prayers along with the notes. I wake humming the familiar

melody of his prayers and hear the angry strings as my father, out in the garage, takes an ax to

the piano. I lay and listen and wonder if he noticed the missing piece.



## Rememories

My boyfriend tosses and turns half an hour before his alarm is scheduled to go off. He wakes me

up—our spring mattress is unforgiving. Most of the time I'm glad to be woken up after the usual

episode of bad dreams I have. This morning my dream wasn't as bad as most so I fall back

asleep trying to avoid his morning breath. Twenty minutes later his alarm goes off. I open my

eyes and see the light brown skin of my arm touch the white of his. He gets up and I lay awake

and hungry, my bladder full. I get up a few minutes later because I don't like to sleep in bed by

myself. Even if I could, the sun lights up our bedroom as soon as it rises and my boyfriend won't

agree to black curtains. I walk into the bathroom and pee. I wash my hands. Sometimes, if my

morning breath is unbearable or if I forget to brush them the night before, I brush my teeth right

away. Sometimes I wait until after I eat something. After I finish in the bathroom, I walk through

the kitchen and into the living room. The place is always messy in the morning because we never

pick up before we go to bed. I'm the only one who cleans the apartment from top to bottom. I

keep it clean when my boyfriend is gone for the weekend but when he comes back  
the place

turns into a mess.

I sit on one of the three couches that are in the living room. I pick the least dingy  
looking

one. Our furniture is white. It was cheap and clean when we bought it used. I tell my  
boyfriend

not to sit on the furniture when he's sweaty—he works out—but he does anyway  
and now the

biggest couch is not as white as it used to be. I open my laptop and my dead cat  
flashes at the

corner of my eye. I ignore him. Sometimes I check my email, sometimes I don't.  
Sometimes I

open the laptop just to look at the wallpaper—the cute actor of the week. I tell  
myself as I

wander over to the New York Times website that I need to write. I read depressing  
articles on the

Middle East, the earthquakes in places I've never heard of, and people's opinions  
that are useless

to me. I usually cry when I read the New York Times and then I turn on the kettle  
and wait for it

to whistle. I fix myself mint or chamomile tea and drink it while I stare at the wood  
floor of the

living room, watching as the sunlight streams through the wooden shutters. I blow  
my breath into

the air and enjoy watching the sunshine dust get disturbed. I finish my tea quickly  
and think

about making another cup but don't because I don't feel like getting up. I put my  
laptop on my

lap, open my word processor and write. The first line is always good and I get drawn  
in. But then

I get lost. My dead cat walks underneath my feet. He's still orange and not see-  
through like I

would expect him to be. The black man ducks behind the corner in the kitchen. The  
clock starts

ticking too loudly and I put the computer down.

It's already an hour later and I think about doing laundry or mopping the floor. I think  
about taking a walk but I don't like New York City. There are too many people and I find myself  
not feeling so badly when someone dies in a fire or the abortion rate soars. I moved to the city  
after dropping out of college freshman year and breaking up with my boyfriend. I arrived and  
settled into a world of prostitution and drugs. I left three years later ready to change. I chopped  
off my hair and moved back in with my mother, found that I still didn't like her and moved into  
an apartment. After two years, I had to leave the little upstate town—I kept seeing the black man  
in the corners of my bedroom and the cat in my mother's curio cabinet. I got back together with  
my boyfriend. He got accepted to Columbia Law School and New York University School of  
Law. He chose NYU Law and I moved back to New York City. Two years later, I am in school  
and living with my boyfriend. I stay away from the darker underbelly of the city and get good  
grades.  
My boyfriend sits on the couch opposite from me and is on his laptop computer. He doesn't talk much in the morning. He doesn't talk much to me. It's my fault. We met in high  
school. He was cute. He had a nice family and it attracted me. He thought I was pretty and I  
joked about wanting to be adopted into his family. But he couldn't know me. We were different.  
I was quiet about my family and spent our time together at his house or in his car. We broke up  
three times in six years—I wasn't affectionate enough, I felt inferior, he left for college. We  
easily took each other back every time because we didn't care to know each other. He had no

secrets and I wouldn't tell mine. I took him back because he was familiar to me.

"I had this crazy dream," I say.

I know that he can't stand listening to my dreams but I go on anyway.

"I had this dream. I was with my father. He was dying. He wasn't black anymore. He was

this orange-y color. He was in a hospital and I broke him out. I brought him to a garden at the

edge of a cliff and we sat looking out over green hills. Then I brought him back to the hospital. I

found him dead in the bathroom. He overdosed on heroin. Isn't that weird?" "Yeah, that's weird," my boyfriend says. "I really gotta study for this exam I have tomorrow. It's like the precursor to the bar exam so..." "Okay. I'm done talking."

I look at my computer and start writing again. Nothing good comes out after the first line

so I stop writing. I have class in five hours. I sign into my Netflix account and watch bits and

pieces of movies until I fall asleep again.

I shower three hours before class because it's cold outside and I want my hair to dry before I step outside. I usually don't shower until I'm late for getting ready to leave for class.

Sometimes I don't shower at all. Class is not of particular interest to me. I step out of the shower,

get dressed into something I don't like because I don't have any money to shop for clothes that

fit me. I clean the bathroom after myself and go back into the living room. I turn on the news but

it's a rerun from the day before and the day before that—people died, someone got raped, there

was a fire and the Middle East is in shambles. It makes me sad so I turn it off. I pick up the new

book I bought at a used bookstore and read. It's something dark—a woman and her five year old

boy abducted and used by a middle aged man. The author's picture is on the cover so I take the

cover off and throw it away. My new cell phone rings. I haven't had a cell phone for a year

because I couldn't pay the bill. I don't particularly like cell phones. I've had this one for a week

and only three people know about my new number. The cell phone is ringing and the same

number appears on the caller I.D. It's a loan company. I know because I looked up the number

on the internet. I answer it after days of not answering it and wait.

"Is Sharonda Harrison available?" a girl asks.

"Who?"

"Sharonda Harrison?"

"You have the wrong number."

