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A Change in Southern Character through Southern Characters

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Clemson University

A Change in Southern Character through Southern Characters:

The Role of Literature in Southern Culture

Emma McCracken

Creative Thesis

Morris, Brown, Lemons

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Abstract

This dissertation traces the patterns in southern literature from the 1950s to 2019 that reveals a difference between an Old and New South that occurs circa 2000, when technology and urbanization was booming in the American south. However, it is important to note that it is not only the medium used to share works that is globalizing southern literature, but it is the way its writers have begun to break away from old tropes and traditions in the content of their writing. This pattern is best traced through the analysis of works by contemporary southern writers like Jill McCorkle, Randall Kenan, Karen Russell, and James Hannaham who, while setting their stories in the south, choose to steer away from southern tropes of the past and further the push for an open and honest society through their characters, establishing a bridge to connect with a wider audience and bring the old south into the twenty-first century. With this, these writers are contributing to a more global discussion of literature in a way that preserves the distinctly southern sense of place, while developing southern characters that often make forward-thinking decisions for the time in which their stories take place. This kind of writing works to fuel the idea that perhaps southerners are more socially and culturally aware than many non-southerners may think. Included in this project are samples of my own short stories that contribute to this literary movement toward the New South.

Keywords: southern, contemporary, fiction, history, New South, Old South, short stories

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A Change in Southern Character through Southern Characters

In 1945, a group of book collectors in North Carolina launched a magazine, *The Southern Packet*, inspired by their interest in sharing books written and/or published in the southern region of the United States with a widespread reading audience. As the magazine became more popular, the team realized the power and influence the use of this medium could potentially allow. An editor familiar with the metropolis of the industrial and urban north recognized that the still majorly rural south was behind in terms of progression and advised the team to question “the wisdom of any project which might continue to make the south conscious of itself.” A member of *The Southern Packet* team, George Stephens, states in his 1949 article “Southern Authors Reveal a Changing South” that, “Perhaps our editor might say that until the South catches up with the rest of the nation, every legitimate means, including regional publications, must be used to bring the best thinking of the region into focus on the task of getting from where we are to where we should be.” He continues by claiming that this focusing of ideas had already become a discussion amongst people in higher positions such as “bankers, sociologists, doctors, or historians [who] have their regional journals,” but that it was the “layman...who need a clearing house for ideas. And that is the need which *The Southern Packet* seeks to serve” (Stephens 216-218).

Seventy years have passed since then, and while the South is still often viewed by other regions and even some southerners as lagging or somehow disconnected from the rest of the world, new forms and mediums of communication in today’s society are allowing us to reach an even broader “layman” audience than Stephens could have ever

imagined for his forward-thinking southern magazine of the 1950s. With blogging, creative writing forums, webcasts, and the countless other mediums through which our communities across the globe share ideas, contemporary southern writers have the power to reconstruct southern literature in a way that joins readers across regions and nations together, rather than further alienating the South into another world too different to read about, and they are beginning to take advantage of the opportunity.

Patrick Horn, an English professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, writes in his 2016 essay “Reading 21st Century Southern Fiction” that, “In a world rendered smaller and more connected by the 24-hour news cycle and the global barrage of social media, the South (in letters) looks less and less distinct from the rest of the United States and the world” (Horn 17). However, it is important to note that it is not only the medium used to share works that is globalizing southern literature, but it is the way its writers have begun to break away from old tropes and traditions in the content of their writing. This pattern is best traced through the analysis of works by contemporary southern writers like Jill McCorkle, Randall Kenan, Karen Russell, and James Hannaham who, while setting their stories in the south, choose to steer away from southern tropes of the past and further the push for an open and honest society through their characters, establishing a bridge to connect with a wider audience and bring the old south into the twenty-first century. With this, these writers are contributing to a more global discussion of literature in a way that preserves the distinctly southern sense of place, while developing southern characters that often make forward-thinking decisions for the time in

which their stories take place. This kind of writing works to fuel the idea that perhaps southerners are more socially and culturally aware than many non-southerners may think.

First it is important to discuss what traits of southern literature set it apart from other works of fiction. It is no secret that the south's claim to infamy is its shameful history of slavery and deeply-rooted racism. It is this shame that has led to a sort of hush-hush mentality for southerners. In other words, the south is often viewed as a region of people who tend to deny this past or avoid the subject altogether, pretending it didn't happen or in denial thinking that it has all been resolved. This occurs not only on the topic of race, but also LGBTQ rights, abortion, criminality, mental health, and other subjects that veer away from what might be considered the "normal" or "right" direction. However, it is also no secret that the south has produced successful experimental literature throughout its history that digs up these roots and lays them out in front of its reader. After all, one recipe for a good story is a region living in unresolved conflict, and many southern writers take advantage of this by creating stories of characters born out of the south's messy, complicated, disastrous past—characters that are informed by and reflective of the culture of that region, and work to give a voice to those who feel silenced because of it.

While the south has been producing literature since its birth, there is a clear shift between works of the old south and works of the new south that occurs circa 2000. When comparing the works of mid-twentieth-century authors such as Eudora Welty or Flannery O'Connor to those of contemporary writers such as James Hannaham or Karen Russell, this shift becomes apparent. For example, Welty in her 1941 short story "Why I Live at

the P.O.,” uses her characters to exemplify the way southern families rely on this hush-hush mentality when Stella-Rondo refuses to speak the truth about her child, Shirley-T, who Stella-Rondo falsely claims was legally adopted, but in truth is her biological daughter. Unfortunately, by the end of the story, this secret leads Sister to move permanently to the post office. The family refuses to communicate with her ever again, though she was the one trying to express the truth about Shirley-T to the family. It seems as if, for all the characters in this story except for Sister, lying, deception, and denial are easier forms of communication than openness and honesty about a difficult topic. While Sister eventually breaks away from this familial pattern, she ultimately is alone in her endeavor.

Similarly, in Flannery O’Connor’s 1953 short story “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” O’Connor uses the character of the grandmother to bring to light the fault in believing that other’s morals must align with one’s own. This is best exemplified during the grandmother’s conversation with the Misfit when she is begging him to spare her life. She says, “You’ve got good blood! I know you wouldn’t shoot a lady! I know you’re from nice people!” (O’Connor 132) Here the grandmother aligns the Misfit in accordance to her own definition of goodness and righteousness when, fact, the Misfit has his own perception of goodness. In saying “I know you wouldn’t shoot a lady,” the grandmother assumes that the Misfit will give in to her guidelines of grace because she feels morally superior to him. By the end of the story, however, and in her last hope for saving her life, the grandmother states: “Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children!” (132) Here she only now is beginning to see their common humanity, both equal in death.

After the Misfit kills the woman, O'Connor ends the story with him saying, "She would of been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every second of her life" (133). That is to say, if she had lived her life understanding her common humanity with others, maybe she could have lived a truly good life rather than her own definition of one.

