Saturday

I’m ready. Ready for it. Not a doubt. I’m tired of it. Tired of all the bullshit. Tired of the polite nods. The surprised nods. The exasperated nods. I don’t like being here either.

Tired of funerals. Tired of being the last one. Tired of my second childhood. I couldn’t stand my first childhood. Tired of the baby talk. Tired of being told what I can and can’t do. Tired of patting arms and canes.

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Tired of my body. They always warn you. Started warning me forty years ago. I knew it was coming. Saw it coming. Felt it coming. But it surprised me just the same. The way it starts in your fingers. Swollen and crooked. Eases into your knees. Pours into your ears. Trickles through to your eyes. Pulses through your veins until they bulge, purple and wicked. Rips your hair out. Shoots up your back. Racks through your mind. Ravages you. Leaves you gasping. Hunched over. Like running.

Back when I could run.

I don’t care that no one cares. That doesn’t surprise me. That I see the look I see in them that I felt in myself so long. Disgust, maybe. Disgust hidden. Hidden in a veil of compassion. The nods. The opened doors. The waiting every five feet. The worst is that I need it.

I don’t think anyone will miss me. I wouldn’t. And if they really would, they’ll understand. If they really care.

No one will cry. Crocodile tears. But no real tears. Not from anyone who knew me. Really knew me. And that’s fine. I understand. I don’t want tears. I don’t want much. Just warmth. And rest. Warmth and rest I don’t deserve. But no one does. And that’s why I’m not sorry. I didn’t do anything wrong. Just what I had to do.

And that’s what I’m doing now. What I need to do.
She could see him through the phone, not long awake given the early hour of the morning, coffee steaming by his side and newspaper in his lap, nodding in feigned understanding of the latest news out of Sana’a while awaiting her call. She could feel the golden morning light tumbling through the shades, haphazardly drawn, scattering over the soft oatmeal carpet of her baby’s living room and dancing lightly into the receiver. “Good morning, Mom.” She could hear the sleep in his voice.

“Good morning, hon.” Her voice was gruff, the same as always. She always sounded as though she had some place better to be, though her Saturday morning call could be expected at 8:30 precisely, like clockwork.

“How are you feeling?”

“Shit.” Her voice cut through the static of the phone as she spat into the receiver. “Did you get the charts I sent you?”

“Yeah, Mom, but you know I’m not that kind of doctor.”

“I don’t give a damn. Can’t be worse than the jackasses they keep giving me out here. Load of carpetbaggers too dumb for the coast who think a cowboy hat means more to us than a doctorate.”

He laughed to humor her.

“It does, too. I won’t miss these idiots.”

“Mom, don’t talk like that.”

“I’ll talk however I damn well please, Stephen. I spent thirty years not cursing for the sakes of you ungrateful little shits. That’s a lot of language to make up for.”

“Mom, you don’t mean that.” She grunted.

“That’s what I called to tell you.”

“What’s what you called to tell me?”

“You know how bad this looks. I’m dying.”

“Mom, there are still a lot of treatment options. This isn’t a death sentence.”

“You don’t understand me. It is to me. I’m dying. In one week.”

The silence pulsed in both their ears for several seconds.

“Damn.”

She grunted again.

“Have you told the others yet?”

She grunted affirmatively.

“All of them?”

She grunted once more.

“All of them?”

She paused. “No. You’ll have to tell the other one.”

“Mom…”

“Don’t give me that bullshit. I’ll be living my last days however I damn well please. And it’d please me if I don’t have to hear her voice.”

There was silence again. She sighed out of convention.

“How’s Colleen?”

“She’s good. A little overwhelmed right now. Sean’s hanging in there but it looks like Samantha’s due for a raise.”

“I don’t know why. Girl never did do any work.”

“Mom-” His voice had an edge to it now.

“I know, I know. I trust she’s doing well.” The edge in her voice was sharper than a steak knife.
“Cassie? Yeah, she’s great.”
“Of course she is. Karma never did come back for her.”
“Mom.”
“Sure, sure.”
“How’s the weather.”
“How the hell do you think it is? Cold as shit. Bring a coat. You’ve got a week. Sunday at 5.”
She paused and inhaled sharply. “I love you, dear.”
The line had gone dead before he had a chance to reply.
The knock rung out hollowly from the door to her apartment. She sighed.

“Come in, Edward.”

The door swung open cautiously and her third child shuffled in. The sun shone down with the arrogance of youth, beating down on the sheer mountains and shattering in through the lace curtains that lined the windows. Her son’s beefy neck popped out from the collar of his flannel shirt, buttoned to the top in some masochistic attempt at self-asphyxiation. His ruddy face shown out, plastered with a smile that was there more as a courtesy than as any sort of expression of joy.

He hesitated at the door a second. His mother straightened the right leg of her pantsuit and smoothed some crinkles from her blazer before stalking over to her chair.

“Oh, don’t bother with your shoes. I won’t have to vacuum the floors again so I couldn’t give a damn.”

“How are you feeling, Mom?” His words carried a mountain man’s lilt about them.

“Skip the bullshit, Eddie, and pour both of us a drink.”

He feigned concern. “Mom, it’s not even noon yet.”

“You of all people, Edward. I expect this bullshit from Jean, but not from you.”

“Yeah, yeah, alright. Bourbon and soda?”

“If you don’t know how I like my liquor by now you got even more of your father’s stupidity than I thought.”

He grunted, and padding over to the kitchen counter, flicked the cap off the handle of bourbon that sat there half full waiting for its ritual and inevitable opening. He held it up first, allowing the sunlight to filter through before grunting in appreciation at its rosewood hue. His fingers manipulated the two glasses with a deftness hewn from years of practice that did not match their sausage-shape.

The ice cubes tumbled into the glasses and skittered about like caged ponies before first soda crackled down upon them like a mountain creek in the midst of a spring thaw. Finally the bourbon trickled down and billowed out through the glass.

Setting the bottle down he pinched the two glasses together with his thick fingers and waddled over to the old matriarch brooding in her chair, a high-backed throne like that of a royal of centuries past that was covered in a coarse and rough green fabric so dark it might as well have been black. Tiny fleur de lis dotted it.

She snatched it from him without thanks and held it up to the light.

“Too much ice.”

“You’ll just have to drink it fast, then,” He said, sighing deeply as he lowered himself gingerly into the seafoam green loveseat opposite her.

“Oh, but it’s not even noon yet,” she retorted in a sing-song tone.

They sat in silence a few seconds before the ice began to rattle in the old woman’s empty glass.

“Good God, Mom, I’m not even halfway through with mine.”

“Well, hurry up then. I’ve only got seven days and plenty of liquor to run through.”

He sneered into his glass. “You aren’t planning on leaving us anything, are you?”

“I’m just draining my liquor cabinet-though I don’t suppose any of you would want anything else from me. I have to leave something in my bank account or else none of you will remember me in a month.”

Setting his glass down, he removed his wire framed glasses and set to polishing them futilely on the lint infested sleeve of his flannel. “No, no, I suppose you’re right there.” He muttered absent-mindedly.
They sat in silence a bit longer.

He broke the silence to wet his lips and inhaled sharply, as if he were averse to the message he was to deliver. “Jean’ll be driving in. She’ll be here by tomorrow at mid-day. Alan’s flying in tonight and expects me to pick him up at the airport, so he’ll be sleeping overnight there. Stephen’s still working out his flight but don’t expect him here before Friday evening. I haven’t heard from Anna yet but I wouldn’t be surprised if she waits till you’re six feet under before hauling ass out here.”

His mother harrumphed. “Things used to be different. You all used to give a rat’s ass about your mother.”

“Things were different, Mom,” He laughed without a shred of mirth. “You used to give a rat’s ass about anything.”

“Listen here, you stay married to that prick of a man for forty years and we’ll see how chipper you are. I would lecture you about having raised a brat who doesn’t love you, but I suppose you already married one. Just try to keep in mind, darling, that I’ve got five, because some of us weren’t raised to give up!”

“And who did that raising, Ruth? Who was it? Because it wasn’t you!”

“Four ingrates. God always tested me.”

“Well, what in the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“You tell me,” she snarled. “You always fancied yourself a genius. And look what it got you. A duplex in God’s shithole and a snake of a wife.”

“You have five children, Mom. Not four.”

“I know it.”

The frost from outside practically leached through the windows, falling in silence upon the room. “Mix me another drink, would you?” Before she had even begun to speak, he had risen to stalk towards the liquor.
Alan McCormick was a tall man, and rail thin. Any hint of an Irish fire within had long been suppressed by his years of law school. He cut an odd figure, selecting his suitcase from the carousel with an almost dainty flourish of his gloved hand, an olive-green and boxy affair frayed by many long years of service. His face was austere, cleanly and harshly shaven, with scarce a trace of a shadow of stubble even now, as the sun, long fallen behind the mountains that poked up from the earth like jagged teeth, gave off its last coughing gasps of dusk. He looked a man out of place from a time long bygone and a very far away land, his black woolen peacoat standing out from the sparse crowd of leather jackets and bolo ties and milled about around him. He still dressed up for airplane flights, as though he were a Rockefeller or a first-time passenger on a Concord Jet. He had risen in the wee hours of that morning to press his finest slacks and knot a fine silk tie with almost unnatural precision before folding himself into a Dickensianly narrow economy class seat he was certainly too well-off for aboard a rickety airplane bound for the mountains filled with the customary Mormon families boasting five buck toothed children and hunters with hat-hair and weathered faces who always addressed the flight attendants as “sir”, and “ma’am”.

It was this discipline he clung to, a sort of self-flagellating attempt to avoid the luxuries and privileges that might come to invade the life of another straight-laced Atlantic elite who had never known neither romance nor parenthood.