I shut the cell phone and hope that they stop calling me. I check my email. One of my

instructors emailed me. He has become my mentor for the undergraduate thesis I have to write. I

chose to write a creative thesis. He has sent me comments on a story I wrote a year ago but want

to use for the thesis. He says that he hasn't forgotten about me, that he's been busy. He doesn't

believe the narrator. He doesn't believe the sexual relationship she has with her father. He says I

have to write about things that I know about. I see my dead cat from the corner of my eye. He's

chasing a mouse that's running across the kitchen floor. I read my instructor's comments again

and think that maybe I should buy the Tylenol. My liver is already burning out from my first

stint in the city. The Tylenol would be quick if I could be so lucky to drop into a coma beforehand. I close the internet browser and get up to clean the apartment.

I clean the dishes and my boyfriend leaves even though he doesn't have class. He says he

has to study so I say goodbye. I worry as things start to crawl out from the corners of my eyes. I

turn the water off. Noises scare me when I'm alone. My dead cat jumps from the kitchen floor

onto the counter and stares at me. He's the orange cat I had as a kid. Sir Pip Leonardo. His name

was Pippy Longstockings before the people at the SPCA shelter discovered his testicles. They

chose Sir Pip and I chose Leonardo for my obsession with Leonardo DiCaprio. He warmed up to

me quickly. I was the only one who could cut his nails. He slept with me at night. I fed him and

changed his litter. He ran after me when I moved around the house. But he would rub his butt

around on the living room carpet and my mother hated it. She threatened to put him outside. My

other cat had died from getting hit by a car so I begged her to keep Sir Pip inside. I came home

from school one day and Sir Pip had been hit. He was walking funny and making sounds like a

crying child. It scared me. I tried to pick him up but he curled his body backward as if he had no

bones. I dropped him and he screamed again. I cried until I threw up. I yelled at my mother until

she hit me. I wanted to take him to the vet. We did. The doctor said he was bleeding internally.

My mother told the doctor to put him to sleep. The doctor did and I cried all the way home.

I turn the water back on wondering if Sir Pip would leave because of the noise. He doesn't. He licks his paw and cleans his whiskers. I never speak to him like I did when he was

alive. I start to wash the dishes again. I turn back toward him and he's not there anymore.

It's time to walk to school. I poke my head out the window in the living room. I look down and imagine myself lain out on the ground four stories below. The sidewalks are wet so I

curse. I don't have any shoes without holes. I put on an extra pair of socks and my boots that I

really like. I've had them for twelve years. I turn to one bookshelf in the living room and then the

other. I want to bring a book with me just in case I choose to take the subway home. When it's

dark I don't like to walk. I see things in the shadows that scare me—people crouching near

garbage bags, black men naked and staring. I take inventory of the books I've read but didn't

like—Hemingway, Salinger, Austen. I feel badly about not liking them because everybody else

does. I choose the same book I was reading this morning—the abducted mother and son. It's

heavy and hardcover so I hold it in my hand and slide my bag over my shoulder.

The black man is holding my dead cat and they walk all the way to school with me. He's

the one I remember from when I was little. The man I grew to know as my father. He had no

beard then. He was thin and had longer hair. I was five and lived in an apartment with my

mother. He lived in the same apartment complex and we were friends for a while. My mother

didn't tell me who he was. She only sent me to stay with him for the weekends. I felt like a doll

when I was in his bedroom. I thought we were playing dress-up like I did with my Barbie dolls.

They were naked more than they were clothed. I didn't have enough clothes for all of them. They

always got lost. But my Barbies didn't have the parts that I had between my legs and those were

what he loved to play with the most. In his bedroom the sun shined through the red curtain and

everything was pink. I stared at the light coming in through the curtain when his weight bore

down on the mattress below me. He was just a shadow against all of the pink. I remember the

white television that was always on mute. I remember the cigarettes he smoked. I remember the

cigarette he taught me to smoke. When I was fifteen I met him again. It had been seven years and

now he was my father. He had changed into a different person. He had a long beard. He was

rounder. He told me that he had been young. That he didn't believe my mother when she said I

was his daughter. Because I looked white like her. He said he was sorry, and my mother remarried him. I didn't go to the wedding.

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I reach the main building on campus and the black man and cat disappear. I go to class

and sit in my usual seat. There's a black trash can at the front of the room that says 'trash' on it

in capital white letters. I stare at it through most of class. When I'm not staring at the trash can I

look up to the clock, forgetting again and again that it doesn't work—it's always .:

It's my turn to critique a classmate's story and I don't know what to say. I don't get nervous. Parts of myself are displaced. I am in my dreams where my body is torn apart while

people watch. My body disappears and all the bad parts of my mind swell. There are people

looking at me and I can feel their fingers on my skin. I start to speak and I sound different from

the way I imagine myself. My voice is calm and I say things that make sense.

I critique the story. My classmate has talent. She is praised by everyone including me and

I wonder what it's like to be her. I remember all the people I used to be. I don't approve of them

all. I was a lot of the things I never thought about being when I grew up.

My boyfriend doesn't know how many men I slept with when I moved to the city. I was

nineteen and cut off from my parents. I didn't have a penny. I had my best friend who had

already moved down to the city and was already working. She introduced me to her boss. He

auditioned me and I started working. I didn't let the men kiss me. I asked for the money before I



undressed. I thought of the expensive clothes I could afford with the men's money to keep

myself from thinking of the black man in silhouette against the pink and how I became his

daughter. Sometimes the men wanted to befriend me, give me rings and bring me on dates. I

would say no and leave. I'd wait at bars between men and drink. I wanted to stop when I started

accepting drugs from the men. I should've stopped when I took the pills before a call. I was high.

The men were waiting for me outside their apartment. I had been tricked and was attacked

between their building and another. My pink tights were torn at the thigh when they were done. I

took them off and threw them in a nearby trash can. My legs were cold. I wanted to be plastic

like the dolls I used to play with.

My classmates begin to put on their coats and leave. The rustling they make sounds like

the rubbing of the attackers' clothes against mine. I put on my coat and leave with them. I debate

whether or not I should go to my next class. The next class is freshman level and I feel old. I am

eight years removed from them. There's a space between us I can feel. I take the escalator down

three flights and walk from the building. The wind is cold. It's sprinkling and I don't have an

umbrella. I walk toward the building that my next class is in. It's fourteen stories high and gray.