Both of these earlier southern works share a similar goal: to express the idea that being open to others, no matter the circumstance and no matter how they might differ from one's own idea of what is good or right, is the truly "good" choice as many non-southern *and* southern readers might agree, especially once empathizing with these characters. However, the manner in which they convey this message to readers differs from that of late-twentieth-century southern writers such as Jill McCorkle and Randall Kenan. In fact, McCorkle states in an interview with *Southern Cultures* magazine that, "...southern literature reflects a much larger image these days. In fact, I don't trust the literature that hasn't grown beyond the easy tropes. If the tea is too sweet, or somebody is hollering for Memaw and Pepaw and Goober in the Chinaberry tree, I'm out of there" (Kenan 8). This turn away from the tropes of past writers can be revealed through McCorkle's first novel, published in 1984, *The Cheer Leader*. Protagonist Jo Spencer is characterized as a young woman on the "right," proper, and family-expected path to success in that she is popular, has good grades, and seems to have perfect control of her life in her small town in North Carolina. She even describes herself as "fit," clearly opposing O'Connor's "misfit" character. However, Jo is thrown off course when not-so-fit bad-boy Red Williams steals her attention and is the catalyst that leads her to

becoming obsessive, anorexic, and an abuser of drugs, many topics that would be hush-hush in the writing of Welty's time, around forty years prior. This story is told through snapshots of Jo's life as she looks back on it from an adult perspective and tries to piece together where and how everything went wrong. In doing so, however, she arrives at the realization that perhaps it wasn't "wrong" at all, echoing O'Connor's message that one's perception of "good" or "right" is fluid. McCorkle's contemporary, Lee Smith, writes about *The Cheer Leader*: "...[McCorkle] stakes out her own new territory: the New South with its subdivisions and Winn-Dixies and country music...and dope-smoking cheerleaders" (McCorkle). In other words, although setting her story in the south, McCorkle chooses to avoid reliance on the southern tropes of writers passed, or, at the very least, blend those tropes into a more modern and open atmosphere. In doing so, her work promotes a more open discussion on difficult subjects. Unlike Welty and O'Connor, McCorkle invites the readers into the mind of the struggling protagonist, paving the way for the pivotal change in southern literature to come in the early twenty-first century.

This transcendence can also be seen in Randall Kenan's 1992 short story "Clarence *and* the Dead." In this story, young protagonist Clarence serves as a medium through which the dead can communicate. In his small North Carolina town, people are taken aback by his ungodly and seemingly magical gift. In choosing to have this protagonist be pre-school age, Kenan aims to give Clarence credibility in that he really has no motivation or reason to make these visions up or lie. In trusting this protagonist in his unique abilities, the reader can begin to empathize or find merit in it, even if they themselves do not believe in clairvoyance. This is yet another example of how utilizing

the “Other” as a sympathetic protagonist can allow readers across cultures to get into the mind of that other person, often leading towards an understanding or even appreciation for the mindset, values, or culture of someone else. For example, the story shows that the more the townspeople find merit in what Clarence is saying, the more they ostracize him. Finally, Ellsworth Batts is convinced by his ability and the two begin to show an “unnatural affection” for one another until they are chased out of town and die shortly after. While this story more openly handles the subjects of clairvoyance and sexual desire, the characters, like in Welty and O’Connor’s stories, are ultimately left in defeat when put up against the characters who represent the hush-hush mentality. In other words, they are shown trying to live and be themselves, but are found not free to do so or somehow imprisoned for it whether through death or silence or oppression. Lastly, it is important to recognize that these late-twentieth-century works use language that begins to drift away from the dialect of older works. For example, while Welty and O’Connor’s stories make use of tropes such as abandoned ghost towns, front porch gossip, and cheesy nicknames through heavy southern dialect, writers like McCorkle and Kenan seem to dilute this enough to where it may exist in their stories, but not so much that it creates a world too obscure for others to connect with or read about.

These works paved the way for twenty-first century southern writers to globalize a similar message. James Hannaham discusses his 2015 novel *Delicious Foods* with Sonya Chung in her *The Millions* article “A Happy Sort of Pessimism.” He states his intention for the novel as “putting a metaphorical defibrillator up against [the readers’] received ideas about discrimination even more than race” in order to “[start] a

conversation about a power relationship or power food chain, really, that is hardly exclusive to black Americans and white Americans, despite how much we love to privilege it and pretend that no other struggle matters” (Chung). In other words, discrimination goes far beyond skin color and far beyond solely America, which allows his novel to reach audiences far beyond the American South. Like southern authors of the past, Hannaham aims to establish a common sense of humanity across cultures. For example, he suggests “that love — even the love of one’s family — pales in comparison to the instinctual desire to survive; my suspicion is that the desire to survive, for those who haven’t lost it, is jammed into our brain stem or something, connecting us to our true animal nature” (Chung). This statement reminds readers that no matter one’s individual obstacle or hardship or lifestyle, one thing most humans share is the innate will to live. In calling to the connection between humanity and its animal nature, he is able to level the playing field expressing that no human is above or below any other. However, he expresses this in way that differs from the works of the twentieth century in that he speaks very openly about drug addiction, so much so that the drug itself is a character referred to as “Scotty.” In doing so, he builds off of the previous works of McCorkle and Kenan by inviting the reader into the conscious of the characters. With this structure and stylistic choice, there is more room for an honest discussion of the subject for the reader—no holding back. This approach has led to this novel becoming extremely controversial in that readers question Hannaham’s choice of revealing, in a vivid and disturbing manner, the mistreatment of minorities in today’s food industry. While some might argue this novel is taking two steps back by choosing not to exemplify minorities

as well-treated, it is in fact working to stimulate an honest discussion about a very real and relevant topic. He is, in fact, calling attention to the truth that no matter how far society has come, it is still lagging. Whether one agrees with his approach or not, there is no denying that people are *talking* about this novel, stimulating a broad and wide discussion of these difficult topics.

Similarly, Karen Russell's 2015 short story "The Prospectors" tells about best friends Clara and Aubby who leave their home of Florida for the northwest to make a living as prospectors stealing gold and other valuables from extravagant parties. This story, taking place in the era of the Depression and the New Deal, takes on topics of physical and emotional abuse and involves much repetition in regard to secrecy and denial of truths. By setting her story in the 1930s, Russell offers a new and haunting perspective of American history. It is this silence and dishonesty born out of shame that led Clara and Aubby to be trapped in the same "cage" as the ghosts of the dead C.C.C workers. By the end of the story, when the silent and abused Clara uses her voice to speak the truth about the Evergreen Lodge, Aubby says of Clara, "She foamed red, my best friend, forming the words we had been stifling all night, the spell-bursting ones" (Russell). In finally breaking the silence, Clara essentially breaks the spell that has bound them to the sort of prison of the Evergreen Lodge. The final image of the story calls upon Maya Angelou's 1969 autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in that Clara is described as holding the yellow bird that was once caged inside the Evergreen Lodge, previously described as singing so loudly it "split [their] eardrums." Just as Clara and Aubby are freed at the end, the caged bird is freed as well: "Clara opened her satchel and

lifted the yellow bird onto her lap, and I heard it shrieking the whole way down the mountain” (Russell). While the caged bird is often used as a symbol of racism, it can be applied to oppression of any kind, including abuse, as seen in this work. This is yet another southern work that attempts to normalize difficult topics and exemplify characters that break the cycle of denial, secrecy, and oppression, further contributing to the global conversation that emanates from these contemporary works.

There are many writers today, however, that rely on the tropes and traditions of in their depictions of the southern setting like Rick Bragg or Ron Rash who often set their stories in the rural, sort of alienated south. While they do portray female and minority characters as well-treated and more respected than in the reality of the old south, their approach is rooted in nostalgia. This is not to say there is no place for such works as they are entertaining, reminiscent, and preserve that traditional, southern, literary voice, but they contribute much less to the contemporary literary movement towards the new south—a movement that works to give a voice to the silent.

In tracing these patterns, one can see that while works of the old and new south have similar goals and intentions, the way these are presented differ greatly. Two factors that play a role in these changes in southern literature over time are the rapid development in economic growth in the southern region along with the rapid development in technology that both took off around the turn of the twenty-first century. For example,

“In the 1930s, the Agrarians accorded special meaning to rural life, particularly the farm, in their definitions of southern identity. For them, the South seemed an

organic and rooted region in contrast to the North, where real estate development and urban sprawl evoked a faceless, raw capitalism. By the end of the twentieth century, however, economic and social forces had converged to create a modernized South.” (Bone)

With this information, the south’s tie to the land becomes evident, but so does its ability to incorporate itself into modern society. This is reflected in the contemporary works discussed in that the characters, while derived from or have a strong connection to the southern setting, are still portrayed as a part of the modern world in that it has drug-abusing cheerleaders, gay clairvoyants, etc. in a place that has shopping malls, busy highways, and, yes, the Internet.