He did not haul his suitcase like his fellow travellers. Rather, struggling to conceal its weight, he trod in even and measured steps out the cramped carpeted low-hanging airport into the painfully clear night that awaited outside. Drawing a sharp breath, he felt the gusty wind dance across his face, and savored the harsh burn of the hard air, absent of anything except a few knife-sharp ice crystals swirling down his throat.

Reaching into his leather attache, he drew forth a charcoal scarf, soft but understated and knotted it in the French fashion about his neck with stiff gestures, as if even the touch of his own hands was foreign to him.

By the time the teal Ford pickup truck arrived some twenty minutes late his legs were numbed and seemingly withered from the cold and his face had achieved a purplish hue. He pursed his lips hard so that he might not stumble over his words.

Edward dismounted from the truck’s carriage with a grunt, and heaved his way over to Alan. Burrowing further into the lamb’s wool lining of his tan leather jacket, he removed his creamy white cowboy hat and extended a fist that in shape and color most closely resembled ham.

“Welcome home, brother.”

“Thank you, Edward,” Alan greeted his younger brother, then turning to the Dolly Parton lookalike who dismounted from the truck behind her husband, with the exception of her red hair piled up into a precarious bun atop her head. “Sarah, you look as lovely as ever.” She raised a single eyebrow at him.

“I hope your flight went well.” She said, her voice lacking an ounce of caring.

“It was late-kept us waiting about the house all night.” Her husband pouted.

“It was fifteen minutes early. The winds were in our favor. If you’re going to lie so brazenly, have the decency to do the homework necessary. It’s rather easy to find such information online.” Alan’s monotone was as dry as the mountain air whipping down upon them.

“I don’t suppose you care if you see the old woman tonight?” Edward growled.

“Well, it’s not as if she’s going anywhere anytime soon.” The joke drawled unnaturally from his lips.

“One more line like that about Mom and you’ll be riding in the bed.” Edward snarled.
“Ah, yes, because I suppose the two of you have never had anything but our dear mother’s best interest at heart. Besides, I suppose you’ll need me in the carriage, or has the State of Montana become so lax in its regulation that it has determined having a sop such as yourself at the wheel does not constitute a clear and present danger to its residents? Seems to be taking libertarianism to a bit of an extreme.” Alan tossed the suitcase into the truck bed with an uncharacteristically cavalier sweep of his arms.

“Now shall you be taking me straight to my hotel or will we be stopping along the way to scour nearby firepits for your savings? I trust you have continued to burn through it with your ‘investments’.” Sarah turned to him, her face puckered, though whether from the cold or disgust was left to the imagination. “I’ll thank you not to mention our finances.”

“We’ve actually been getting some checks recently.” Edward bragged.

“Oh, well, I do suppose they never put a minimum limit on the amount of money that can be written out in a check,” Alan remarked breezily. “I hope Mom didn’t have too much trouble reading it for you—I know her eye sight’s been going recently.”

“Dad was too kind to you,” Edward remarked. “I would’ve made you sleep outside in the winter as well.”

“Ah, yes, our dear father,” Alan stalked his way into the cabin. His eyes seemed to grow glassy, or perhaps they just began to freeze. “May his soul rest in peace. After so many years in this frozen wasteland, he is finally someplace hot.” He buckled his seatbelt and turned to stare out the window as the truck’s engine rumbled to life.

They rode in silence to the hotel. Alan unloaded his luggage from the trunk, checked in to the front desk, and upon entering his room, brushed his teeth, washed his face, changed into his pastel blue and white striped pajamas, and slid into bed scarcely rippling the cheap duvet, hoping the time difference would not knock askew his daily habit of rising every day at precisely 6:45 with nary an alarm clock around to bid him rise.
The night pressed in early that day, seeping across the sky and racing out from shadows while all around clocks still ticked on dutifully. Inside the cookie-cutter, Stephen had seemingly melded into couch upon which he sat, staring balefully at the screen of the laptop humming in his lap with immobile eyes. Against the far wall, kids hurled up shots, never seeming to miss in a basketball game that didn’t matter between two teams about which he didn’t care.

Cassie padded in in slippers worn thin from years of use with a bowl of soup that she handed to him in silence. He made the sign of the cross, then closed his prayer far too soon to have prayed anything, and began eating.

He cast a wary eye her way. “Really, Cass? Mom’s funeral soup?”

“How did the kids take it?” She asked, shifting her legs up underneath her and beginning to rub her husband’s leg.

“A bit on the nose, don’t you think?” He poked warily at the rusty red soup with his spoon, testily picking up a single grain of barley and blowing on it gently.

“I know this is a pretty stressful semester for Colleen- I’m not sure she’ll take it well. You know how close they were.”

“I’m just saying. She’s still alive.”

“It’s on the calendar, Steve. You can stop being a smart-ass.”

He looked at her, peering around the corner of his rectangular glasses. A blocked shot sent the crowd hundreds of miles away into a frenzy. He turned back to his laptop, scrolling through absentmindedly with a flick of his fingers.

“These tickets are expensive. Even with the bereavement policy.”

“Of course they are sweetie. You’ve got two connections on a couple’s days notice. Jet fuel don’t come cheap.”

“And it can’t even melt steel beams. I’m just saying this wasn’t how I was hoping to spend our vacation money.”

“Honey, I’m not going. Sam and Sean are too busy with schoolwork so it’ll just be you and Colleen.”

“Why aren’t you going? You said work is quiet right now.”

Cassie lowered her chin to glare at him teasingly. “I can’t imagine she’ll want me there.”

He laughed softly. “You’re right. It just might kill her before Kevorkian gets to her.”

“You know you’re going to have to stop joking about it when Colleen comes home.” She admonished gently.

A shot clock violation rang out from the TV.

“I’ll probably be sobbing by then.”

She started to rise, then paused, looking him up and down.

“I’m fine,” He shooed her away.

“Are you sure?”

“Not at all. No.”

She shook her head. “I’m going to bed.”

“I know. I’ll see you up there. We sleep together, you know.”

She rolled her eyes. “Buy those tickets now. They’re only getting more expensive.”

He nodded. “You know how I get.”

“I know. But just do it, okay?”
“Headed to checkout now!” He said, turning the laptop around to show her with pride like a
tomcat bringing home a dead bird to show its prowess.

She walked in measured steps back up the stairs as he turned his attention back to the task at
hand, tapping out the individual numbers of his credit card with his right index finger. In the background
the crowd roared in response to a domineering alley-oop.

A dead silence settled over the house, kitchen lights glowing warm and feeble, the absence of
noise broken only by the crisp clacking of the keyboard and the murmured roars of the television.

A car door slammed shut. A corner three thudded into the near edge of the rim, dropping like a
rock. Stephen did not stir, pretending not to hear it. A suitcase thudded over the driveway, rocking back
and forth unevenly on the pavement. Clouds sat noiselessly overhead, a purplish haze defiantly blocking
out the moon and stars.

The doorbell rang. Stephen sighed, then heaved himself to his feet and shuffled to the door, still
pinning the afghan that had sprawled across his lap to his chest with his laptop. Through the glass at the
doors his middle daughter waited impatiently. He feigned an eye roll and turned back towards the stairs in
mock exasperation as she rang the doorbell twice more.

He turned back and paused at the door for a moment as if contemplating his next move. Clicking
the deadbolt unlocked, the door swung open in the girl’s anticipation.

“Evening, daddy,” She greeted him, bustling in. “I’m assuming Mom’s sleeping?”

“She sure is!” Came the call from upstairs.

She had already marched into the kitchen and begun opening cabinets in search of food when her
father greeted her.

“Don’t you have school, Colleen? You know tomorrow is Monday, right?”

“Perks of being a grad student, Pops. I can cancel all the sections I TA for tomorrow and all I get
for it is better reviews online.” She began munching on some snack from the health food store that had
been holed away, any hope of its being consumed long gone.

“We don’t fly out till Friday.”

“I know. Who the hell buys plain rice cakes? Are you guys going senile already?” She had
begun to search for a glass of water to wash down the snack.

Stephen eyed her up and down. She looked the same as always. Tired, maybe. But he could
never tell. The motion that never stopped that had struck dread into his heart twenty years before had
never left, adding in grace what it lost in speed as her legs and hair lengthened, both sweeping back and
forth like twin pendulums. Her eyes a pair of green lights inviting you to join her as she spun about the
kitchen.

Extracting a greenish bottle from the fridge, she turned her attention back to the room.

“Where do you guys keep a bottle opener?”

“Better watch yourself, Colleen,” Her father cautioned her.

“I’m twenty-two, pops,” She protested with an eye roll. “Is it by the sink?”

“I know. Which means you’re old enough to buy your own overpriced ales.”

“Whatever,” She said, setting it down. “I don’t like hoppy beers anyways.”

“That’s not what hoppy means, dearest,” He turned back to the living room “It’s by the forks.
Get me one. And don’t tell your mother.”

He lowered himself back into the sofa, burrowing deep into the cushion. She lowered herself into
the armchair next to him with caution before handing him his craft brew. He took an appreciative sip
before slapping her exploring hand away from the remote. “I’m watching that,” he warned as the second of a pair of free throws slipped in.

“No, you’re not,” she retorted. “Which is the home team?”

“That’s not important,” he bluffed. “You’d better go unpack. And recycle that beer bottle when you’re done with it.”

She grunted her approval. She slipped away up the stairs and he continued to stare at his laptop’s screen, hovering his mouse alternately over the exit button and the

She slipped back down some ten minutes later. “Hey, dad, I just wanted to say goodnight.”

He was already asleep, snoring silently with his head tilted up on the couch and his mouth slightly agape as if to catch rain drops. A final pair of free throws iced the game.