The blue scaffolding would match the sky if the clouds would clear. I arrive at the doors and

turn. The light of the day is enough for me to walk home. I reach the end of the park and start

walking down the hill. There's a black man walking toward me and I ignore him. He's not

holding my cat. He's a stranger. He calls out to me.

"Smile, beautiful," he says. "I'm coming for you."

I startle and look straight at him.

"I said, can I get your number?"

"I don't have a phone."

I walk away and imagine him following me. I look back. He isn't. He only stares.

I walk into my apartment building. I close the door and jump backward into it. There's a

cat on the stairs which lead up to my apartment. It's an orange cat and I can't tell. I put my hand

out to it. The cat meows and I pull my hand back. It pushes its face toward me and meows again. I

pet its head and it leans into me. I pick it up.

"Sir Pip?" I ask.

The cat struggles to get out of my grasp. My neighbor walks out of her apartment and makes kissing sounds with her lips. She sees me. I drop her cat. "Sorry," I say.

I step into my apartment and lock the door behind me. I put the chain lock on and turn on

the light. I peek into the dark kitchen. I stare at the shadows. There's nothing there. I take off my

coat and my boots. My socks are wet so I take them off too. I sit on the cleanest couch and listen

to the clock. The second hand ticks louder between the six and the ten. I put a record on the

record player to drown out the clock. I rescued all of the records from my mother. She put them

in the wet basement to be destroyed. The crackle of the needle against the vinyl slips in and out

from between the notes of the song. I turn the music louder and close my eyes. My boyfriend

doesn't like when I turn the music loud. His ears are sensitive. He's sensitive about the people

who live below us. He doesn't like the music I listen to. The song gets louder and the singer yells

out. I sit up quickly and stare into the shadows that break up the kitchen. I hear the footsteps that

I hear often when I'm alone. They're familiar to me. I can see his jeans at eye level. I can see his

black fingers and his white palms. I turn the music low and listen. There are no footsteps.

Someone is yelling outside. A car goes by.

My phone rings. My mother is calling me. I answer. She's wondering how I'm doing. I say that I'm doing fine.

"Why did you call?"

"I can't call you? I can't see how you're doing?"

"I'm fine," I say.

"Your father says happy birthday."

I listen to her breath. She wishes me a happy birthday and asks if I want to visit. I say no.

I say that I have to go. I say that I have homework to do and that I have friends coming over to

study. I hang up the phone. I feel something soft against my arm. Sir Pip is sitting on the arm of

the couch. His leg is stretched out in front of him and he's licking his crotch. I reach out to touch

him. He jumps from the couch and runs into the kitchen. I don't get up to see if he's still there.

The black man doesn't come out of the shadows. It starts to rain hard and I fall asleep.

I wake up when it's dark outside. It's black where pieces of the wooden shutters have

broken off. The clock throws a long shadow against the wall. I hear crumbling and startle so

violently it hurts. My pores open and my palms sweat. My heart is tugged in different directions.

Pain shoots through my left arm and I wonder if I'm going to have a heart attack. Pieces of brick

land on the floor of the fire place. I haven't gotten used to the sounds of the apartment.

I hear the key in the door. My boyfriend pushes the door and there's a loud bang. He's

stuck behind the chain locked door. I get up and unlock it. He rolls his eyes at me when he walks

in. He's wearing a suit and his hair is wet from the rain.

"You're just sitting here doing nothing?"

"I just woke up."

"You shouldn't sleep so much."

"I was tired. Where've you been? I thought you didn't have class today."

"I had clinical."

"Oh."

He goes into the kitchen without turning on the light. He gets a beer and sits on the dingy

couch. I watch him drink and want to talk. I see the black man out of the corner of my eye.

"How was clinical?"

"Fine."

The black man is standing in the full light of the living room.

"That's it? Just fine? Tell me about it."

"It was just fine. Nothing much to say."

Sir Pip leaps up into the black man's arms.

"Clinical. What exactly do you do there?"

"Haven't I told you before?"

"I forgot. You know I have a bad memory."

My eyes start to water.

"You know there're ghosts in this apartment. Because the apartment is so old."

"Shut up about the ghosts already. I have to do some prep for this trial I have tomorrow."

And I still have to study for that test.”

I leave the living room and hope the black man and my dead cat don’t follow me. I

undress in the bedroom. I need to do laundry. I need to clean my room. I check the mantel above

the bedroom fireplace for quarters. There are only three dollars worth. I look behind me. The

black man and Sir Pip are gone. I walk into the bathroom. I don’t look in the mirror. I’m afraid

I’ll see them behind me. I brush my teeth and wash my face. I pee so that I don’t have to get up

in the middle of the night and travel to the bathroom in the dark. I take my laptop and book from

the living room and bring them into the bedroom. I lie down in bed and open my laptop. I put my

fingers on the keyboard. I write a sentence. I catch something red on my dresser. There’s a box

of Tylenol next to the radio. I don’t remember buying it. I take it from the dresser and put it on

the nightstand next to the bed. I lie back down and type another sentence and wonder if it’s good.

I hear the same crumbling from the bedroom fireplace. I look up to the ceiling. There’s a crack

down the middle and a hole in one of the corners. The rain pounds on the skylights. The rain

drips down the chimney and slaps the slate of the fireplace floor. I close my laptop and open my

book. The mother is being raped again by her captor. The child is in the wardrobe counting the

creaks of the bed.

I fall asleep. I dream I’m in my parents’ house. The black man breaks in. My mother welcomes him. My father runs from him. The black man and my father collide and merge into

one. My boyfriend appears and he watches as I lie down with my father under the pink glow of

the window. I try to move. I open my eyes and hear footsteps. I’m too heavy and I stick to the

bed. I see the shape of a man in the shadows. I sweat. I try to call out. There's pressure on my throat and chest. I'm pulled through the bed to the floor. I gasp the air and fly up—my body breaks free from the weight. I'm sitting up and breathing hard. It's dark in the bedroom and my boyfriend is asleep next to me. I listen. There's only rain on the glass of the skylight. I stare into the dark. There's nothing there. I cry and can't stop myself. I tug at my boyfriend's shirt. He mumbles and turns from me. I lie down and tug at his shirt again. He mumbles and turns toward me with his eyes closed. He puts his hand on my thigh. I push it away, turn over and lay awake for the rest of the night.