As computer use and Internet access became more and more convenient and widespread beginning at the end of the twentieth century, so too did written communication forums such as blogs, webcasts, or even Twitter only a few years later. This ease of access and use to spread ideas instantly to people anywhere in the world allowed for a boom in the way people communicate across the world, bringing the south closer and closer to the rest of the nation and beyond. It is important, then, that millennial writers take advantage of this medium that writers like O’Connor, Welty, even McCorkle and Kenan at the time, lacked.

So what do writers do with this opportunity, this responsibility? In a recent *Southern Cultures* magazine article, “The Deader Mule: A Southern Fiction Roundtable,” Randall Kenan advises young authors of today in stating,

“It seems to me that the better millennial southern writers shun nostalgia and false historical romance. They write about the way we live now. They write about: hog factory farms, the growing immigrant community, health care, cell phone reception, free WiFi, and LGBT rights. Yes, they love farm-to-table and are besotted by craft beers, but that’s part of their flavor. Nonetheless, they are aware of and informed by the past. They really are the New South and represent our best hope to remain America’s most relevant, loud, high-spirited, authentic voice.”

(Kenan)

New southern writers are joining an ongoing movement on the paths of writers that came before them. In tracing the differences and similarities in the way southern literature has changed and developed over the past approximately seventy years, it becomes evident that no matter despite the differences between people of all kinds, our common humanity is a constant. Mid-twentieth-century authors reveal the way southern characters are inclined to not talk about certain issues. Late-twentieth-century authors show southern characters beginning to talk more openly about their hardships that may be frowned upon, but still blended with hints of dialect and tropes, though noticeably less than their predecessors. Early twenty-first-century literature, however, seems to dive head-first into open discussions and descriptions of the struggling protagonists. This, in combination with the ease of sharing works that comes with twenty-first-century technology, contemporary southern writers have the opportunity to reach across nations through open and honest conversation through the use of their characters that serve as a reflection of the culture out of which they are derived. It is through literature that the south has the

ability to reconstruct its image in a way that joins it with the rest of the world rather than further alienating itself, as that only seems to reinforce the idea of the “Other” that the southern literary movement of the new south aims to dissolve.

The Trailer Bar

I didn't want to visit the Trailer Bar. At any bar, the meaningless chatter amongst loud, whiskey-breathed boys and girls spilling their drinks all over a sticky, splintered-wood floor would drain me of any energy I might have. I felt obligated to go, though. After all, it was nice of my friend Olivia to host us for the weekend, and it was the *one* place she wanted to go while we were in town.

We went to visit her parent's house in Topsail, North Carolina. She had talked up the Trailer Bar for weeks before our weekend vacation. It was originally supposed to be the three of us—Olivia, Carrie, and me, a relaxing weekend, I thought—but at the last minute Carrie invited a few boys they had met the week before at a local bar crawl. That's what they told me later, anyway. I must have had a migraine that day, stayed in bed. It was like that a lot—Olivia and Carrie gallivanting about with their the-city-is-ours kind of spirit, and me, lifeless with exhaustion from the standard day-to-day routine. Always having to “recharge my batteries,” as my mother used to call it.

It was always hard to say no to people like Olivia. In the weeks following my mother's death, I had transformed into a sort of robot—going through the motions as programmed, but unable to feel much at all. With her death I lost a part of myself, her only child. I kept my head down, never said much. But Olivia talked to me anyway. She talked a lot, which seemed to make up for my silence, and in a bright voice like a child's, but mature and confident. She never asked much about me, though. And I never thought I had a story of any interest.

I didn't feel like a normal girl anymore, not since the accident. And normally I wouldn't so willingly oblige to a weekend of socializing. I much preferred the security of staying in the house. But the beach always smelled like home. Real home. The scent of the wet air alone would be worth the effort a night at this Trailer Bar would require of me. I could fake being okay for a little while, at least, and Olivia made for the perfectly peppy example to follow. So I trailed behind her and the rest of the group into the bar.

It was a trailer, all right—a long, tan rectangle going straight back. I scanned the room to see a crowd of locals, most of them in their forties, many of them tattooed, and a few of them missing some of their teeth. They seemed to feel comfortable there, as I assumed it was their usual spot. Twenty-two and dressed in the white skinny jeans and flower crop-top Olivia talked me into wearing, I suddenly felt as piercingly bright as one of the neon bar signs. I scoped out a clear space at the opposite end near the band's empty stage. With no one performing, I thought, no one would have a reason to stand there or even look in that direction. So I meticulously weaved through the clammy tangle of arms and legs and waited, hoping the others I had arrived with would make their way over, too. When they eventually did, I waited some more for someone to suggest we order drinks.

Tinny country music blared through the speakers that vibrated the floorboards under my feet. A burly man next to me caught me checking my watch.

“Got somewhere to be?” he said, butting elbows with me in a way that made me cringe.

“Anywhere, but here,” I said.

“Aw, it ain’t so bad. But my place is better,” he said with a sly yellowed grin and I felt a large, rough hand cup the curve of my jeans.

“Excuse me!” I said, slapping his hand away.

“Aw, you’re no fun,” he said, and turned back to chat with his comrades.

I could only see Carrie, so I rushed over to her and told her what happened.

“Laurie!” she shouted over the music as she took her change from the bartender.

“That’s crazy!” she said. “Was he cute, though?”

“What? No,” I said, sort of stunned at the question.

“Ah, that’s too bad. Well, hey, every girl needs their ass grabbed every now and then. Just take it as a compliment.” She waved at our friends to join us.

It didn’t take me long to realize I wasn’t being listened to. What was the point of talking? The rest of our group gathered around and started a round of the game where they guess at the conversations between others in the bar, usually reverting to unclever sex jokes. To look busy, I stuffed my chilly hands in the pockets of my denim jacket and felt something smooth—an olive shell I had forgotten I picked up from my walk on the beach earlier at sunset. I rubbed my thumb back and forth against it. It felt like soft bed sheets dried by the sunshine on a clothesline, and reminded me of a seashell picture frame I kept by my bed that my mother had made for me out of her own shell collection. She told me that olive shells were hard to find, but their beauty was worth the effort of the search. Centered in the frame, my mother and I are wearing matching dresses for Easter Sunday service, posing in front of a bush of bright pink azaleas that brought out the rouge

she had powdered on my cheeks that morning, the sun's rays making our faces glow a golden hue.

She raised me by herself in a coastal ghost town. She always referred to our little rental by the river as “the beach house,” though the only “beach” was thirty or so yards of store-bought sand along the river mud and itchy marsh grass. But on Saturday afternoons after pouring her glass of chardonnay, she would wheel me in a wagon down the path to our beach and watch me make friends with the fiddler crabs until the sunset. “Laurel, I am so *proud* of you,” she'd say on our walks home every now and then, kissing my kiddish blond hair and pulling me to her side. As I grew up she kept saying it, but I never really understood what it was she was so proud of.

I glanced over at a mirrored beer sign to try and see for myself, but was yet again faced with the paleness of my reflection, the dullness of my now dishwater-brown hair. I pulled some lip liner out of my back pocket and began the retouching process, the mental photo of my mother as my guide. I meticulously painted on the mask I would wear for the evening—a red lip to match hers. She would be proud, I thought, of my inherited ability to literally “put on a brave face.” Less impressed, maybe, by my unpainted fingernails chewed to the nub. I shoved my hands back in my pockets.