Colleen shook her head and turned back upstairs. “Good to know some things never change.”

She muttered to herself as she turned out the lights and silence rushed instantly back into the house, breaking the levee of light.
Sunday

The cabin of the Subaru was cozy, bordering on stifling. The heat pumped out from the dashboard and cascaded throughout the entire crossover. Jean’s hands, long and thin to the point of emaciation gripped the wheel tightly as the car rumbled over the interstate’s straightaway. To each side empty farmland sprawled out till the mountains, sheer and crude swooped up from the earth like the teeth of some beast buried deep within the rocky soil.

The car’s tires fought to stay rolling over the packed snow that dotted the roadway, yellowing and uneven.

Jean peered out the windshield, desperate to keep herself alert. Her head poked out from her long neck like a bird desperate for food. The late morning sun fell young and bright on her face, wrinkled and weathered from a lifetime in the elements. Her hair, cropped close to her head was brown and wiry. Her mouth was pursed in a manner that the creases in her cheeks suggested was near permanent. She burrowed herself into the silence of the car, interrupted only by the hum of the warm air pumping out and the rush of air stampeding outside her car and the chesty grumbling of the ice underneath. Her chest fell into deep, steady breaths.

The ring of a phone call beeped out from the dashboard. Seeing the contact information, she sighed, pausing a second before pressing the icon to answer it.

“Good morning Eddie.”
“Morning, Jean. How’s the drive?”
“Busy,” She remarked, peering out at the deserted highway.
“Ooph, I’m sure,” He remarked with an insincerity that would not fool a child. “Is there any chance Maggie or Andrew make it out?” He added, his lack of concern evident in his flat intonation.
“Oh, no, no, no, I don’t think so,” Jean remarked absentmindedly. “I think they’re both busy so they’ll be trying to make it for the funeral.”
“Oh, sure, sure,” His mountainous intonation flattened his tone. “How far out are you?”
“Hmm,” She wondered aloud, passing an exit ramp. Ten miles to go. “It’ll still be a while. Don’t wait around for me.”
“So lunch is out of the question, then?”
“Definitely. Probably dinner, though.” She turned to gaze out at the white, so painfully white, until it started to turn blue and dazzle from the sunlight, turning her eyes back to the road. “Are you making sure she’s staying hydrated?”
“I’m trying my best,” He conceded. “But she always liked her water to burn, and she’s only getting fussier.”
“I know, I know. But she’s taking all her medication?”
He snorted mirthlessly. “You think Mom would turn away the opportunity to take some pills?”
She rolled her eyes. “Just try to keep her alive until I get there.”
“You think a fancy degree makes you more qualified than me to ask Mom if she’s dead yet?”
“Yes. I do.” She hung up. It always did amaze her that she was related to such a jackass.

Outside the empty fields, laced with barbed wire and dotted with rolls of wheat like some sort of sign left behind by extraterrestrials raced by.

She sat there, tersely staring at yellow line of the two-lane interstate that meandered its way between the foothills of the mountains that lurked in the horizon. At least there was no question of her falling asleep now, as her blood pulsed with anger till she could practically hear it surging in her temples. She sighed, and punched a few buttons until the phone’s artificial ringing filled the car’s cabin once more.
“Hello?” Alan’s bored baritone drawled out of the speakers.
“Hey, Alan, it’s me,” She replied, making sure to sound preoccupied.
“Oh, hi, Jean,” Alan voice softened. “How’s the drive?”
Another ramp passed. Five miles to go.
“I’m not sure. Are you at the hotel?”
“No, I ran to the grocery store to pick up some ingredients. Would you believe all Mom had in
the house was Jack Daniels and microwavable Velveeta?”
“She’s drinking Jack Daniels now? I wasn’t worried before.”
“I’m convinced she’s hiding the real stuff somewhere else. Are you still a ways out?”
“I won’t make it to Mom’s until around dinner time.”
“So you haven’t even hit the mountains yet?”
“That’s not what I said.”
“Ah. I see. Well, I can’t say I blame you.”
“And you think Mom will be okay with just Eddie to look after her?”
“My dearest Jean, contrary to what your nursing school might have taught you, one does not need
a four year degree to take a feeble old woman’s temperature.”
“Alan, you’re sounding like your brother. And not the good one. Besides, that still doesn’t mean
Eddie could do it.”
“I suppose you’re right.” The beeping of the grocery store scanner intoned rhythmically,
blending in with the static of the phone. Alan sighed. “What can I do for you?”
“Make sure he doesn’t burn the house down. And make sure Mom doesn’t die before she’s
supposed to.”
“My dearest, you ask too much.”
“I just worked a twelve hour shift, and now I’m driving eight hours to spend another week with
my family. I don’t think I can ask too much.”
“Darling, before you crown yourself the silent sufferer in our family, ask yourself who really
bears the heaviest cross in spending time with the two of them.”
She sighed. “Thank you, Alan. I love you.”
“Of course. I’ll tell them the roads were icy up by the pass. Enjoy your last few hours of
freedom. I don’t suppose there’s any chance Mother will actually eat any flax I get her?”
“Alan, you know that woman only eats things out of the ground if they’re a root.”
“You’re right, of course. Potatoes, onions, and iron supplements.”
He had hung up before her feeble laughter reached him.
The ramp snuck up on her and she veered suddenly, shaking away her reverie and rumbling up.
SUVs rumbled past as she merged left. In the distance planes glided down onto the runway of the rinky-
dink local airport a few hundred yards down the highway like swans descending upon a lake. The hotel
arrived sooner than she expected, as always, and she hurriedly executed a left turn into the parking lot,
already scanning for a spot as the pickup truck barreling down the highway nearly nipped her tailgate.
She parked, and took two deep breaths, feeling the heat already start to leach out into the tundra
around her. She bustled out from the car, jamming her gloved hands into her underarms as she bustled to
her trunk to unload her two small suitcases and barely pausing to slam the trunk as she hustled into the
hotel lobby.
The man at the desk oozed pompousness. His brown hair was slicked back high above his head
and a neatly trimmed beard lined his soft jaw and upper lip. His uniform was immaculately maintained,
the black collared shirt buttoned to the very top button, cutting into his ample neck. The red vest that struggled to constrain his bulky body was absolutely free of any sort of lint or imperfection even as the carpeting of the lobby was stained with puddles of snow tracked in.

“Hello, and welcome. How were your travels?” His voice had a silky quality that was clearly forced.

“Well, it’s over now,” Jean remarked, flashing a polite smile. “Room for one under McCormick, please.

An artificial laugh bubbled up from his belly. “Coming right up for you, Ms. McCormick. The continental breakfast will be served over there,” He pointed crisply with two fingers indicating an alcove polluted with cheap chairs made of fake wood imitating the homespun mountain style. Cereal dispensers and half-full cups of juice lined the walls. “...From 6 to 10 every morning. The fitness center, pool, and steam room and sauna will be open every day from six till midnight. If you need to extend your stay you can either do so online or right here at the desk. Your room is on the first floor, to the left and all the way down.” She nodded along politely with a tired smile on her face. He waddled around the desk to hand her her key. “Please enjoy your stay with us.”

She thanked him again and then padded off, her two suitcases trailing behind us.

The room key clicked in the lock and she shoved the door open. A small stove and refrigerator lay to her right, and in front a TV, desk and two chairs with an ottoman between them stood between her and her bed. Dropping her luggage in the kitchen area, she laid down on the bed and stared at the ceiling waiting for sleep that would not come as her mind raced in the late morning light.
“Steve, I’m the last person she wants to see right now. Or ever.” She pinned the phone receiver to her shoulder as she paced around the kitchen counter, holding the flower vase out in front of her as if it reeked before depositing it in the sink and pouring more water into it.

“Anna, it’s the right thing to do.”

“Steve, I really don’t think it is. Unless you want me to bring Ben too. Then we might be able to save however much money she’s spending on Doctor Kevorkian. Actually, come to think of it, if it would save her money maybe she does want me there after all.”

“Anna, she’s our mother.”

“No, she’s your mother. She’s made it rather clear she’s not interested in having any relation to me.”

“Anna, she misses you.”

“Really?” There was no hint of a question in her voice. “Has she told you that?” The static of silence buzzed through the phone. “That’s what I thought. Steve, I’ve given and given and given to that woman and she wants nothing to do with me. I might go to the funeral, but I doubt she even wants me there.”

“Don’t you love her?” Anna could feel her silence sinking into the receiver and fill her baby brother. She drew breath sharply, then paused and held it. “Yeah. Of course I do.”

“Then please come. Please.”

“Love is a two-way street.”

“Did it ever occur to you that maybe that’s how she showed her love?”

“Not when I grew up around the two of you. She’s capable of feeling like a normal human being. She just couldn’t be bothered with me. We both know that.”

“Is there anything I could say to convince you to come?”

“No. But she could. Anyways, do you have any idea how expensive last-minute plane tickets are out there.”

“Anna, I love you. But do you really think anyone in this family is going to buy that excuse, especially coming from you?”

She sighed. “What are they going to do, keep not sending me Christmas cards?”

Stephen’s empty laugh echoed through the phone. “Don’t you ever consider that maybe they’ve mellowed with age?”

Anna’s laugh cut high and sharp. “They’ve aged like warm milk, Stephen. Jean calls me often enough for me to know that.”

“Jean calls you?” He sounded sharply surprised.

“Hah! Maybe twice a year, if that. Guess her Catholic guilt is still hanging in there after all.”

Stephen humored her with a laugh. “When was the last time you were out there?”

“Dad’s funeral.”

“Fifteen years is a long time to go without going home.”

“That place hasn’t been home for a long time. Not like it has been for you.”

“I know. And I’m sorry about that. But even Alan is coming.”