### **Salt in the Wound**

I had a dream last night that I was in my parents' kitchen. I no longer live with them but not a day goes by where I don't dream of their house. I mostly dream of the kitchen—the room that hurts me the most. The first sexual experience I can remember clearly happened in the kitchen

and it was unwanted. I can't say that my father was a bad person for doing these things. He did  
love me in better ways than this. The kitchen became my enemy. Beginning at age fourteen and  
in the first stages of puberty I avoided the kitchen. I ate only when I couldn't sleep the hunger  
off. I dipped my finger in the salt shaker and stuck my finger in my mouth when the taste in my  
mouth turned bad. The weight that disappeared from my body was my enemy—the kitchen—  
dying.  
In my dream, the kitchen walls were twenty feet high instead of their true seven feet. The  
walls were cracking and crumbling. Holes were forming and through them I saw not the outside  
world but a white brightness. My parents decided that the walls needed fixing. I stood on a  
ladder and, with the help of my parents, I filled the white hollow of the walls with bucket after  
bucket of salt. After the walls were packed with salt, I plastered the cracks and holes. I got down  
off the ladder and admired my handy work. I heard a sound like sand being sifted. A crack  
formed in the corner of one of the walls near the ceiling. It stretched across the wall diagonally  
until it reached the floor. The salt poured out like grain from a silo. My father handed me a big  
metal shovel. He pointed to the basement. The basement was filled with salt. It covered the stairs  
like snow drift. I dug the salt out with my shovel and, again, filled the walls. I was still standing  
on the ladder when the walls cracked again and the salt poured out. I drowned in the salt and  
woke up just before I lost my breath.

When I opened my eyes I curled up next to my boyfriend. We were napping together. I

never told him the things I experienced as a child. He felt bad about my nightmares but never

asked why I was having them. When I curled up next to him, he put his arm around me and

rubbed my back. I was glad he did. I thought he had been angry with me. That same morning, he

had found the bruises on my neck and I had to show him my torn shirt. I wasn't going to tell him.

I could see in his eyes that he thought I had cheated. He had joked about it before I left to go out

that night.

"They're going to rope you into a threesome," he said. He knew Mary and Joseph were in an open relationship.

"You shouldn't go out. You shouldn't stay at their place afterward."

"It's okay. Mary lives close to the bar."

I wasn't lying. I believed what I was saying to him.

I was still feeling ill from last night. I had come home in the morning off balance and sick

to my stomach. I was upset. I could still feel their hands on me. I wondered about my dream and

thought of packed wounds. It was a fear of mine ever since I was a child. For a fourth grade field

trip, I had gone to the salt museum just outside the town I grew up in—we were known for our

salt deposits and salt potatoes. The tour guide explained a usage for salt that I never forgot. She

gave a gruesome example of a man with the flesh of his arm split to the bone. She said that back

then, when the Erie Canal still had its barges pulled by mules, the man with the tortured flesh

would have packed his wound with salt. The image that formed in my head was so revolting—

rotted, torn flesh and bits of crusted blood filled with white, wet salt—that I gagged while she

was explaining the process. I learned that packing salt in wounds was very painful. I learned that



this was the way people's wounds would heal. Yet, the image in my head was always the open,

salt-packed wound—never the healed scar.

I ran over the night in my head as my boyfriend snored on, lightly touching my back. The

night began innocently enough, but when I began to put things together in the clearing fog in my

head, I realized that the night had started two years ago.

I'm not good at keeping in contact with people who I have never been intimate with. And

by intimate, I mean the connection I have with somebody where I can speak freely and perhaps

hug them once in a while. Around most people I don't behave in this way. I have had many

friends that I've lost because of it. Many have called me cold. I don't even keep in contact with

my parents. Last week, Mary emailed me. Wanting to break my habits, I made the mistake of

emailing her back.

She was quiet when I first met her two years ago in a writing workshop. She was very

pretty and a talented writer. I began hanging out with her through a mutual friend. I was hesitant

to befriend her simply because of our difference in age. She was twenty and I was twenty-five at

the time. I wanted to test her, find out how she would react to certain things. I wanted to compare

our life experiences. I discussed the fiction I was writing. She was put off by the dark subject

matter. I assumed she had less life experience. I felt superior.

As we spent more time together I realized that she was strange. She made me second

guess my superiority. I assumed that just because she didn't feel the need to compare her own

dark fiction that she had a more normal life than me. She was quiet and religious. She only ever

wore dresses that fell past her knees. She wore copious amounts of black makeup around her eyes and torn tights. She was always late to class. Her choice of boyfriend threw me off. It was when he was around that she seemed different, darker.

I met Joseph soon after I met her. My first thoughts were about their names—Mary and

Joseph. It made me laugh. My first impression of him was the high school “Goth kid” that no one

ever wanted to hang out with. He wasn’t wearing all black. He didn’t have makeup on. It was his

quiet way, the way he would stare, the lip ring and the long black hair. It was the look he kept

giving me. He would stare at me in front of Mary. I’d avert my eyes. She’d just smile, hold his

hand and watch him stare at me. I assumed she was naïve. The next semester I had a class with him. He sat next to me every class and stared. One day, I looked back at him.

“Are Grendel and his mother actual monsters?”

He didn’t answer me. He was scribbling in his notebook. My name written again and again, in cursive, in print, my first name alone, my full name. He saw me looking, closed his

notebook and tried not to smile. I turned away and blushed.

I saw him in the cafeteria soon after that day.

“Hi,” I said.

“You want to hang out?”

“Sure.”

But I didn’t. We went to the roof of the main building on campus. I sat and ate my bagel.

He knelt so close in front of me that he was almost between my legs. He touched my hair. I let

him. I never could say no.

“I want to show you something,” he said.

I followed him.

“But I’m afraid of heights,” I said.

“You’ll regret it if you don’t do it with me.”

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I cried as I climbed up the interior ladder of the bell tower of Shepherd Hall—the gothic

style building with four steepled bell towers reaching fifteen stories into the sky. He climbed up

behind me. His staring scared me. He touched my upper thighs, my bottom. I ignored it. I didn’t

want to start an argument this far off the ground. The black hole beneath us was not something I

wanted to fall into. I climbed all the way up, crawled out of the tiny black door at the top and

ended up sitting on the outside ledge of the bell tower. The ledge was narrow and had no barrier

to keep us from falling. I was terrified and excited at the same time. I looked out across the city

and Joseph kissed the weathered gargoyles.