Every foam ceiling tile in the doublewide was painted a different beer logo. The vivid blues and yellows of beach scenes for Landshark and other tropical beers took me away from the place, at least for a moment. “What a cool idea,” I heard myself say to the space between me and the others. When I looked around for a response, each set of eyes shifted elsewhere. Guess I didn't say it loud enough. Besides, the bar owners probably

covered the tiles to hide the brown smoke and water stains that I'm sure were underneath the layers of the chipping acrylic paint. It was still a trailer after all, no matter how pretty they tried to make the ceiling look, or how they knocked out walls and installed a bar. I stretched my neck to one side and then the other, feeling the bones crack, thankful the volume of bar babble covered the pop-pop-pop of my vertebrae. I am programmed, after all, to follow social norms—well enough to know a social outing isn't the place for chiropractic stretches. I could practically hear my mother's voice over the sound of my bones cracking: "Laurel, that is not very lady-like," she'd say. But I had to do what I could to ease my inevitable headache and keep up the facade through the rest of the night.

I stuck by Olivia's side, mirroring her every move like a mime. When she ordered a new drink, I ordered one too. When she playfully laughed at a guy's lame joke, I laughed too. As long as Olivia was happy, I could mimic her enough to pass for a normal girl enjoying a night out with her friends.

Carrie, now much drunker than before, stumbled and draped her arm around me for balance. I tried not to shrink away from her with discomfort.

"Laurieeeee," she sang. "Hey, you should wear your hair down; it's so much prettier that way." She pulled out the hair tie securing my neat ponytail.

"Guys think it's way sexier when a girl's hair is, like, in her face a little."

"Oh," I said, trying to recall something I said or did that could have made her think I wanted to be sexier. But I faked a smile and shook my hair loose.

"How's that?" I said.

"Much better."

My head began to throb.

“Hey,” I said to Olivia, standing next to me, “Order me a Corona with a lime?” I opened her hand and put in a crumpled five-dollar bill, walking out before she could respond.

The newly tacked-on porch of the Trailer Bar smelled of fresh plywood that blended with the salty beach air. I took a deep inhale to relax, but it was too late. It was like a vise had clamped around either side of my skull, precisely pressing each temple so the pressure overtook my every thought. I couldn't tell how much time had gone by before I remembered where I was.

Half listening to the light conversation within the group, half scanning the bar porch for I don't know what, I wiped the cold glass of Corona back and forth across my forehead. The vise clamped tighter. I squeezed my eyes shut hard, drawing the tension elsewhere to give my temples a reprieve. I managed to tune back in to Carrie rushing through a swallow of her vodka cranberry to say, “Is that truck trying to tow you, Liv?”

The six of us looked across the florescent-lit parking lot to see a Surf City tow truck backing up to Olivia's car.

“Nah,” I said, “No way.”

Looking back, I suppose this conversational contribution of mine was a desperately hopeful attempt to deny what I could feel was about to become a head-squeezing disaster.

“Oh my god, he totally is!” Carrie said as she jogged off to save the car, the night, and Olivia's dying buzz.

The two ran ahead of me. Maybe it was in an effort to distract myself from the constant pressure of the vise, or maybe it was a way to feel included in something other than shallow bar-talk, but, like a ghost outside my own body, I watched myself follow them toward the tow truck.

Carrie and Olivia stood side-by-side as if to build a guarded wall with their bodies, confident in their ready approach to win back the car. Standing slightly behind them, I peered over Olivia's shoulder to see the tow man unwinding the chain to a large rusty hook. The vise pinched my brain like a too-tight belt on a too-wide waist until I could no longer focus on what was happening outside of my mind. Blurry bits of conversation passed by my ears.

Olivia's bright voice, weighed down with worry: "Sir, please don't tow my car. I'm just here on vacation with my friends...."

"What'chu cain't read?" I heard, and caught a glimpse of the tow man's chubby hand, dirt under the nails, pointing at a nearby sign.

"I can read. Look, I just didn't see the sign. Can't we work something out?"

"Nothin' I can do, darlin'. I got the call, and this is my job."

My mind was now louder than the crowded bar, louder than the points and laughter of the drunks waiting for their cab nearby, louder than the metal slam of the tow truck bed and the clinking and clunking of its rusted, oversized hook. Overwhelmed by my neurosis, I shut down. Now what felt like a hammer pounded rapidly against my chest; the needle-sized bit of a drill corkscrewed against the base of my skull, sending

what felt like pulsing shocks of electric waves through any part of my head that wasn't already constricted by the vise.

As these symptoms combined efforts to distract me from my environment, I mustered up the power to check back in to reality.

“Look, I've had Marines and shit try to jump me in this very parkin' lot, and I don't know who your friends are,” I heard the tow man say, a little more aggression beneath his accent this time.

Olivia responded, “You know what, I'm sorry if I'm being a bitch, but I'm not trying to get my car towed when I can get it right here.”

“And you know what, you *don't* know who our friends are, so maybe you should try the next car over,” Carrie stepped in to say.

I couldn't do it. My body was physically revolting my decision to fake being normal, being okay. It was like the drill in my temple had struck oil, and I felt it all flowing up—memories flooded, flashes of images of my mother's blood on the steering wheel and the clunking and clanking of the tow truck that hauled her crushed vehicle away. I looked to Olivia for guidance to pull myself together, but her face was red with frustration that something was about to get in the way of her perfect weekend. I tried with all the energy I had left to hold it all in, until it all come out. In vomit. In vomit, and all over the tow man's boots.

“Ah, shit, man!” he said, shaking off his boot, “Hey, why don't you worry about the friend you got right there? I'm towin' your ass. You can pick it up tomorrow for two-fifty.”

The tow man continued loading up the car. Olivia turned to me, and I became suddenly aware I had been standing silent and stationary for the entire episode.

“Damn it, Laurel, we were just about to talk him out of it! What the hell?” she said.

The hammer gave a hard, heavy pound to my chest, sending a crack through my bones—the drill whirred, the vise clamped, and Olivia’s now cheerless disposition weighed heavy on my aching shoulders. If I couldn’t be happy, at least I could be vicariously happy through Olivia. But I had just ruined the one night she had hopes for. And I knew what it felt like to be let down.

“Liv, I am *so* sorry. I don’t know what happened, I must have, like, mixed drinks or something,” I fibbed.

Walking back to the bar porch to meet back with the guys, I felt the tools let up enough for me to notice the tension they had caused—a sort of soreness. I hadn’t relaxed a single muscle, though, before an older woman yelled across the porch to me (it’s always me), “Hey! Dont’chu wanna tell them with the black car that they gon’ get towed too?!” Hammer. Vise. Drill. Vise. Drill. Hammer. Maybe as a way to compensate for my previous, shameful silence, I yelled back, “We don’t know whose car that is!” My response didn’t satisfy me. They never do. Did the woman really expect me to approach every individual in the bar to make sure they didn’t get their car towed? After so many of them had pointed and laughed at us? Or me? Vise. Hammer.

Carrie commanded the group the moment we returned to the porch with the others, eager to fill the guys in on the details of what happened. I tried to chime in like I

had been a real part of the whole thing, but the more I spoke, the more I realized I might as well have not been there at all. Olivia and Carrie shared the story vibrantly as they recollected the details. I watched Carrie think back and she said to me across the group, “Wait, Laurel, what did you even do? Did you say anything? I mean, like, before puking.” No. I did nothing. I said nothing. I stammered, “I mean, um...” The drill whirrs; the vise clamps. I replied hastily. (I’ve learned to reply hastily—someone else in the group will almost always interrupt, diverting the attention away from me.) Sure enough, Carrie turned back to talk to Olivia, seeming to forget she had spoken to me in the first place. In an attempt to avoid the risk of being called out a second time, I stared down at my shoes.