“Oh great, another one to call me a slut. I can’t wait.”

Stephen sighed.

“You sound tired,” She fusssed. “Steve, you’re three hours ahead and it’s almost eleven here.”

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“Well, staying on the phone with me isn’t doing you any favors. Go to bed.”
“I’ll try. Will you at least think about coming out?”
“Not gonna happen. You’ve got work tomorrow. I’m sorry. I love you.”
“I love you. Good night.”
“Good night.” There was a pause at both ends of the line, a pregnant moment lasting perhaps three seconds before they both clicked off simultaneously.

Anna sat down upon one of the high chairs that ringed the bar in her kitchen, running a hand through her straightened hair, highlighted to conceal the signs of aging.

The front door swung open quietly, and her son padded up the stairs silently.
“Oh, hey, Mom. What are you still doing up?”

“Your uncle Steve was on the phone. Aren’t you back a little late for a Sunday?” He had the same impossibly lanky build as Stephen, the same slouch that made her pull her hair out. His dark curly hair and tanned skin definitely came from his father, as did his impossibly dark eyes, but sometimes, when he smiled just right so his nose wrinkled, Anna could see traces of her own father and his namesake dance across his face.

“Oh. What’s new out east?” He shrugged and hiked up the sleeves of his waffled shirt as he crossed past her, swinging open the refrigerator door to forage for something to stave off his hunger.

“He’s heading back home. Grandma Ruth has decided to…..end her life.”

John froze with a tupperware of leftovers in his right hand, turning to face her. “Oh. Are you going to go see her? You haven’t been back out in a while.”

“Eleven years. I’m still thinking about it.”

He put the leftovers back and came over, kissing his mother’s forehead before unfolding his marionette-ish legs towards the staircase. “Okay. Love you.”

“John.” She called to him. He turned back. In the lowlight, she looked ten years older than usual, and her face seemed weighed down. “I’m proud of you.”

His brow furrowed in confusion, then softened. “Oh. Thanks. Good night.” He bounded up the stairs in silence as she took her head in her hands to stare at the ground, mind racing and heart broken.
Monday

The alarm clock sounded, crude and jolting, at 6:45, precisely. In one smooth motion Alan rolled his body over so he laid, chest down against the hotel linen, and flicked the clock off with his middle finger. The time change had forced his hand, after all. Rolling onto his back once more, he stared up at the cream ceiling of the hotel room. The time change was playing tricks on him.

Taking his hands and running them through his hair, thick and dark hair, flecked with salt by the temples. He let out a gasping sigh throaty with anger as he remembered where he was. The heat of the room pushed in on him, almost stifling in an act of overcompensation for the bitter cold that lurked outside. The hotel linens were too white for his taste, and had that certain feel to them, as if they need to let you know that they’re clean. At least they smelled pristine. He let out another sigh, this one weaker and resigned.

In another well-oiled movement, he slid out the bed, resting his feet on the floor to look at the alarm clock again as if to double check the time. He rose and paced to the door, his legs long as trees sweeping across the plush carpeted floor in powerful strides. He thrust open the thick curtains that blotted out the sole window of the hotel room and felt the cold air that hovered by it radiate gently towards him. The light was surprisingly bright, the morning sun still timid scattering down its light on the landscape painted liberally with snow, where it ricocheted about until it hurtled in upon Alan, who blinked in surprise.

Turning, he paced to the bathroom, flicking on the light there which burst forth, artificial and yellow. He blinked again, once, twice, thrice, and gazed at the face that looked back at him. His near-black hair was swept about his head in oily strands, a few odd locks tumbling down on his forehead, pale and lined to barely kiss his eyebrows, dark and haughty even without being furrowed, as they near-constantly were. His eyes caught his surprise, as always, cold and blue, void of anything but a reflection of the gaunt hopelessness the dark circles underneath them conveyed. Around his cheeks and jaw, still sharp even with age, his deep creases were interrupted only by the fine black stubble that coated his tough skin, pooling in the wrinkles around his mouth and chin. He held eye contact for too long, too fatigued to look away from himself until he started to drift crosseyed to stare at the nose he hated, far too thin and far too long, the nose his father used to claim was left by the stork that dropped him off.

He cast his eyes down in aversion, first to the countertop, immaculately organized into small piles of cloudy white bottles and whiter towels and his hands, large and rough, that rested on the counter supporting his weight as he leaned out over the sink. His eyes then drifted up to his chest, lightly-haired and maintaining a boyish scrawniness, even after all those decades, not like Edward’s, whose torso resembled that of a Sean Connery impersonator whose gym membership had lapsed. A light protrusion rested at his waist line, squatting out over the waistband of his red and blue boxers, and he sighed in irritation. He would have to visit the pitiful hotel gym tonight, altitude sickness be damned.

He splashed a bit of cold hard water on his face and felt it run down, trickling down his chest. He sighed once more, forcing his leaden limbs into his daily routine, clomping into the small roundish shower bathed in unhealthy yellow light and smelling of bleach. Unwrapping the cheap paper from the almost quaintly small bar of soap that felt childish in his hands, he began to rub it back and forth furiously in his hands and watch the suds leach out and flow down his wrists. His hands worked in small gentle circles around the broad caps of his shoulders, meandering around, then over the sharp shoulder bones that poked forth and the base of his neck. Even now, under the steamy water of the shower, he felt the soap cling to him as it failed to wash off under the hard water, instead hovering above his skin in a thin layer like oil on water. He had forgotten the unnerving sensation, ripping open the shower curtain as he
felt his skin begin to crawl and snatching a yellowing face towel from the shower rack, balling it up in his fist and holding it under the stream of water. The shower, previously comfortably warm, had turned scalding, its gentle stream beading down turning into oppressive bursts flying from the showerhead to shatter upon his body, sending boiling currents racing down his body.

He began to scrub furiously up and down his body, breathing heavily now, his lungs pumping furiously in the jungle-like heat, leaving uneven pinkish stripes up and down the length of his body, whipping his thin dark hairs about his body in a frenzy. He stumbled out from underneath the glare of the showerhead, panting and leaning against the shower’s far wall basking in the steam as the water continued to pool around his ankles. Taking one final deep breath, he scrubbed furiously at his face, then stepped back directly into the shower’s attention, leaning his face right up to the head, scrunching up his face furiously as the pressurized water scalded away skin.

The water began to creep up his nose as he ran out of air, and he stepped out of the shower once more, snorting like a cornered animal before shutting the shower off, stepping out of the shower and indulging himself in the faux-luxury of a cheap hotel bathrobe, feeling the grainy white material grind against his skin like camel hair.

He returned to the outer chamber of the bathroom, standing before the fake granite countertop once more, taking his travel shaving cream can in his right hand and pressing down firmly with his thumb, feeling the substance squirt out joyfully onto his palm. Massaging it about his chin, he felt its soothing touch cool down his pulsing blood. He breathed deeply twice, and, rinsing his hands, opened up his travel case made from sandy leather, and his single-strop razor slipped out like a snake. Picking it up, he flipped it in his hands testily a few times, and set about slowing scraping away the stubble that shadowed about his cheeks.

He was halfway through when he heard a knock upon his door. Hunched over the sink, he righted himself, and sighing, paced to the door to open it. Jean waited on the other side impatiently, dressed impatiently in a simple pastel green blouse with a navy blue cardigan and cream straight legged khakis, the only sign of any ostentation being the two thin gold hoops that hung from her ears.

“What time are you headed over?” She asked as she paced in.

“Please, make yourself at home,” He remarked drily, punctuated with an eyeroll and returned to the sink as she sat herself down upon the corner of the bed.

“You’re looking well,” She offered up more out of decorum than truthfulness. “How’s New York seem now?”

“Well,” He laughed, now painstakingly stroking away underneath his chin, his motion fluid like those of an impressionist. “Much less cold. And better options for dinner. I didn’t even know they still made salads with iceberg lettuce.”

Jean laughed tiredly. “I’m fairly certain Mom thinks a balanced diet is one of whiskey AND sodas.”

“Might as well let her have it. It’s not like she’ll have to face the health consequences.” He quipped, ignoring the disapproving look from his older sister. “How’s the hospital been?”

“Excuse me?” Her tone’s edge had sharpened.

“You are still working at the county hospital, right? I knew I was a poor brother, but I didn’t think it was that bad.”

“Oh. Oh. Yes. Well. It is what it is. There are some pretty major cuts but they won’t be able to get rid of me.” She rose now and paced to the window.
“No one ever could,” He muttered, now turning his head up towards the light to navigate the dimple that cleaved his chin in two. “I don’t suppose we’ll be spending the whole day with her.”
“She should tire out by eight or nine and then I’ll put her to bed and we can head out. Don’t worry, Edward will be travelling for work so he won’t be able to join us.”
“What a shame. I didn’t even realize he was allowed to travel for work—don’t most of his coworkers have ankle bracelets?”
Jean smothered her laugh, staring out across the plain that swooped over the landscape outside the lone window, the snow suffocating any noise the distant cars made as they trekked across.
“I suppose it’ll be just like old times then, you, me, and the old woman, then,” He continued. “Is there any chance any of her drugs will make her delusional or shall we have to talk to her sober?”
Jean turned. “I’d be careful the way we talk about our mother, Alan. Let’s not forget all she’s done for us.”
“And when was she ever careful about the way she talked about us, dearest? Am I dwelling too much on history, or just the parts you choose to ignore?” He pondered aloud, his tone jovial, as he wiped the excess cream from his blade on his bathrobe.
“We’d best get going,” She replied curtly. “She’ll be wondering where we are.”
“I doubt she’ll care,” His motion had grown short and abrupt as he scratched away the dark prickles that were planted above his lip. With one final savage motion he whipped away the last bit of cream, turning to splash water on his face and patting his cheeks with another face towel before turning to face her. “As long as you supply the magazines, dear sister.”
She looked back at him, her face cocked in confusion. “Well, you can’t seriously expect we’ll keep up a conversation for that long, can you?”
The apartment was drafty. She tightened her cardigan around her and rapped her knuckles on the mahogany coffee table, impatient for nothing. She cast her eyes around the living room, full of tables too small to hold anything but picture frames she had tired of long ago and trinkets from years spent wandering.