After that day, I didn’t see him or Mary much. The next semester I would meet up with

Mary outside of her writing workshop. She told me that the professor loved her work and the

way she looked. Joseph was taking the same writing workshop.

“Does the professor love your work, too?” I asked him.

“He hates it. He won’t even let me workshop it.”

I read one of his stories and understood why. I had no words of comfort for him to balance the professor’s opinion of his writing.

From then, I only saw Joseph in passing. I saw Mary once in a while. Every time I did she would say that she missed me. I never said it back. I would force myself to hug her. We

exchanged emails. We wrote to each other once and fell out of contact. She didn’t always have

access to a computer and I didn’t write, fearing that she’d say she missed me again.

A week ago, months after I had last heard from her, she emailed me.

Subject: Hey you (from your long lost friend Mary)

Hey, haven't heard from you in a while and I miss you. You can reach me at --- --- .

We can go out to a café or something (have you been writing?) or if you'd like to come have

drinks and go to a raid tomorrow night. Feel free to call. Ciao.

Sincerely,  
Mary

I didn't know what a raid was. I thought of raves, the ecstasy and warehouses of the early

nineties, and couldn't put that together with Mary's personality. I emailed her back the next day.

I remembered that she didn't have a computer. I broke down and texted her. I had recently

watched a documentary about the Lost Boys of Sudan and how they lost all contact with family

when they escaped their homeland. When they moved to America they made it a point to keep in

contact with the rest of the Lost Boys in their Kenyan refugee camp. I cried at their sense of

connection. I wanted to be like them. I felt bad about all the people I had lost touch with. I would

redeem myself, starting with Mary.

She invited me to go out the following Friday. She used the word "us" in her texts—you can come out with *us*, *we're* going out—and I hoped she didn't mean Joseph.

The day after texting her, I was in school later than usual. I usually got to campus in time

for class and left immediately after. But this night I had a performance to participate in. I was on

campus three hours after my classes had ended. Instead of walking home, I took a detour to the

library. As I walked to the library elevators, Joseph walked toward me.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I have to study."

"Can it wait?"

"I guess."

"Come with me."

He took the garment bag I was holding and led me to the computer lab.

"I can hold that, you know."

He didn't answer me. In the lab he pulled up his email and opened a word document."

"I just wrote a story and I want to read it on paper."

I hoped he wouldn't ask me to read it. I watched it come out of the printer.

"What are you doing now?" he asked.

"I'm going home."

"Can I take you home?"

"Sure, but I walk."

He laughed and said, "I walk, too."

I couldn't say no. He packed up his story and we walked from the campus. It was dark and breezy. The winter chill was still in the air. I walked quickly. He fell behind.

"Can we slow down?"

I slowed my pace.

"I want to remember this," he said. I thought of my name written over the pages of his notebook. I thought of Mary and felt guilty for walking with him. "I'm missing something," he said.

"Aren't we all," I said. "I suppose I am, too. But my boyfriend doesn't feel the same way."

He looked at me and grinned.

"Well, what about Mary? Is she missing something?"

He crossed the street ahead of me.

"I guess I should ask her myself," I said. "Or maybe this is just a weird conversation."

"So," he said, "you're coming out on Friday?"

"Yeah, I am."

"Good."

Now I knew the "us" Mary was talking about was him.

"Mary hooked up with one her professors."

"What? I don't believe it."

"She did. He was one of her English professors."

"But how did you find out?"

"She told me. He gave her bourbon and they hooked up."

"And you don't care?"

"Do you drink a lot when you go out?"

"What? Well, I guess. How serious are you guys about drinking?"

"The last time we went out I ended taking a lesbian's virginity."

I was put off. A gay girl losing her virginity to a man on a one night stand was something

the girl may not have wanted. I thought of my virginity. I wasn't sure if I had ever been a virgin.

I always thought of a virgin as a pubescent teen or older who had never had sex. I was doubtful

that a child before their understanding of sex could be considered a virgin. By the time I was of

age, I had already had sex. I had already masturbated. I had already known it all. I walked in

front of a moving car thinking of these things. Joseph pulled me back to the curb.

"Where was Mary when all this was happening with the girl?"

"She was there. We woke up in the apartment and the girl was still there."

"How long ago was this?"

"Last Friday."

I understood their relationship.

"I messed around with this boy from school," I blurted out. "My boyfriend doesn't know

and he wouldn't like to find out. We're not into that kind of thing. An open relationship or

whatever you want to call it."

Joseph didn't say anything.

We reached the stoop of my apartment building. I knew my boyfriend wasn't home.

Joseph looked expecting.

"Do you want to come up for a little bit?"

"Do I get to meet the boyfriend?"

"He's not home."

We went up to my apartment. We exchanged short stories. I read his and couldn't make

sense of it. A man was running through a forest. A girl was growing out of the mud and

advancing on the man sexually. "Black Dog" was playing on my record player. Joseph read one

of my stories. He turned up the stereo. It annoyed me. I wondered how he could read with music

that loud. We finished reading each other's stories and didn't comment. We drank tea. I showed

him my film collection.

"You have 'The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo' trilogy."

"Yeah. I have a huge crush on Lisbeth Salander."

Lisbeth was the girl with the dragon tattoo. She was tough, she was beautiful, she wore

dark makeup, black clothes and sometimes spikes around her neck. She got revenge on all the

men who had abused her in one way or another and I wanted to be just like her. She was gay and

I wanted her like I wanted men.

"You know, Mary really misses you. You guys were good friends."

No, we weren't good friends. We were acquaintances.

"I've had three different phones since I saw her last. Losing contact happens."

"She's really happy that you're coming out with us on Friday."

By the tone of his voice I felt I had hurt Mary.

"Well, now we have contact and I'm hanging out with you guys this weekend. Where does Mary live?"

"Near the bar."

Joseph left before my boyfriend got home.

"Yeah, Mary and her boyfriend are in an open relationship, I guess."

"Oh, really. Interesting."

"I'm gonna hang out with them on Friday, okay?"

"But you hate bars."