They were a pair of tan, wedged sandals with red tassels, or fringe, or whatever it’s called that reminded me of an oriental rug. I had bought them the week before our trip when Olivia and Carrie invited me to go on a shopping spree to buy some new outfits for the vacation. My go-to ensemble was a black zip-up hoodie over a T-shirt with ripped jeans and Converse that Carrie called “boyish and drab,” so to liven up my appearance I agreed to buy whatever they picked out for me at the mall. Besides, I really didn’t care. If anything it was another check off the list of ways to show the rest of the world that the robot I had become could at least function properly in normal society, and look nice doing it.

But there on the porch of the Trailer Bar, I looked down at the tasseled shoes and the bright colored clothes and sighed. The truth was I was shattered inside. And all I wanted to do was run.

“Hey, so I think I’m gonna just walk back to the house on the beach,” I said. Again, no one seemed to hear me.

“Oh my gosh, thank you,” Carrie said eventually, “You really do smell like puke.” She laughed along with the group and said, “Kidding, kidding, don’t get all butt-hurt,” placing her hand on my shoulder.

“Hey, do you know what I bet guys think is sexy?” I said to the group.

“Not puke breath,” Carrie said.

“No, sticky beer hair,” I said.

The group looked at me like I had six heads but for once I didn’t care. I’d give them something to look at. I poured my still-full glass of Corona on Carrie’s bleached hair.

Over the sound of the drunken laughter and hollers of the Trailer Bar crowd, Carrie said, “What the hell was that?” and shoved me into the porch railing.

“What?” I said with a smirk, and with a swipe of my clean sleeve I wiped the lipstick off my face. “Guys love it,” I said, “You look great. You’ll smell even better.”

The porch fell silent.

“Well, look,” I said, tucking my hair behind my ears, “I’m gonna walk back to the house from the beach, so I will catch you lovely folks later.”

I made my escape. I crossed the street toward the beach, but when my toes felt the sand, still warm from the day, I couldn’t help but run—like I could not run fast enough, hopping, yanking the tasseled sandals off my feet. I threw them behind me and kept

running toward open sky. I kept running, throwing my jacket and crop-top to the wind, stomping wet sand over the white skinny jeans I tossed to the ground, ripping off any remnants of the trendy metal armor I used to shield myself. My bare feet pounded against ground as I neared the shore, and I had never felt more empowered. This would be my narrative now. Not Olivia's, not Carrie's. Not even my mother's.

When I reached the edge of the water, I stopped. I took a deep breath not as a coping mechanism, but just to smell. To smell ocean and salt, to inhale the quiet and the peace. Crawling over my toes, a family of fiddler crabs took refuge in their burrows. I smiled, said "hello" to the crabs, and then I cried. I cried at the echoes in my mind of my mother's voice from our walks home so many years ago. She was proud of me even when the fiddler crabs were my only friends. Maybe she was even proud of me *because* the fiddler crabs were my only friends. Back then I lived freely. Maybe that's what she was so proud of.

I stepped out of my underwear and gazed at the open ocean. I walked into the warm water and waited for the tallest wave before I took the plunge into something that finally felt real.

My Own Sky

The drive from the low-country to the Blue Ridge that winter was an icy one. I leaned my head against the passenger-side window of my mother's sedan to cool my red, swollen cheeks. I was cried out from the aftermath of my parent's recent, messy divorce and my mother's announcement that she "needed to get away for a while." I wasn't sure what it was she needed to get away from, since my father had already left. I could only assume, then, that it was me. Dad left both of us. So I couldn't understand why she didn't want to take me with her, wherever she was going. I thought we would have been in it together. I watched the temperature on the dash plummet with every county line we crossed on the winding route to Mama Lenny's estate. I hadn't experienced much cold growing up on the coast.

I stared out the window, headphones loud enough to silence my thoughts as we went up and up and up into the mountains. It should have given me a better view of the sky that way, but I couldn't see the sky anymore at all. It was shrouded in forest trees and white haze. I supposed we were in a cloud; there was so much fog. I should have felt lighter, like I was floating, but my shoulders hung heavy. I couldn't guess the time of day, but the drive felt like an eternity. Out of boredom, I decided to break the long silence with my mother.

"It's not too late to turn back, you know," I said.

She turned to face me and patted my frizzy brown hair, identical to hers.

“Renee, honey,” she said, and paused to look back at the road, “Honey, I know you’re hurting right now and there is a lot you don’t understand, but it’s only a week or so. You’ll be fine.”

I hadn’t visited Mama Lenny’s house since her funeral visitation the summer before. So, I guess it wasn’t really her house anymore. It belonged to my grandparents then, my mother’s parents, but Mama Lenny was the one who designed the whole thing, top to bottom, inside and out. She was a renowned artist and successful architectural designer along the east coast, and finally settled in the home she created for herself in North Carolina.

It was a work of art from the floorboards to the crown molding to the walls holding it all together, and she cared for it like it was another of one of her many great-grandchildren, I being one of them. But growing up, the kids in the family spent all our time outside in the summer recklessly driving Grandpa’s golf cart or double-bouncing each other off the trampoline.

I felt the cold of the window against my face as I pictured that Fourth of July one year when my cousin Sean jumped so high he landed in the bushes of the neighbor’s yard and they made him come back the next day and replant new ones. My other cousin, Cindy, and I laughed at how ridiculous he looked in those floral-print gardening gloves, and went back inside for some of Mama Lenny’s homemade vanilla ice cream with real vanilla. I could almost taste it, sheer bliss on the tip of my tongue. I wondered if my grandparents would have a batch ready for me when I got there.

My mother turned to pull into the steep driveway and I felt the back tires yank us in another direction. She quickly jerked the steering wheel to regain control, which jostled us back and forth in our seats.

“Shit,” she said, “Slippery.”

“Yeah,” I said, still gripping my door handle. We weren’t accustomed to these kinds of conditions.

When we pulled up to the house, it wasn’t what I remembered from just months before. The only color in sight was the chipped pink polish on my chewed fingernails. You’d think the white of the snow would have made the house seem bright, but instead it seemed to bury it. Whatever of the exterior was still exposed seemed dreary and dingey next to the stark whiteness of the snow. If houses could breathe it surely would have suffocated.

I looked back at my mother to see her applying her lipstick in the rearview mirror before waving me off. My grandmother opened the door, and maybe it was the contrast against the white snow, but peering inside I saw nothing but darkness.

“Welcome, dear,” my grandmother said. She was so petite she had to reach to pat my shoulder. I thought if I hugged her I might break her, she seemed so fragile. I walked in and said hello to my grandfather who was working a crossword puzzle in his recliner in the corner and sipping a cup of black coffee.

“I’ll show you where you’ll be staying,” my grandmother said, gesturing toward the back of the house, a place I had never really paid much attention to, for I had only

ever spent time outside or in the front living room. We walked down a long, narrow hallway with a row of doors on either side. Too many doors, it seemed. The house was big, but it didn't seem that big from the outside. As we walked I thought of Mama Lenny and wondered why she would have designed such a strange place to call home.

“What are all these rooms?” I asked, following behind my grandmother.

“Oh, Lord, you know Mama Lenny,” she said about her mother, “Loved to get lost in her own house. Who knows what all this junk is. I just keep them locked up. No need to delve into what was.”

At the back end of the main hall was my room, which I would come to memorize, from the number of flowers printed on the wallpaper to the ticks of the grandfather clock just outside the bedroom door that seemed so loud in all the quiet. In my first few days there, I tried to make conversation with my grandparents, but they weren't big talkers, I guessed. Instead I had to learn their strict and painfully dull routine. They would drink their black coffee promptly at eight in the morning, and eat plain Cheerio's with cut fruit that never tasted very sweet to me. Then they'd spend the rest of the morning and into the afternoon reading the paper or flipping through old catalogues, maybe folding some laundry or playing gin rummy if they were feeling bold. By evening they'd watch Wheel of Fortune while my grandmother heated up soup or grits for supper, followed by Jeopardy! while they ate. By then it was lights out at eight. It is no surprise, then, that as a fifteen-year-old girl I was slowly being bored to death, and the cold outside was keeping me trapped there, isolated.