She had settled years ago and watched the dust collect on herself and her ornaments alike. She let out a sigh and felt restlessness settle in on bones enwrapped in muscle too feeble to shake it off. The sun caught her eye suddenly, poking up over the mountains lining her windows and she shook her head gently in irritation like an elephant plagued by mosquitoes.

Resigning herself, she reached her right hand over, fishing it in between an old lamp and a miniature harp to pluck out an old landline, its white plastic dirtied from years of abuse. She dialed in the number she knew by heart with an unsteady finger, then held it to her ear as it began to ring. Even now, her arms rested, she could feel her arm begin to tremble. She clenched her jaw and inhaled sharply through her nose, letting a wave of nausea wash over her. Instead it sat in her gut, swirling up towards her throat, and her breaths grew shallow like a dog out in the sun.

“Good morning, Grandma!” The voice that cut through the numbness that was seeping into her was as sunny that morning as it had been when she had bounced the girl on her knee twenty years as they watched apple pudding brown in the oven.

“Good morning, Colleen. Are you back from school already?”

“I took the week off. I think I’ll be coming back to see you. Dad got tickets for Saturday morning. How are you holding up?”

“Oh,” She forced a pathetic excuse for a hearty bluster out. “I’m holding in there just fine.” She swallowed a cough, and nearly gagged on it. “How are classes going?”

“Oh, I’m done with classes for now. I’m just TA-ing and working on my dissertation.”

A sigh escaped her. “And remind me dearest, what is your thesis?”

“Oh, you would love it! It’s an analysis and synthesis of the role of external factors in the revolutionary movements in Russia and Ireland spanning the turn of the century till the post-war period.”

She could feel the girl’s smile through the phone.

“Dearest, you’re going to have to speak a little slower for your grandma.” A feathery laugh escaped her in spite of herself. “But that does sound lovely. We’re so proud of you.”

Surprised silence seeped out of the receiver. “Thanks, Grandma. Why were you calling?”

“Oh, I just wanted to check in on Stevie and see how everything was going. I hate to spring a surprise on him like this.”

“Oh, no, no, no, we don’t mind at all!”

“Don’t worry, dearest, I know. Is he there?”

“No, sorry, he’s at work. I can have him call you back, though!”

“Oh, no, that won’t be necessary. I trust him.”

“Okay, Grandma. I love you.”

“And I love you. Now go write a chapter for me.”

The girlish laughter pulsated through the heavy silence of the room. She savored it a moment, then clicked the receiver silent.

She could hear his voice echo through her head, placid as ever but faraway and eerie, like whispers in the night. A great weight pressed down suddenly upon her shoulders and a shiver ran through her. She felt the sharp dryness of her throat start to press in against her tongue and she reached for her water, only to find it empty. Her legs, immobile, would not soon be stirred. She took the crystal glass in
her hand, still tinged golden from whiskey masked with water from the night before, holding it in her palm for a moment. It pressed against her skin cool and smooth, the decorative grooves carved into it sparkling in the watery winter light like a dimmed chandelier. It clinked gently against her wedding ring, which slipped over the curving glass to nestle into one of the grooves.

She eyed the cheap plush carpeting of the floor and testing the glass in her hand, cocking her arm back as far as it would allow, almost approaching perpendicularity with her shoulder. A chip along the rim of the glass caught her eye, small enough to ignore upon first inspection but enough to drive its owner mad upon closer inspection. Her upper lip twisted in a gnarled smirk and she set the glass down forcefully. She began to run her finger over her wedding band and engagement ring, feeling the princess cut diamond’s edges poke keenly into the tip of her blundering finger, sending needles through her arthritic hands. She inhaled sharply once more, running her finger down to where it had been enlarged decades earlier as her hands had begun to twist in upon themselves with age. She crossed her hands in her lap, bowing her head as the time she had been running through began to settle down upon her.

She did not wait long. Three short raps on the door signalled its swinging open as her eldest daughter walked cautiously in. “Hey, Mom, how are you feeling?” She grunted.

“Alright, sorry Alan and I are a bit late but we brought some food for lunch and dinner.”

Alan strode in, two brown paper bags dangling from his scarecrowish arms, nodding curtly to her. Their cheeks were still ruddy from the cold and they immediately commenced bustling around the apartment, unpacking their haul.

“Mom, it’s sweltering in here. Are you sure you’re alright?”

“Yes. Yes, of course I am.” She snapped.

“Alright, madame.” Alan threw his hands up as he tossed a package of ground beef into the fridge, immediately assuming a defensive position. She slumped a bit lower in her chair. He relaxed his posture, lowering his hands to undo his French-knotted scarf.

Jean, having shrugged off her mammoth winter coat, bustled over, already shaking out pills, her outstretched palm smooth towards her mother.

Ruth frowned and grunted in displeasure. “Mom, you have to.”

“I don’t have to do anything. Bring me a drink.”

“Mom, you’re not mixing pills with whiskey.”

“Good then. I’ll take my whiskey on the rocks, Alan. You remember how I like it.”

“I couldn’t forget,” He muttered, gently placing a pair of white onions on top of the refrigerator and fetching a tall glass from the cabinet.

“Alan, don’t you dare put a drop of whiskey in that glass. You’re a lawyer; if anyone in this family knows how many laws that breaks it’s you.”

“That’s a low blow, sister. Unfortunately for you, I am not barred in the state of Montana, and if there’s any state that regulates against giving old women whiskey, it’s certainly not this one, even if they can’t handle it.”

“I’ll show you who can handle their whiskey, ingrate.”

Jean let out a brief, restrained shriek of frustration. “Fine! You can take these dry or with water or you won’t get anything to drink for the rest of the day.”

“Fine,” Ruth snarled. “Pass the pills. I’ll take them dry.”

Jean held her palm back out, one small round white pill barely larger than a nail’s head, a red ovular pill as long as a fingernail, and one horse pill, ovular and big as a penny resting there. Ruth’s trembling fingers took them and dropped them in her own palm, finger loosely curled ever so slightly
with arthritis. Blunt fingers trembling, she picked each one up slowly, as if seeking to call her child’s bluff. Jean peered down at her haughtily, arms crossed like a vulture.

“Jean,” Alan cut in. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Get started on dinner, Alan.” Jean didn’t raise her eyes from boring into her mother unblinkingly. He stood immobile, frozen in indecision, before capitulating and turning to the kitchen.

Ruth swallowed the pills slowly, dropping the smallest onto her tongue first, then closing and swallowing hard, her head bobbing back and forth almost imperceptibly. Coming to the final pill, she paused before placing it gently. Her daughter still leered over her, statue-esque, placid cruelty etched into her face. The old woman strained, and tears began to well up in her eyes, gagging noises creeping out of her chest.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake!” Alan, snatching a tall glass from the dish rack and running it under the sink, hurried over and handed it to her. She wrapped both hands around it and sucked greedily from it. She handed it back to Alan.

“More, please.” Looking up at him, she seemed to have sunk lower into her chair, looking almost childish in her smallness.

“Sure, Mom,” He said, turning back to the kitchen. “Hell of a nurse you are, Jean.”

The silence spread from the plush carpeting.

Warm mid-afternoon sunlight soaked in through the windows as the early winter air snarled outside. Ruth stayed sunken into her seat, her frail head bent shamefully like a robin returned too soon caught offguard by the harshness of winter. As the light radiated into her, Jean began to feel a thin film of sweat begin to form underneath her sweater. Still staring down at her mother, she turned suddenly, pacing back to the door, snatching her windbreaker from the bookshelf where they lay piled, and stalking out the door, shutting it forcefully behind her without a word.

Under the sun beating down outside, rivulets of fresh snowmelt began to run down the bay window in spite of the bitter cold. Solemnity pressed in on the room, weighed down by the pack of snow resting on the roof.

“Get me a drink, would you, Alan?” Alan’s beef sizzled browning in the pan. He slid finely diced white onion off a cutting board, until its hissing chorus joined the meat, then, wiping his knife’s blade, broad and rigid, on his apron before turning to her.

“I suppose I don’t see why not,” He remarked airily, putting a lid atop the browning mixture and lowering the heat before sweeping off his apron and deftly snatching the whiskey from its cabinet. Ruth closed her eyes, smiling faintly as the ice cubes tinkled musically into the twin pair of glasses and spirits swirled about them. Alan paced over to her as mechanically as ever, his measured paces carrying the unnatural evenness of a machine. The glass he handed her was marginally more full than his own. She sipped it cautiously, then smacked her lips appreciatively.

“You always could mix a drink, son.”

He sat on the couch across her, crossing his right leg over his left and taking a sip from his own drink. “Lots of practice.”

“Five kids, and only one of you could ever mix a drink.”

“The better they were, the less time I had to spend around Dad.”

“Careful the way you talk about the dead, son.”

“Then he should have been more careful in the way he treated the living, mother dearest.”

“He did his best for us. He did the best he could in his time. You’ll understand that some day. Though I suppose it’s too late for a family of your own to teach you that.”
Alan laughed dryly into his glass. “Age was never the primary concern there. And time seems to have softened your memory of him.”

She bristled. “Bring me a blanket.”