He knows about the bad things that had happened in the bars I used to hang out at. I had

been taken into a bar basement by a bartender and did things against my will. I had gotten into

fight with people. Men had not been kind. I had read somewhere that a person who had been

abused in childhood was more likely to be assaulted as an adult. I was told to see a therapist but

thought that I was good at packing my wounds. It turned out that I was good at opening them

again, too. Again and again I found myself in situations I couldn't easily get out of and was

brought back to childhood. I didn't have the volition as a child to say no and I had never gained

it as an adult.

"So these guys are going to try and rope you into a threesome," my boyfriend said.

"What? No. They're not like that. Mary is super conservative. I mean, besides the whole

open relationship thing. I'd have to be a willing partner, I guess. But I probably won't want to

come home by myself so I plan on staying at her place. She lives close to the bar."

"Okay," he said. "Just be careful."

Friday came around. We were meeting at a bar called The Continental. I had never heard

of it. I looked it up on the internet. They were being investigated and picketed against for having

racist policies. The owner claimed he only had a dress code. I was hesitant to go but the drinks

are what kept my plans. They were the cheapest I had ever heard of in Manhattan.



I arrived before they did. I waited on a corner near a bar and watched people being turned

away by the bouncers—black and white both. I saw Mary and Joseph walk up together from

across the street. The first thing I noticed was Mary's outfit. She was dressed just like Lisbeth

Salander. I didn't want to hug her. I didn't want to look at Joseph. They swept me up into a hug

at the same time. Mary kissed my cheek. I gave Joseph a questioning look. He walked past me

and headed toward the bar.

We got in without a problem and began by taking shots of rum. For being cheap, I thought they'd be watered down but they weren't. My nose stung and I was thrown back to the

last time I had been at a bar. I had ended up on the back of a motorcycle and driven into

Brooklyn to the apartment of a man I didn't know. I bought another round of shots for us—this

time tequila. I bought a round of mixed drinks and we found an empty booth. Good music was

playing, *Kill Bill* was being projected on the back wall. A man with a Chinese rice hat was

walking around. He looked over at us and I told him that I liked his hat. A waitress bought us our

next drinks. After six shots and two mixed drinks within a half hour, I was drunk. Mary sat close

to me and Joseph moved to my side. He caressed my hand and touched my thigh. I was still

conscious enough to feel uncomfortable. I pushed his hand away.

"I miss you," Mary said to me, "I love you."

She hugged me.

People from the table next to us took our picture. Joseph took my face in his hands and

kissed me hard. Mary turned my face to her and kissed me. I preferred kissing girls. They were

gentler and less spit was involved. I couldn't deny that I was physically attracted to Mary. I was

very aware of the flash of the camera and the fact that I had a boyfriend.

"I need some air," I said after another round of shots. The last three round of shots, I finished their share. I wanted to ask why they weren't taking their shots. They followed me outside.

"Do you guys smoke?" I asked.

"Weed sometimes, yeah."

"No. Cigarettes."

I took out the pack I had just bought. I had quit and hadn't smoked in over six months.

"No, we've never smoked."

"Well, here you go."

They each took a cigarette. I lit us up and we smoked.

"You're corrupting us," Joseph said.

We went back inside and took two more rounds of shots. I finished all of Mary's. I could

no longer walk straight. I ran outside, leaving my things inside. Mary ran with me across the

street from the bar. In the middle of the sidewalk I puked. Mary was rubbing my back. People

were walking by.

"I'm sorry guys," I slurred. "I'm throwing up so I'm sorry for that."

"It's okay," Mary said. "They don't care. It just smells like alcohol and you're really hot.

It's okay."

My puke splattered on the sidewalk and looked granulated like wet salt left over from winter's snow.

After I was finished, Mary guided me back across the street. A cab almost hit me. I

tripped up onto the sidewalk. I headed toward the entrance of the bar. The man wearing the

Chinese rice hat put his hands up.

"You can't go back in there."

"Why? I really like your hat."

"You're too drunk. You've had way too much to drink."

"But my things are still in there."

"Your friend can go get them."

Mary went in and got my things.

I remember hands on my arm. I remember being guided from the front of the bar. Mary came back out.

"I'm sorry I got kicked out of the bar. I'm really so sorry I got kicked out the bar." I don't remember what they said. We walked from the bar and stopped at a group of people that looked around our age. Mary turned to one of the boys. "Do you wanna made out?" she asked him.

They started making out. Joseph watched. He seemed to be squinting.

"Do you wanna make out?" the boy standing next to me asked.

"Sure," I said. I thought it was funny that I just threw up. I tried to shove my tongue in his mouth but he wouldn't let me.

We kept walking. I remember talking to a lot of people on the subway. I gave someone

my number. We switched trains and got on the A going out to Brooklyn. Where were we going?

I thought I was going to Mary's place.

"Do you guys live together?"

"Yeah," Joseph said.

"I didn't know you guys lived in Brooklyn."

They looked at each other.

"Yeah, we do," Mary said. "My uncle owns the building. It's just a room and we have to share a bathroom with the floor, but it's home."

I thought about the poor girl who lost her virginity to Joseph. I hoped I would be able to find my way home in the morning.

We got off the train to an empty station and climbed out of the station to an empty street.

Scaffolding was everywhere. Buildings were boarded up. I can't remember walking to the

apartment building. On their floor I saw room after room with closed red doors. It looked like a

funhouse. Mary opened the door to their room. It was the smallest apartment I had ever seen. The

bed, the dresser and small refrigerator fit like puzzle pieces into the room. There was barely

enough room to walk around unless someone was on the bed.

I don't remember lying down on the bed. I remember Joseph on top of me and ripping my

shirt. He scratched my chest. I touched it. When I lifted my hand there was blood. I asked him to

stop. I remember Mary asking questions that scared me.

"You want me to touch you?" she asked. "You feel so good. Really, it's okay."

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Her hands were already on my chest, my shirt had disappeared. She was naked and I couldn't remember when that had happened. Joseph was biting my neck. I told him to stop, that

my boyfriend would see. He didn't stop. Mary had her hands down my pants. Joseph was trying

to take my pants off. I held on to them with all my drunken might. They had already been

unzipped. I managed to crawl away, he managed to pull them down a little more. Again and

again it happened, cat and mouse.