By the end of that week, my cell phone had lost reception, the cable was out from ice on the lines, and the snow clouds had made it so dark outside I had lost all sense of time. Anxious to wake from this nightmare and flash back to my old life, I called my mother from the landline.

“Mom? Mom, it is so awful here. Grandma and Grandpa are basically zombies, I can’t get in touch with any of my friends from home, where even are you?”

“Renee! Baby!” she said too loudly into the phone, “How are you?”

“Hi, Mom, I just told you how I was. Miserable. And don’t change the subject, where are you? You said this would only be a week, tops.”

“Pfft, relax, honey, I’m just spending time with some friends in Key West, I told you I needed a vvvuhcation,” she slurred.

“Are you drunk? I thought you didn’t drink? When are you coming to get me?”

“I just need a little bit more time. I have a lot to think about and just needed a getaway.”

“Yeah, so you’ve said.”

“Yeah,”

“Yeah.”

When I hung up I ran to the back of the house to my room. All I wanted in that moment was some semblance of warmth, but my room was frigid, offering no comfort. Grandmother explained that the property was difficult and expensive to maintain, so they did all they could to cut back on electric bills—less heat, no lamps. The only light in the house came from a few small windows, and that was only if the sun could break through.

Over tomato soup that evening during a Jeopardy! commercial break, I tried again to speak up out of boredom and frustration.

“Grandmother, can we shed some light on the situation, please?” I said with some sass, getting up to turn on a table lamp.

She scoffed. “If you must, dear.”

“I must,” I said. “Now, that’s better,” and I returned to my soup. “Hey, maybe if you’re not doing anything tomorrow,” I said as if she would have had plans, “I could help you clean out some of those junk rooms or something.”

“Oh, that’s nice of you, dear,” Grandmother said, “But that’s just too much for me to tackle right now. You don’t wanna go through all that junk, anyhow. It’s a real mess.”

“Well, what kind of stuff is it? Maybe I’ll find something cool that I want to save.”

“Oh, you know, there’s some furniture stored back there from when your granddaddy and I moved in, some of your mama’s old things we moved out of the warehouse to save on that cost. And well, you know, Mama Lenny’s oddities so Lord only knows what you’d find. She was a strange bird.”

“Well, could I have a key and explore a little?”

“Oh, no, I don’t think so, dear,” she said, finishing her soup. “You don’t want to dig into all that.” She turned her attention back to the TV set.

I must, I thought.

Back in my room, I bundled myself up in a pile of blankets that smelled like mothballs. I tried with all of my might to remember a smell that would remind me of

home, like shrimp boats or the jasmine that blossomed in the spring, but it was like I couldn't grasp on to anything. Snow and cold smelled like nothingness. I waited until I knew my grandparents were asleep before I started rummaging for the keys from desk drawers to china cabinets to newspaper piles to decorative pottery, but came up empty-handed. I tried to wiggle the old iron door handles loose, I tried the bobby pin trick from all the movies, all to no avail.

Another week had gone by and I had given up any attempt at conversation with my grandparents. In fact, I started to pretend not to be there at all. I only came out at night to search for the keys. It was my new life, it was like a game. It gave me a purpose that the day didn't offer. So I'd tip-toe, take too much Advil PM and Nyquil to sleep all day to help the time pass, come out to the kitchen for a late-night snack, usually dunking fruit in the sugar jar, which my grandmother always disapproved of. It still wasn't sweet enough, anyway.

It must have been mid-February or so by then, over the span of six more calls from my mother extending her "me time."

"I miss you, Mom," I said one evening, defeated, exhausted from begging for her return.

"I love you, Renee."

"Then why aren't you here with me? Or at least somewhere with me?"

"Honey, I had just been through so much—"

Static.

"—Renee? Are you there?"

I heard the trail of her voice cut in and out of the crackling connection before I hung up. I felt like I had been through so much, too. Why did I have to do it alone? With a slam of the phone I ran back to my room. If the cold wasn't enough to numb me, maybe something else could.

Out of my own supply, I rummaged through three different bathrooms' cabinets to gather every sleep-aid I could find. I couldn't tell you what all I took or how much, I don't know, maybe they weren't even sleep-aids. And I don't know how long I slept before the buzzing sound and flickering lights of the house losing power disrupted my dreaming. I had learned to love my dreams so much more than my reality that I loathed anything that kept me from them. I stumbled out of bed in a drowsy rage. All I could think about was how much colder it would get without any power at all.

"Fuck this house!" I yelled as loud as I could, desperate to make a sound. I could see my breath in a sliver of moonlight beaming through my bedroom window. I had three layers of socks on to keep my feet warm. I kicked the wall and the socks cushioned the blow so the sound was so minute it wouldn't have made a roach skitte.. It had been so long since I felt something that I would have been content feeling the fracturing of my own bones. But nothing and no one could hear me. Even when I spoke, even if I yelled. I was surprised to hear my stomach growl at me, breaking the silence; I hadn't had much of an appetite since I'd been left there. I was starving. My electronics powerless, I wiggled one of the long candlesticks out of the old holder on the dresser and lit it with a match from the bathroom. I walked down the hall toward the kitchen, craving anything that had a real taste. I lifted the candle to the tall grandfather clock at the end of the hall.

Both hands hung loosely at the number six and it, too, made no sound. Broken or dead like everything else, I thought, when I heard a clamor from the back-center of the house that made me jolt, spilling hot candle wax on my boney, dry fingers.

Woozy, I shook off my hand and stumbled into the wall. I was so confused. My grandparents had surely been asleep for hours by then. What could have possibly made the noise? I was determined to find it; anything that had movement and life and precious sound was something I had grown desperate for.

I peered down the hall of what appeared to be Mama Lenny's old studio wing. The walls were painted a soft light blue under an array of watercolor paintings framed and hung neatly on either side. Even through the windowless darkness and dust the space was effulgent, like it was its own source of light. I felt welcome there. Invited.

I lifted the candle and peered into the first door, half-open. The walls were adorned in canvas oil paintings of all sizes, which were Mama Lenny's favorite to create. She always said the dimension of the thick paint leaping off the canvas invited anyone looking at it to "come on in." These were more vibrant than the pastel watercolors of the hallway—bright reds and oranges depicting ocean sunsets or the changing leaves of fall. She was most attached to scenes of nature and rarely painted people, claiming "You never know what you'll find when you're lost in the solitude of a work of art."

The sound seemed to have come from the far back of the hall, so I walked straight to the door at the end. I could feel warmth emanating from it. It was like my skin was defrosting. It opened up to the grandest room I had ever seen. It was designed in a circle so it had no corners and even the sound of my breath had an echo. Surprisingly, the wall

was empty, plain. In the center of the room were a stool and an easel, a stack of blank canvases leaning against an old painter's cart. I panned my candle across the room to see what must have made the clamor that drew me to that space, and discovered a hard plastic cup a few feet from the easel, paintbrushes scattered around it. The cup must have slipped off its resting place at the edge of the easel, I thought, but when I reached down to pick it up, it seemed too far from the easel to have fallen without some external force. Suddenly I didn't feel so alone, but I wasn't afraid.

I propped the cup back onto the easel along with a blank canvas and took a seat on the stool. I just sort of stared at the blank white space for a while. I wanted to create something, to fill it with color, but I felt nothing but the drug-induced tingling in my fingertips. My candle running low and my mind growing fuzzy, I staggered through the hallway and back into my room for the night.