Alan rolled his ice about in his glass and rolled his eyes wryly, before setting it carefully on a coaster and rising to stroll to the hallway closet, the beginnings of drunkenness loosening his step ever so slightly and leadening his feet. “Mother, he was a monster sober and a monster drunk. There was a twenty minute window every day before his third drink when he was tolerable.” He plucked a simple cream afghan from the top shelf and, dropping it in her lap, retook his place on the couch.

She wrapped the afghan around herself and burrowed herself deeper into her seat. “We gave you the best. The best school, the best books. How many of your classmates were able to get out of here? How many of your family members were able to make it out? Did I ever ask you for a thank you?”

“Why do you think I had to leave, mother?”

“When did we ever lay a hand on you? When did we kick you out? So then why did you have to leave? Because of a few names your father called you that he didn’t even remember the next day? I had hoped you of all my children would have been too smart for that. But you weren’t. You left me in an icebox surrounded by buffoons to protect your feelings. I raised you better. But I failed. I raised you smart. Smart and soft.” She spat out the last words before drawing her blanket closer to her chin and taking another small sip from her glass.

Having drained his glass, Alan rose to fix himself another, chuckling to himself. The rivulets on the window had intensified and coursed down the window now. A cloud of steam sprang up from the pan as he lifted the lid up to check on the food quietly simmering in the kitchen. He sprinkled a bit of salt carelessly, then turned to the whiskey on the counter.

“And what did you want me to do? Stay and rot here, waiting on the hands and feet that kicked me?”

She laughed into her glass. “You fashioned yourself into a real martyr, didn’t you? You think you were some silently suffering saint, don’t you?”

His light smile morphed into a snarl. “Saints have angels watching over them. There were no miracles for me, mother. Just pain.”

“They were chores, Alan. Not Hercules’ labors.”

“And when did Edward dig up frozen soil for the garden? When did Jean ever get banned from the car. It’s four miles to church, mother. Just long enough for the frostbite to set in every Sunday in Advent. When did Anna ever shine his shoes nightly, or sort the garbage? When did Stephen ever spread the compost? You sent Stephen to Saint Monica’s as well, didn’t you? When was he rented out to farms over the summer to work for his tuition? And I wonder why he didn’t have to pay for his schooling.”

“I don’t know what you’re trying to say. We taught you to work, same as the rest of them.”

“That wasn’t the lesson you were trying to teach me. And you never had the nerve to do it yourself. Always hiding behind him. Always holding his coat for him. Oh, you shook your head and scolded him like your sixth child, but so long as the garden stayed clean and he used my money to buy your dresses you had no complaints. You stayed in your seat. And you stayed there till he died. You’ve done nothing but strut over us for the past fifteen years as if you ever had the strength to stand while he was alive. So spare me the theatrics, please, and if you’ve finished your drink pass it to me so my beloved sister doesn’t make me sleep outside.”
She tossed back the remaining drink and swallowed it in one go, then handed it to him as he passed on his return to the kitchen. “You suffered because of this family. I suffered for it. Don’t forget that.”

He laughed, care-free and easy. The sun, sinking quickly over the mountain, bleached the color from the room as it became watery and sleepy. The beads of water tumbling down the window began to gel and freeze, caught out exposed in the wake of the brutal night that barrelled mercilessly towards them. A cloud of steam barrelled up into his face as he lifted the lid off of the pot. “I’d imagine we’re the only ones of the McCormicks not eating funeral soup tonight.”

Laughing at the face she pulled, he handed her a glass of water while lowering himself gingerly, swirling about his cherry-wood colored drink. She frowned at him.

“Weaning me off, are we?”
“You’re on far too many pills to hold your whiskey, mother dearest.”
“I’ll be the judge of that. I think I’ve earned another.”

“Do us all a favor, Mom. We’ve heard your excuses of having earned it for quite long enough, so please try to keep your woe-is-me one woman show to a minimum or else we might be tempted to move up your appointment.”

“You seem to have been on the East Coast long enough to forget everything I did for you. It’s funny, your baby brother has been gone just as long and he has much better recall. Maybe you’re not as much younger than me as you thought.” She snarled into her glass.

“Oh, yes, on and on with everything you did for us. I did what our family wanted from me too. I got out as soon as I could, and bit my tongue when you all suggested you would have had it any other way. So I’ll thank you if you tame yourself.”

“Amazing! You’ve been drawing horns on all the pictures of your father for so long you’ve actually started to believe they were there along.”

“I’m dreadfully sorry you got bored sitting around home making pies for years, mother. I truly am. It sounds dreadful. But just because you couldn’t hear us from the kitchen window doesn’t mean it wasn’t all real.”

“Leave Edward alone! At least he tried!”

“And I didn’t? And I didn’t?” The words rolled off his tongue, savage and deliberate. She fell silent, finishing the tepid tap water in her glass.

They sank deeper into their chairs, their barbs softening to tired glowers as dusk burned away in the sky, leaving deep blues flowing across the window.

The door opened, carrying with it a burst of fresh air, as Jean tramped in, knocking boots from which she had already knocked all possible loose snow. Her breaths were jarring and panicked, having forgotten the invigoration of warmth.

“Good. Jean. You’re back.” Alan rose steadily from his chair, pushing up with both arms corkscrewed into the armrests. “Dinner’s ready.” He offered his hand to Ruth, who accepted with a hint of wounded suspicion in her eyes.

“Sorry, I just needed a bit of fresh air. I suppose I might have even missed the cold.” Her laugh rung hollow throughout the apartment. She turned to them, as if noticing the pair for the first time. “Are you alright? You look….tired.”

“Quite alright, quite alright.” Ruth bustled over to the table in small shuffling steps.

“Yes, yes,” Alan waved a hand dismissively. “We both just needed a spot of silence to clear our heads.”
Alan moved the steaming pots over to the kitchen table, where he set it heavily on a pair of lacey hot pads, a bit of sentimental snootiness in the otherwise homely apartment.

Taking each plate successively, he scooped potatoes, followed by chicken breasts in a light marinade and asparagus onto each.

Ruth nodded reproachfully at her plate. “Potatoes are overdone.”

Alan snorted humorlessly.

“Mom,” Jean warned.

“She’s right, Jean. I was wasting too much time while I was making them.”

Jean raised her hands in surrender. Alan sat down and plucked up his knife and fork, joining his mother in sawing through the chicken. Jean unfolded her napkin onto her lap before placing both hands delicately on the edge of the table and clearing her throat.

“Do either of you care to join me in prayer?” They both raised their eyes from their dinners contemptuously.

“Jean, darling, who do you think you’re fooling?” Alan drawled, voice drier than the chicken.

She lowered her head resignedly before picking up her utensils with leaden movements. Dean Martin echoed in whispers through the vents from the apartment above as the woolen darkness from outside unspooled and suffocated the alcove of old stale light.
Tuesday

Their forks had long ago been set down beside their plates in surrender. They now sat in silence around the table. Ruth alternated her glare between the two of them. They both wore poorly crafted masks of indifference as they stared off at nothing in particular, searching for anything but medusa-like eye contact in the stony silence.

Ruth sighed. “I’m getting ready for bed. I expect you both out of my house before I fall asleep.” She rose unsteadily and waved off both their assistance to stumble back towards her room. Her attempt to slam her door shut behind her ended with a feeble clap and a flick as yellow light gushed through the cracks of the door.

“Well,” Alan said. He rose steadily but slowly, feeling every creak in his knees, and hobbled over to the stovetop. “I’m making tea. Might I interest you in some?”

“Sure, sure,” Jean nodded appreciatively.

“Quite the vacation we got ourselves into here,” Alan remarked ruefully, reaching into an upper cabinet to fish about for teabags. Jean hummed her agreement.

Selecting two old ceramic mugs, tan with light blue trim, he placed them in the center of the round table and dropped a tea bag in each. “I hope green is fine. It’s all she’s got.”

Jean smiled weakly. “Better than nothing, I suppose.”

“Well, I also have a sneaking suspicion it’s leftover from the Carter Administration, but I think we’ll be fine. It’s just dead grass anyway, right?”

Jean let out a single muffled laugh. “Of course. I’m sure you’ll survive without your fresh cosmopolitan tea for a week.”

“Yes, because the most noted difference between the greatest city in the world and God’s great icebox is the tea.”

“I always knew it.” She chuckled back.

“Well, how would you?” He retorted with a raise of the eyebrow.

“Really, Alan?”

“Just an observation. I’ve been more than happy to come visit you. Yet never once have I hosted one of my own flesh and blood.”

“Well, plane tickets are expensive and we like where we are.”

“Oh, you always did have a sense of humor.”

“Watch yourself. You know what they do to coastal elites like you in these parts.”

“I’m just saying. The bright lights aren’t enough to attract you but I’ve trekked across every square state that echoes if you talk too loudly.”

“Well, that certainly doesn’t apply to me.”

“Cut the bullshit, Jean. You live in the shit part of Washington. Might as well be Idaho.”

Jean raised her eyebrows in mock dismay. “Watch your mouth. And is it really such a bad thing none of us have come to visit you?”

Alan rose to retrieve the whistling kettle, nodding begrudgingly. “Fair enough.”

The voice came from across the apartment, harsh and rough. “Shut that damn kettle off!”