I was tired of saying no. I was tired of hearing Mary's low, sensual voice complimenting

my body. My body was tired, my eyes were closed. I wondered if I would enjoy this under

different circumstances. Mary's nipple was brushing up against my mouth. Joseph's weight kept

me from moving. I let her put it in my mouth. Joseph's hand was down my pants and I struggled

to pull it away.

I was being raped by my friends. It had always been someone who was supposed to be my friend. It was always someone who said they loved me. They kept at it. They took my lack of resistance as cooperation. I felt Joseph get up. I watched him put a condom on. I held on to the waist of my pants.

Joseph couldn't get it up. He was too drunk. He wanted my help. He was in my mouth

before I knew what I was doing. He finally stopped. He couldn't do it. He collapsed next to me.

Mary was lying on the other side of him. I was lying down. I turned from him. He took me by the

waist and pulled me next to him. I tried to put space in between us but he held on tighter, put

both his arms around me. He was still touching me, but gentler now. I passed out while they

were still awake.

I woke in the morning to his arm still around me. I traced the cracks in the walls. I listened to the early morning traffic. The curtain on the only window in the room was the same

color as the curtain in my childhood bedroom—the place where I still can't sleep at night when I

visit. I tried moving away from Joseph. My head was pulsating. He pulled me back, put his hand

down my pants, touched my chest. I wiggled out of his grasp only to have him sit up and pull me

back, pin me beneath him and try again what he had failed at the night before. I was sober now. I

hit him, pushed him off me. I stood up. I had no shirt on, no bra, my pants were undone. I covered myself.

"Where's my shirt and bra?"

Mary woke up and said, "You're leaving already?"

"Yeah, I gotta go."

I was dizzy and not thinking about what had happened the night before. At that moment, I

blamed everything on the alcohol. I couldn't find my shirt, my phone, my bra, my shoes, my

money. Mary took a shirt out of the drawer.

"You can wear my shirt."

"No. I need my shirt."

She helped me look for my things. She was wearing a long robe. She looked like the Mary I had first met. Joseph was half asleep on the bed. "I saw that Joseph was ready to jump on you again this morning."

I didn't know what to say. I took my shirt and bra from her hands as soon as she found

them. I put them on. I found my shoes under the bed and put them on. I found my phone and

money on the floor and put them in my pockets. I put on my jacket. I let Mary hug me.

"I miss you. We'll hang out soon."

I left. I didn't know where in Brooklyn I was. I took the hour ride on the C train back into

Harlem. I felt ill on the train. My mouth was still salty from tasting them. I tried falling asleep

but I was aware of people looking at me. They could tell what had just happened. The skin on

my neck hurt but I paid it no attention. I tried to remember everything I could from the previous

night. I had trouble remembering some things. I wondered what happened after I fell asleep. I

wondered if they heard me saying no, if they heard me asking to stop, if Mary saw me trying to

push Joseph off of me. I tried to convince myself that it was no one's fault. I tried to convince

myself that it wasn't my fault, that I was drunk, that I tried stopping them.

I arrived home. I told my boyfriend about getting kicked out of the bar. I got changed and

hid my torn shirt from him.

"What the hell is on your neck?"

I froze. I felt the skin on my face fire up.

"I wasn't going to tell you," I said. "This asshole at the bar got kicked out after he attacked me. I should show you the shirt."

I showed him the shirt but I could tell that he didn't believe me. His face closed up. He

pursed his lips. He didn't look at me. He told me that he was upset, that I should have told the

police. He asked if it wasn't Mary and Joseph roping me into a threesome. I laughed. The old wound of not being able to tell anyone. The old wound of being afraid that no one would believe.

"Why didn't you fight him off?" he asked.

The old wound of someone misplacing the blame and me believing the accusation.

I looked in the mirror. On both sides of my neck were purple and red bruised teeth marks

almost the size of the palm of my hand. I put a scarf around my neck so my boyfriend wouldn't

have to see the bruises. When I was a child, I smiled so no one would know.

I slept most of the day. I fell asleep and dreamt of the salt in the walls. When my boyfriend woke up from his nap, I covered my neck with the sheet and hoped the bruises would

vanish by the start of the school week. I couldn't let myself be hurt by the fact that he didn't

believe me. I had told him a lie. What hurt, in covering this new wound, was that he wouldn't

believe it if I told him the truth. It was the kitchen all over again and my family who couldn't

know, who wouldn't believe me. My stomach rumbled. I was afraid to keep quiet and remain

unstitched. I was afraid that I'd drown in healing before the scar even appeared.

## The Fishless Summer

Libby's momma sent her out again, this time with the homemade fishing net.

Libby held on to its handle and fingered the thick string of its netting. She tilted her head and

pursed her lips. She put her hand into the pocket of her loose cotton dress and tapped her leg.

"Can I see them?" Libby asked for the second time.

Her momma looked away and put the sheet to her face, hiding the tremble in her lower lip.

"Catch whatever you can, honey," her momma said, slowly shaking her head.

Her momma's face was puffy and the nurse was carrying the bundle of soiled sheets, as if

they were living, across the room and into the bathroom. Her momma tried smiling, but the

subtle smell of metal and sweat was still in the room and her papa sat at the kitchen table in the

same position he had been in for the past three hours. The unplugged phone cord was still tangled around his limp fingers, the two wool blankets were still folded in his lap. "And wear the hat, please," she said, "You burn so easily, honey."

As soon as Libby turned with the intention of going into the bathroom, the nurse came

out and helped secure the hat on the girl's tiny, blond head. The hat was made of thick woven

straw; a deep itch like a loss of blood arose from underneath her forehead. Her pale hand

scratched what skin it could get at under the brim and then fell to her side. She didn't dare

complain over her momma's tears and her papa's fallen face.

She glanced over to the bathroom's open door once more. She could see half of the



bathtub and the red soaked sheets that hung over the side. She waited for movement knowing there would be none.

With a light push from the nurse she pattered into the living room which was clear of the company gathered there last night. A single gift had been forgotten by its giver and lay alone pushed halfway under the couch. She unraveled the ribbon from around the box, put it in her pocket and came out onto the wrap-around porch. The sun was gaining height, the land was quiet and clean, but something darkened a spot to the girl's right. The old man had stopped digging to look at the girl. He was known to her only as the landowner—proprietor of all the fields that she wasn't allowed in. He wiped his muddy hands on his overalls and lifted one to her. Her little hand returned the greeting. She turned from him and headed through the shallow woods and beyond to the wide meadow with the stream. The morning sun had dried half the meadow of its dew—the other half was still spotted with the shadows of the saplings that lined its edges. The green was streaked with blue flowers growing in pairs. Just yesterday, she and her papa picked enough to fill her momma's favorite vase.