I awoke the next morning cold again, but with a faint memory of warmth. It took me a few minutes of waking to realize my little exploration wasn't a dream. I was determined to get back there again, but would have to wait until my grandparents were asleep. A few more doses should fast-forward me to then, I thought, and slugged back the thick, menthol goo of the Nyquil.

That night, I decided to explore the other doors of the studio wing. I pushed open the first door, but the candle illuminated nothing for me but towering stacks of cardboard boxes labeled things like "paint supplies," "cleaning stuff," and "miscellaneous," but as I turned to leave, the light flickered across a box labeled "Estelle's Photos." I had never

really seen many photos of my mother when she was younger; I guess maybe no one knew her grandmother had kept that box of them in that closet.

I grabbed the first photo album sitting at the top of the box and had to check the label again to make sure it didn't say "Renee's Photos;" the resemblance between me and the photos of my teenage mother was uncanny. I had heard she did some modeling in her youth, but she never offered to show me the portraits. She was stunning, but she wasn't the mother I knew. The girl in the photos was bright-eyed and hopeful, but my mother's flame seemed to have been snuffed out a long time ago.

In one candid photo she was surrounded by an eclectic group of friends at the beach and she was laughing with her head thrown back and a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon in her sun-tanned hand. It was the look of freedom and joy and I wanted desperately to meet the Estelle from the photos. I wondered if that's how she was feeling on the shores of Key West, like she had turned back time. If I could have been that happy again, I guess I would have done anything to make it happen, too.

Maybe I could, I thought. I took all the pills and syrups out of my sweatpants pockets and dumped them into a corner wastebasket. Something was calling me back to the canvas. Gripping the paintbrushes in my hand sent memories flooding into me—happy ones and heart wrenching ones. Overwhelmed with flashing images of my past, I let go of all the tension that kept me standing upright and gave in to the weight of gravity pulling me to the earth, plopping heavily onto the stool.

I frantically scavenged through the paints like they were a new drug. I dug for the blue tones of my sky I had been missing for so long. There, in the empty room

that echoed, that clamored, that wrapped around me with its round walls like hugging arms, I began to paint.

Life Alert

Lydia sat on a stool in the garage and sifted through her precious box of old photograph prints. She was gingerly pulling apart a few prints that had been stuck together by the summer humidity when she heard a shrill, alarming scream coming from the front yard. She dropped the photos and ran outside to see her grandmother, Eleanor, leaning weakly against the mailbox and fanning herself with a handful of mail. Lydia rushed over to help her and walk her inside, the bright hot sun blinding her a little.

“Are you all right?” Lydia said, panic in her voice. “You scared the shit out of me!”

“Watch it,” Eleanor said. “You think your cousin found a man like this talking like that?” She waved a piece of mail in Lydia’s face.

Lydia snatched it out of her hand. It was an engagement announcement from her younger cousin, Chrissy, who moved out west to Arizona after their grandfather passed away. He was the glue that held the family together. So, like the rest of the extended family members, Chrissy stopped calling after only a month and stopped answering a month after that. She hadn’t been back to Eleanor’s since. The announcement in the mail was a formality, at best.

It was a photo of Chrissy and her fiancée, James, kissing on a park bench swing, a small yellow Labrador puppy between them with a sign around its neck that said, “My humans are getting married!” Lydia rolled her eyes and handed it back to Eleanor who was still pretending to feel faint.

Eleanor shook her head. “Now, Lydia, you see all those sweet, sharp-looking families all day long at work, aren’t you about ready for something like that for yourself? For the family? You’re through a quarter of your life already, for Lord’s sake.”

“For the family?” Lydia said. “What family?”

“Don’t start with me.”

“No, really, Eleanor. What family? Look around, your family is your acre of crap.” Lydia gestured toward the front lawn, an overcrowded zoo of junk her grandmother had begun to hoard back when her husband died.

“My, what has gotten you all riled up today?” Eleanor said.

“Nothing,” Lydia said. “Sorry. It’s just really hot today. My photos from the garage are sticking and I don’t want them to tear.”

“I don’t know why you’re wasting time going through that old stuff. Especially when there are new things in this world to be bought.”

“We all have our own ways of filling the voids, I guess,” said Lydia.

Lydia was nineteen when her parents were killed by a drunk driver—the same year her grandfather died. It was the worst year of her life. With all other family living out of state, Lydia was the only one left to care for her grandmother—to cook her meals, manage her medications, be there in case she were to fall. And to listen to her bitch about how “a woman needs a man in her life” and how “that’s just a fact.”

It was the same year, though, that she took the most photos, sneaking outside in the late afternoons when Eleanor would fall asleep in her plaid, clunky recliner to the

sound of Family Feud playing from the television set. Lydia studied the best photography books she could find at the local library and practiced religiously until she could no longer restrict her time to only a couple hours during her grandmother's naps. She started finding other times to sneak away to capture the feeling of having something that was all her own. Once she improved her skills, she began submitting her photos to magazine after magazine and was rejected time and time again. But it didn't matter. The anticipation of waiting for the letters in the mail gave her enough hope to keep her mind occupied during the weeks when she was giving Eleanor her sponge bath or trimming her toenails.

Lydia sighed and walked back into the oppressive heat of the garage. The air was heavy, like a weight on her chest, and the garage smelled like mothballs, so she carried her box of photos out into the sunlight. She took a seat at the old family picnic table in the backyard—the single item that Eleanor refused to pile anything on top of. She was too fond of the memories of when she and her husband used to host all the family, the children, grandchildren, cousins, brothers, aunts, dogs for every holiday. They would all sit at the long picnic table and share meals and stories, Lydia always fluttering around snapping photos with her Polaroid and sticking the prints to the refrigerator door. But the family didn't talk much anymore, and the wood of the table was starting to splinter, the nails loosening.

She flipped through another handful of photos, reminiscing fondly over in particular—a black and white, film double-exposure of the old railroad tracks layered under a photo of a brick wall with one brick missing just off-center. She had submitted a

copy a couple years back to her favorite photography magazine, Shutter. She knew it was the best photo she had ever taken and awaited the response with butterflies in her stomach—the good kind. Weeks went by and then months without a word until Lydia had completely given up on the idea. She was defeated. They didn't even write to let her know? Maybe she didn't have as much talent as she had once thought. Her grandmother sure didn't think so, and didn't let Lydia forget it. Lydia began to believe it herself—that maybe all she was good for in this world was helping her grandmother, but Eleanor was always there to remind her that she was no good at that either.

But in an effort to support herself and her grandmother, Lydia settled for a local job as a family photographer. She at least got to spend her weekends in nature since so many families wanted their pictures taken in parks or near the river, but all of her time and attention was spent on making stupid, goofy faces to make rowdy kids look at the camera long enough for her to snap a cheesy photo. Sometimes, when the parents were busy fussing at their children to behave or sit still, she'd zoom the lens as far as she could—past the matching white shirts and blue jeans, past the walls of the town—like the viewfinder could transport her at lightning speed, like it could burst through the summer heat. And when her finger pressed down to capture the moment, the sound of the shutter transported her back to reality just as fast.

Lydia sat there at the picnic table until the afternoon sun had begun to sink behind the trees, casting shadows on the photographs she had been looking through for hours—most of them photos of stranded boats in the marsh, many of rusted out abandoned cars, some of the old train station—all things that once could have taken her away from this

place but couldn't anymore. Most of them were taken when she was younger and first interested in photography, showing basic use of rule of thirds and amateur angling. Every weeknight over the summers after dinner, Lydia would take the camera down to the river to watch the sunset, passing by the old train station and the marsh on her walk. The skyline seemed to stretch forever and in a perfectly straight line she decided no man on earth could replicate. She used to dream of travelling the United States in a VW bus, selling her photos to folks in every major city. Photos of more than just the borders of her old town and its rundown, broken objects. Photos of the freedom of the open Pacific Ocean, the endless plains of the flatlands, the vastness of the mountain ranges.