“The old girl’s still kicking,” He noted with a raise of the eyebrows as he poured the steaming water into the pair of cups. “So, what are you hiding?” He glanced up at her to catch her response. Her eyebrows knit in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh, come on Jean. You always were a rotten liar. There’s something going on that you’re not telling us.”
“So that’s what this is all about.”
“What what is all about?”
“It never was enough for you to be kind for kindness’ sake, was it?”
“Yes, because kindness has always been the currency upon which we operate in this family. You’re not nearly as clever as you think you are. What is it?”
“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”
“Something has you on edge.”
“Well, if I had to guess off of the top of my head, my mother is ending her own life within the week and my grown brothers won’t let my blood pressure drop. I can’t imagine working twelve hour shifts is terribly helpful either.”
“Oh, good, again with your nursing sob story. It’s a shame I left my violin back in New York.”
“Well, then, why the hell would you ask?”
“Because there’s something else. You can pretend it’s not there, but it’s needling you.”
“It’s called this God-damned family, Alan.”
He laughed. “After this long, this family is like a bed of nails. But there’s something new. Something longer and sharper. I don’t expect you to tell me. Respect and openness never was your style. But I know it’s there and I want you to know that.”
“Spare me the lawyer talk.”
“I was never barred in the state of Montana. Prosecuting cattle hustlers never appealed to me. I’m just your brother.” He blew into his mug, then took a long, reticent sip of tea. “Do you want milk for yours?”
She grasped the table with white knuckles suddenly, and her jaw clenched. His eyebrows furrowed.
“Are you alright?”
“I’m fine.” She spat through gritted teeth. Her grip relaxed. Her chest rose and fell uneasily.
His phone buzzed. He sighed, setting down his cup of tea. “So no milk, then?” Extracting his black thick-framed glasses, he perched them upon his nose and peered through them down at his phone. “The village idiot has forgotten the garage code. I’ll head down to let him in.” Seeing her clench her jaw, he retorted preemptively, “By all means. Tell me I’m wrong.” She held her tongue as he rose slowly once more, knees unfolding like a newborn deer’s, sliding his shoes on, and trodding out into the hallway, flicking the switch behind him.
She sat there in the darkness as the night sank in, light filtering out from fifteen feet away where her mother laid in wait for a dark that would not be chased away by the sun. Surrounded by ghosts that decades worth of Catholic knick-knacks could not chase away, her eyes searched the clear blue shadows for more light as faint green reached out from the microwave’s display, grasping for the loving warmth of the opposite door jam. She slumped. The light was always just too far away, it seemed, here, far from the sun’s power. The green light stumbled and fell, thwarted by an indifferent night, a darkness that could not bring itself to care.
A red light jolted awake, accompanied by the trill of the landline’s ring. Jean roused herself in surprise, collecting herself in time to answer the phone.
“Hello?”
“Hey, Jean, how are you holding up?”
“Oh. Stephen. Isn’t it late back east?”
He laughed, more out of custom than anything else. “It’s not too bad.” His voice grew childish, as if shedding forty years. “Is Mom there?” It was a voice she had not heard in decades. The voice of the baby. The voice that had shrieked out a greeting on her pilgrimages home from college. The voice her mother had cherished, held close to her heart. The voice had left and taken something with it. Something from their mother. Not all at once. Fading slowly with the years, the light slowly drowned by the gravel in his baritone.

“No. Sorry. She’s already asleep. She wore out quickly today.”
“Oh.” He paused. “Is there any way you could….”
“No. She needs her rest. Sorry.”
“But-”
“Maybe tomorrow. I’ll see you soon.” The receiver clicked as she jammed it back into its home. The voice wriggled its way underneath the door with the light, seeking out a hand to hold onto.

“Who was that?”
“No one,” She snapped. She righted her tone. “It was just Alan. They’ve parked and they’ll be up now.”
“I don’t want to see them. Tell them to go away.” The voice sank back into the carpet, defeated.
“They’re here for me, not you. Do you need anything before you go to bed?”
“No. No. Come turn off the light for me.”
Jean walked wearily over to the room. By some act of God, the old woman had prepared herself for bed. She sat upright, propped against a half dozen pillows, small and frail, barely an island in the sea of her bed. Jean nodded once. “Good night, Mom.”

“Good night.” Surrender was in her voice. The light switched off as Jean turned to the exit. The night rushed in, a vacuum of apathy.
Wednesday

It had been the darkness that had kept him awake all night. Invasive, intrusive, a saturated black that poured and pored all over him and into him, a darkness he tried to shake off, turning side to side, searching for Cassie next to him, her sleep heavy enough to weigh down the bed from floating away in the black. He lay there, riveted to her form until she began to vibrate black and blue and he rolled over, searching for something else to grasp.

It was the arrival of light, gliding gently through the windows that lined the room, leaning through curtains and blinds, that kissed his eyes shut.

It was not long after that Cassie rose silently, her hand snaking out to silence the alarm clock after one ring, before its crass cry could sour the air. Her hand slid down and pinched up a hair tie out of habit, pulling her hair back before it could awaken and come alive. She cast a glance over at her husband.

She had fallen in love with him asleep. It was a morning nearly thirty years ago. It had been a classic Carolina autumn, when summer had lingered well past its welcome, each morning the fields coming alive cautiously, unready to be caught in a lull defenseless in the merciless heat of midday. She had been sick, a fever that left as suddenly as it had come. She had insisted on retrieving an old quilt from the closet elbowed into a crevice beside the front door of the duplex they lived in back then, a shoddy nest for graduate students and moralists embarrassed chased by self-loathing, debt, or both.

When she woke that morning, her body suddenly clear and ringing with inaction, she had sat upright, her back straight as an arrow. She turned to her right and saw him lying there. Suffocating in the night, he had shrugged free, his shirtless chest wriggling free to pin itself against the wall their undersized bed was wedged against and his scrawny back thrown open. His left arm pinned against his chest dog-legged and his right arm stuck out, every muscle stretched, no matter how small, his chin was pointed toward the ray of light trickling in from the window, no bigger than a shoebox thrown hastily in their wall. Sleep had washed away years from his face and his mouth was slightly agape, lips delicately parted, reaching for a hand to feed him. His doeish eyelashes embraced each other tenderly. He was a creature, simple and delicate for her to protect from the world. From herself.

For years, she had woken before him, catching a glimpse of the wonderment of dream on his placid face. For the first time this morning, his face was locked in stony concern. His eyelids were fixed in stubborn resolution not to acknowledge the world. A gaunt hollowness she had never before seen was fixed into his features and his body was prostate, perfectly straight with his hands crossed on his chest, like a corpse ready for the sarcophagus.

It was another two hours before he woke. The darkness that had rushed into him for hours welled, and nearly purged itself in the peachy light of day, swirling about in his throat in wave after wave of nausea. He stumbled into the bathroom in stunted paces and dangled over the bowl of the toilet until his staleness of his breath was too much and he staggered downstairs for a mug of inky coffee.

The royal blue mug was waiting for him on the kitchen table, tendrils of steam still creeping up like ivy. His steps were staggered, his eyes swollen. Shaking his head like a horse chasing off gnats, he looked up, searching.

“Good morning, honey.” Her tone conveyed a cheerfulness her expression did not warrant. Fighting a losing battle against the concern in her eyes, she rose from the fake granite countertop against which she leaned and walked over, plucking an apple from the bowl of fruit that rested next to his mug.

As her hand crossed back over his, she let it linger. “How did you sleep?”
He laughed once, sharply. “Bad.”
“Is there anything I can do?”
He shook his head wordlessly, turning to look at her. The pure blue of his eyes unsettled her. She paced away, opening and shutting the drawers that lined the kitchen, looking for a knife.

He looked after her briefly, then took two more heavy steps to the spread out handtowel where he had stacked the previous night’s washed dishes. Fishing around between pots and pans, he procured a paring knife, its old wooden handle nearly white with age and its blade betraying the slightest hint of a curve.

He cleared his throat once. She turned. Her face broke, his still intact. She took it from him gently, her delicate hand glazing over his clenched fist. He cast his eyes down. Three steps back, lowered himself heavily into his chair.

“Is Colleen up yet?”

“That girl? She went for a run at six and has been asleep for the past two hours.”

He laughed, defenseless. “She gets it from you.”

“Only because no one in your family has ever had to exercise.”

“Has Sam called back yet?”

“No…no. She’s always busy with something.”

He nodded, not out of understanding but to buy himself more time to process.

Silence fell on the kitchen again, the peaceful silence of a morning both of them had foregone.

“Do you want a smoothie for breakfast?” Her voice sounded unnatural in the kitchen, strained as if she were unaccustomed to hearing it aloud.

“I can’t do it, Cass. I can’t do it. I have to go.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m driving out. I don’t care. I can’t take sitting here.” When he looked at her again, there was something adolescent lurking in his eyes, a dare, a green edge to his blue, hoping for her to challenge him.

She paused, staring down his rebellion. She turned her eyes down. “Okay. I’ll let Colleen know once she’s up. Go start packing.”

The familiar rolling thumping from above announced the arrival of their middle child. She nearly tumbled down the stairs with the same recklessness as always, the one that had always invoked their sternness and could never be squeezed out from her by any number of bruised shins.

Careening into the kitchen, her parents stonily awaiting her arrival, she froze, tensing her muscles. A look overtook her face, long unseen, the look of a child caught in the middle of an illicit act.

“Did I miss something?”

The kitchen’s silence was timid, nearly sullen.

“I’m driving out.”

“Driving out where? Never mind.” She corrected herself, then paused. “When do you leave?”

“As soon as possible.”

“Oh.”

“Why?”

“Did you hear my phone call?”

“No.” Her mother cut in.

“It was Professor Madden. I’ve been invited to the conference over Christmas break in Boston.”

“Congratulations.” It rang hollow in the air.

“Yeah. But we have to prep all this week.”

The silence seeped back in.
“Well, we’d better start packing.” Three lips pursed. Three heads nodded in unison. Three heads turned to leave.
It wasn’t the alarm that woke her. It was the cold. She had forgotten about the cold. It seeped through the windows, poured across the floor, soaked her comforter, blanket and sheets, submerging her feet and creeping up her legs. She awoke as her toes fell numb, the despair sitting heavy on her chest.