"These are perfect, don't you think?" he had said.

"Do you think they'll know what flowers are when they come out?" Libby asked as she dug a naked toe into the ground.

Her papa put a hand on her head and said, "They'll know that they're beautiful. That they'll know."

She now ran through them until she was wet to her knees, until she felt a stitch in her side. She fell to the ground, dropping the net beside her, and let the coupled flowers surround her

head. She reached her arms toward the sky pretending her fingers were petals, her arms the stems, her body the root.

She heard the small, trickling voice of the stream. Attracted by the sound, she went to it

dragging the net behind her. The water was cool for midsummer and she noticed there were still

no fish. Last summer there were still a few—she had even helped her papa catch a couple of

them. He had said to her,

“I don’t think we’ll be seein’ anymore of this fishin’ business around here.”

“Why, Papa?”

“The fish are movin’ on...they’re movin’ on, see.”

Wishing she was fishing beside her papa again, she began to hop the stones that lead through the water and to the other side. She stood in the middle of the stream when something in

the water caught her attention.

“A fish!” she cried out, “A fish, Papa!”

She turned to run to the house, but stopped remembering what was inside. She tread back

to stand on the same rock in the middle of the stream. Carefully, she dipped her fishing net into

the water. She followed the shape until she found that what she was seeing was only a reflection.

She looked up to where she thought it was coming from. In the corner of her eye she caught something blue and flying. Turning quickly, she lost her balance and cut her foot on a

sharp rock. With the aid of the net’s handle against a rock, she regained her balance. Blood

trickled onto the rock, through its cracks and down into the water. She dipped her foot in the

water to stem the flow of blood. She held it there, dry-eyed and keeping close watch on the blue

butterfly that was now circling high above her head. It skipped making dizzying patterns through the air.

Her head was terribly itchy—she took the hat off and scratched. The hat was dropped into the water and forgotten. She moved quickly to chase the butterfly as it flew around and around

the perimeter of the meadow. Behind her, the hat flowed downstream to a place farther than her

wandering had ever brought her. Holding the net was hindering her progress so she put the net

over her head—the pocket of the net covered the length of her face.

She followed the butterfly, limping around on her cut foot until the sun revealed all the

meadow's edges. The sun was hot against her skin by then and she tired from chasing the blue

blur around—it was now hard to see against the sky. She sat down to nurse her foot, rubbing the

skin around the wound until the sharpest of the pain was relieved. She lay down in the sun and

fell to dreaming.

When she awoke, the sun was at its highest and she thought she heard her mother calling

for her. Closely, she listened but heard nothing over the stream. She took the net off her head.

Unaware of the interwoven pattern left on her face from sunburn, she made her way back to the

house, leaving the net behind.

The landowner was still sitting outside, now sipping on lemonade under the shade of the

porch. He was dirtier than before and when he noticed Libby coming toward the house he stood. "Libby," he said, "now don't go in there. You can't go botherin' your mamma, now. Ya hear? Hey, now."

She saw the hole to the side of the house, the shovel beside it stuck in the earth like a flag, and the front door wide open. She heard her momma crying and her papa saying her momma's name over and over again.

"Lily, Lily, Lily..."

She limped into the house against the landowner's warning. The smell was still there but

the sheets around her mamma weren't red anymore and her papa wasn't sitting at the table. He

stood at the window, where the blue flowers stood in her mamma's favorite vase, with his back

facing the room. The wool blankets were no longer folded. Each one was on the kitchen table

and wrapped around something small and oblong. Rice-paper string held them together in a

pattern that made the blankets look plaid.

"Momma," the girl said, "what's Papa doin'?"

Her mamma's head was in the nurse's bosom, her shoulders shook. She reached her arm out to the side, as if signaling for something.

"Leave your mamma alone, Libby," her papa said, "Not now, not now." He turned to look at his daughter. "What's on your face?"

He looked at the pattern left on her face and then to the two bundles on the kitchen table.

"You shoulda left your hat on like your mamma said."

"Libby," her mamma whispered, "get the flowers for Momma."

Libby took the flowers and vase from the window sill and brought them to her mamma. "Now," she said, "don't you give 'em to me. You picked 'em for your brothers. Let them see just how beautiful they are."

Libby turned to the table, unsure of what to do. Suddenly and almost carelessly, her papa

lifted the bundles by their strings and left the house. Libby quietly followed, curious to see how

deep the bundles would lay in their hole. The landowner held her back by the shoulders at the

front door. Her papa put the bundles in the dark hole, stood a moment and then turned to the

landowner.

"Pack it good, Barry, pack it good."

“Yessir,” the man said, releasing the girl.

Her papa walked away from the house and the landowner walked to the hole. The girl

stood at the edge of the porch and watched as her papa stopped at the edge of the woods. He fell

to his knees, his shoulders trembling. The girl ran down the steps but held herself back when he

abruptly got up and turned back toward the house. He walked past her without a word and

through the front door. Her momma howled from within—the awful noise pushed Libby further

from the house. She stood with her weight on her good foot and watched the landowner fill the

hole. The dirt fell heavily in clumps down the hole and onto the bundles. Her foot throbbed as

she stood listening to the sickening thuds. She thought she heard a baby cry, but realized the

choked sound had come from her. She wiped the tears from her stinging face and put the vase

against her cheek to feel the coolness of its porcelain.

With the hole filled the landowner stood a moment, moving his lips. Libby came close

and plucked a single coupled flower from the vase, tied the ribbon from her pocket around them,

and in the soft dirt she stuck its thin stem. She waited for disapproval from the landowner, but he

did nothing. He only watched her, his face wrinkled with sadness as she stepped onto the mound,

dug her toes in and let the coolness of the dirt sooth her cut foot. With a small shake of his head,

he walked away down the road with the shovel slung over his shoulder. With her feet sunk in the

dirt, Libby watched the landowner grow smaller in the distance.