She looked up from her handful of photos and surveyed the backyard. Things. Things everywhere. Everywhere, and piled on top of more things. It was like playing a game of Eye Spy on an episode of Hoarders. Lydia had scoped out the old Playskool house buried underneath years of piled junk that Eleanor referred to as her "antiques" or "treasures." She never liked playing "house" with Chrissy and her other cousins when they would visit Eleanor's as kids, but she'd play along out of boredom from time to time. Chrissy, though younger, would demand to play the mother while Lydia was more likely to volunteer to play the family pet dog that had a problem of running away, changing the game from "house" to "tag." The Jeopardy! theme song played from inside the house, Lydia's cue to start cooking dinner for Eleanor, and she carried the box of photos with her inside to protect them from the outdoor heat.

"What is the Cold War," Eleanor said at the television as Lydia searched the floor for an open space to put down the box, being sure to step around the cats that circled her

feet. Every square inch of house was covered in Eleanor's more "valuable" antiques and treasures on top of outdated children's toys and clothes that she swore she'd donate. That was six years ago.

At last, Lydia spotted the only open space in sight, the stovetop she had half-way cleared off earlier to cook Eleanor her favorite evening meal—country-fried cube steak with okra and a sliced tomato. She decided she would order take-out for herself that night.

Lydia could barely hear the click-click-click of the gas stove igniting over the blaring television as she began to make her grandmother's meal.

"Lydia! Get in here!" Eleanor yelled from her recliner in the next room over.

She obeyed. "What is it, Eleanor?" she said.

"Cook your grandmother up some instant mashed potatoes. There are some packets of Hungry Jack in the pantry. And don't forget to salt the boiling water, Lydia, no man wants to come home to a bland meal, you remember that. Now, what in God's name is that smell? Are you burning up my dinner?"

"What?" Lydia sniffed the air, smelling the pungent mixture of cat piss and smoke. "Shit!" She raced back into the kitchen to see her box of photos up in flames.

"No!" she wailed at the sight. Ashes drifted up into the air. They were gone. It was all gone. Any glimpse of hope, any sign of escape—the only thing she had left to hold onto. Gone. Gone like her grandfather, gone like her parents, gone like everyone

else who left her stranded there. All Lydia could think in that moment is if her grandmother wasn't in her life, this never would have happened.

From the living room she heard, "Lydia! Lord, it is no wonder you're still a single woman if you can't even cook a decent meal." The crackle in her grandmother's smoker's voice blended into the whoosh of the flames as she hobbled into the kitchen to criticize Lydia up close. When Eleanor saw the fire she yelled in sheer panic at Lydia to save the "collectibles" she displayed on the counter by the stove, which were rows of oversized, ornately decorated matryoshka nesting dolls she had ordered from eBay over the years.

Lydia looked around and spotted a rusted metal bucket where Eleanor stored her assortment of umbrellas. She dumped them out and filled the bucket with water from the sink faucet. The seconds felt like hours as she waited for the bucket to fill. Lydia froze, her eyes glazed over, absorbed in the fire's warmth with nothing to look at but her photographs engulfed in orange flame, the only tangible thing she had left to remind her she could have had a life outside of this house, outside of this town.

When the bucket was near full, Lydia poured the water over the flames and watched as it morphed any photos that weren't already destroyed by the fire. When her adrenaline stopped pumping, she realized what she had done and her eyes filled with tears. From over her shoulder, she heard Eleanor grumble before demanding that she hurry and clean up the mess so she could finally get dinner started. Eleanor hobbled back into the living room and plopped back in her recliner, television blaring.

“You want clean?” Lydia mumbled under her breath, “You got it.” She swept up the ashes of her photos and wiped up the water, but didn’t stop there. She cleared every countertop with the sweep of her arm, knocking years of dusty trinkets and cheap knick-knacks to the floor. The wooden matryoshka dolls popped open as they hit the kitchen tile, but one did not have smaller dolls inside. Lydia reached down to pick up a tightly rolled manila envelope from the shell of the largest doll. She looked around to be sure Eleanor wasn’t watching before meticulously opening the envelope.

In it was a stack of papers and letters addressed to Lydia. She scanned them over, growing more frantic as she read. A letter from Shutter magazine: “Congratulations,” “photo,” “accepted,” followed by a deadline by which to contact them that was dated two years ago. Lydia’s heart sank, and with it her body slid to the floor.

After a deep breath, she flipped through the other papers that included a letter from the state art academy inviting her to participate in their photography programs dated eight months back, and more from editors writing to accept her old photos that would now never even see the light of day. And finally, a letter from her parents outlining the details of the trust fund that was left to their only child, Lydia, by birthright. She felt sick to her stomach and the crowded walls of the house seemed to close in on her. She couldn’t catch her breath no matter how deep she inhaled and her heart pounded like it was trying to beat its way out of her rib cage.

“Lydia!” she heard her grandmother call from the living room. Unsure yet of how she would handle the newfound information, Lydia dried her eyes, pinched her cheeks, and pushed herself up off the floor.

“What is it, Eleanor?” Lydia said when she walked into the living room.

“I can’t find the damn remote. Change it to QVC for me.”

Every evening after Jeopardy!, Eleanor would switch to the QVC channel to hunt for more “treasures” to buy, more shit to buy, to fill the space in the house that was once filled with family—with people, with life. Lydia did as she was told and changed the channel for her grandmother. She returned to the kitchen, pacing back and forth and shuffling pots and pans every so often so Eleanor wouldn’t nag her again about cooking dinner, but couldn’t shake the plethora of information she had just received. She wanted to give her grandmother a chance to explain. Surely no one would steal someone’s life away like this, she thought. Lydia stormed into the living room and confronted her grandmother.

“What is this?” she said, waving the letters in Eleanor’s face.

The old woman pushed herself up using the arms of her recliner, looked her granddaughter dead in the eye and said, “My social security,” and spit on the floor by Lydia’s shoe.

“How could you be so selfish? So cold?”

“Watch it. I’m all you’ve got.” Eleanor plopped down in her seat and returned her attention to the TV set.

“I could have had more!” Lydia said, realizing no one was listening. “Fix your own damn dinner.”

She stormed upstairs to take refuge in her small bedroom. It wasn't long before she heard some rummaging downstairs blended with muffled TV noise. Her grandmother must have gotten hungry enough to make her own food.

Her thoughts were interrupted when she heard a stumbling sound followed by a faint "help!" come from the living room. Lydia had practically memorized the advertisement for Life Alert that always played on QVC at a higher volume than any other commercial, she supposed because it was targeted towards the often hard-of-hearing elderly population. In the commercial, an older woman is home alone; she slips, and falls. "Help! I've fallen and I can't get up!" she says into her Life Alert necklace/microphone, and an operator offers to send help right away. Eleanor would tell Lydia, "Hey, there's one thing I don't need to buy. That's what I've got you for! Too bad you're not good for much else."

Lydia, unsure if the cry for help had come from the television or from her grandmother, didn't step into the living room to find out for certain. Instead, she ran upstairs to her small bedroom and packed the few things she owned into a backpack. Being sure to grab her camera bag and the manila envelope, she walked out the front door.

When she got to the mailbox at the end of the driveway, she turned back toward the house and peered through the camera viewfinder. She zoomed in past the hideous, over-crowded lawn art, past the crooked, uneven steps of the front porch. She panned the camera over the house windows in an attempt to catch a glimpse of her grandmother one last time before she would decide whether or not to return, her guilty conscience nagging

her to see if it really was Eleanor who had fallen. She aimed for a view of the plaid recliner, but every window of the house facade was blocked with piles of this and stacks of that—more shit to block the light from ever coming in. This time Lydia didn't press the shutter.

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