She had forgotten the cold, forgotten the way it had haunted her all her childhood, chased her down south, then west to California. Forgotten the days spent huddled near the radiator even as Ruth had rained down scorn on her. Soft. Softer still through the nights when she had whimpered out, drawing nothing but scorn from her mother down the dark tunnel of a hallway lined with treacherous drafts. Forgotten the way her father would wait until the body next to him, cold as stone, would drift off to sleep, snarl still fixed on her face, then rise, quiet as a whisper and drift down the hall to her, bringing her blankets and soothing whispers, gentle strokes of her hair, wiping away the rivulets of tears left behind that felt frozen to her temples, padding silently to the kitchen, socks full of the rice that went unused in the kitchen in hand to microwave, then nestle them in between her arms and sides to keep her warm till the morning.

Looking out the window at the blank canvas of snow, dotted with errant cows, she couldn’t help but wonder if it were the cold that had driven her out looking for the warmth another body brings at night. Maybe it was the emptiness of it all, the vastness of the mountains, forests, and rivers that could bury you in loneliness that sent her looking for something to hold onto.

She braced herself, every muscle from her jaw to her feet tensed, then sprung from the bed, dashing headlong to the hotel bathroom, setting the water to its fullest heat, foregoing grace to yank clothes off her body as the water warmed. When it was finally warm, she set the shower on, then plunged her body beneath it, her chest heaving in shock at the heat of the water.

Closing the drain, she let the warm water pool around her feet until it sapped the cold from her toes and she could feel her body once more. She slowly swept the hair plastered to her face back, letting her head roll back and a groan escape her chest. She turned reluctantly to the welcome left by the hotel, foregoing the shampoo in bottles smaller than a shot. She would wear her hair up. Her mother would hate it, but she’ll be dead soon anyways. Unpeeling the paper wrapper from the soap, she set to rubbing it about her body, trying to scrub away the goosebumps.

When she was finished, her bathroom properly steamed, she stepped out, skin bright pink from the heat of the water, and wrapped herself and her hair in suspiciously off-white towels, then stepped back out into her room, caught off-guard by the cold of it once more. She changed hurriedly, but the smell of the towels stuck to her. She wiped her feet off, wrapping two pairs of socks around each foot before wrestling them into boots. The smell of the towels clung to her hands, suspiciously soapy, as if trying to compensate with the reek of cleanliness.

She drew two of the hoods of the three coats she wore up over her hastily tied bun and snatched the wallet and keys from the table where she had placed them next to a map of the town and two postcards, neither of which she needed. She bustled past the free breakfast. Not worth the risk. Walking as fast as the ice that coated the parking lot would allow, she slid into the seat of her rental car. It was a big, black, SUV. Exactly the kind of car that would make her family raise their eyebrows. She didn’t care. But maybe she did. Maybe judgement was better than silence.

The four-wheel drive rumbled out of the parking lot. The map in her mind sprawled out before her. Squinting up at the mountains south of her, she thought she could just make out the ridge where her mother waited. She glanced up at the roof, pondering, then made a sharp right. The longest route.
She hugged the dividing line of the two-lane highway, holding to the thin ruts worn into the ice tightly.

She peeled off to roll down an exit ramp. The wheel shifted under her hands, rolling over rough ice. Her knuckles flashed the white long beaten out from the snow. Her left foot twitched, then flexed, and the black beast jolted. A pickup truck rode close to her, a nimbus behemoth, whose horn barked out its irritation. The heat pumping from her dashboard hit her all at once, as a bead of sweat rolled down her temple.

The rivets beaten into the ice guided her into a gradual right turn, but her hands shook, hesitantly jolting out of the worn path to continue straight into the glade of pines, following what she hoped was the snowed-over road, trailblazing through the powder, dense and light with a soft crunch. Her jaw tightened once more, listening in dread for the whirring of spun-out tires that did not come. The car was jostled by the bulging veins of potholes, muscled up by roots and years of ice and abuse as she rolled to a stop in the blank field that, come springtime, would serve as a parking lot.

She cupped her hands, blowing hot air into them twice before sidling out of the car and bustling across the parking lot. Her feet found their way to the path hidden underneath the perfectly level snow. A breeze stirred its way across the field towards her, dancing through the pines and garnishing loads of snow from its branches. Crystals of the snow danced up in the wind and bit and cut at her face.

She trudged on where she knew the path to be. She wove her way steadily between more pines, keeping a lone granite hut to her left. Her eyes flew over to the old plot she knew too well. Her brow furrowed. A bulldozer, violently mustard, sat parked next to the plot, two men huddled leewards of it sipping tumblers of coffee. Her stride widened, exposing her inner thighs to the snarl of the whistling morning wind, and she paced over to the two men, chin jutted out accusatorily, snaking her way between the neatly ordered marble mounds that poked through the snow with a recklessness of affront.

“Excuse me, sir, what are you doing?” Her pitch was whiny but she didn’t care.

“Digging out a plot. Got the order in the bobcat if you care to see it. Figured we’d get started sooner rather than later, considering the ground’s stiff as a….well, you know.” The man’s hardened chin sank into the bandage of fat wrapped around his neck, wriggling into his collar. He glanced up to gauge her reaction as his lips puckered around the too-hot coffee.

“I’d like to see the order, please.”

He raised his eyebrows in surrender before glancing at his partner. He sighed heavily, knowing the cold that would race into him upon his first move. He turned, stomped over to the bulldozer, trying futilely to knock the snow from his boots, and snatched out a single piece of paper, handing her the invoice.

Sure enough, there at the top of the page, printed in bold, were the two words Anna dreaded most of all. McCormick, Ruth. She frowned, feeling the red in her cheeks deepen as the cold pinched ever tighter. She handed it back to the man, nodding her thanks. He tucked his chin deeper into his collar in acknowledgement. She paced over to the stone next to the reddish dirt chamber that had begun to be clawed out. Brushing the snow aside, she saw the small square meant for flowers, the ones sent by well-wishers throughout the city, those who read the news in the paper, sucking their teeth in pity before returning to their oatmeal. The ones she had thrown on the ground that November morning when they lowered him down, tears streaming down her face too fast to freeze and her words hiccuping in her chest like a child. She felt that same rage grip her, a rage of balled fists and pouted lips, a rage of helplessness.

She read the name, John McCormick, written in too-tall font, the font she had picked out, crossing her arms and slumping into her chair when her brothers dared to disagree with her.
She saw what they meant now. It was too haughty, without a hint of self-awareness.

That morning had been as bitterly cold as this one, but the ground was bare and brown, devoid of any snow. That had been a dry winter, one that had been followed by a summer of heat, orange flames licking up all the bone-dry wood. The grass, flat and stale, had crunched underfoot and she had stewed in the back, the weight of her sorrow too great for her to lift the casket with the others, glowering at those in black suits and dresses, shivering in their Sunday best as they passed over and threw over their handful of dirt, a pitiful sacrifice. None of them had loved him like her. He had loved none of them like her. The dull calloused hands of old colleagues, friends from poker and dinner groups, Saturday night and Sunday morning, left her shoulder feeling raw and achy under the black lace of her dress.

Ben had offered to come, but she had been selfish. She had wanted her grief all to herself, sought a flagellating homecoming resplendent in its misery. She had craved the sneers on her mother’s face, her brother’s face and his idiot of a wife when she turned up alone in the cold.

She had waited until they had filed away, one at a time, in slow shuffles so as not to betray their desire to be somewhere, anywhere else, muttered condolences on their lips, before she screamed, limbs flailing, her face red and raw, her chest heaving, spewing insults that caught in her throat at them all, numb from the cold and numb from years of cold from their father, not knowing the springtime he held inside, the light in his eyes just for her. The way she had thrown flowers, scratched the earth, stomped her feet, heels digging into the ground haunted her, floating back in bits and pieces.

The way Stephen had looked at her that morning, not like she was his sister, but rather one of his pathetic children of soft flesh and feathery hair that sat with juice and soothing whispers from their mother in the car had stopped her. Left her frozen in her tracks. Underneath the collick he had never tamed were twinkling green eyes. Not a sparkling electric blue that John had had for her every birthday, every Christmas, every graduation, the blue he saved just for her. Nor was it the blue sheen that spread across his eyes when the reddiness blossomed from his cheeks, when he would slur to anyone who would listen that she was the best thing to arise from the valley. It was a soft green that left her babbling like a baby there on the ground as he guided her into his arms, gently lifting her up, hand tracing gentle circles on her right shoulder blade the way Ruth would when their young stomachs grew restless.

He had lowered her steadily in, next to the infant son chewing on a nameless plastic ring from which rainbow-colored keys hung, his cheeks twin shiny globules of fat and a wonderment danced in his eyes.

She wished he was here now as she lowered herself jerkily back into the camel-colored leather of her SUV, shaking her head out of the trance that had carried her back to the car.

Her fingers, numb from the cold and fumbled the keys once, twice, preferring instead to twitch in search of gloves. She jammed them into the emission and the car rumbled to life.

The car tottered drowsily out of the graveyard, shaking itself awake, vents slowly roaring to life, whirring furiously to warm the engine and the cabin drowning in frost. Lumbering back onto the road, she jolted to the right. The pines that lined the road like monks soon gave way to split-level huts squatting in the snow, dug in against the cold.

There, ahead to the left, she spotted the red brick box of her high school. Surrounded by empty parking lots and empty fields. A few low ruddy shoeboxes poking out against against the empty and the white of it all. She gave the school a wide berth, and the road widened. The median was still a low streak of dirty white between the two lanes. It was still early in the winter. She remembered the endless nights of February, when the numbness of the cold had crept up your limbs and swirled about your stomach. When after months of slavering cold, no respite was in sight. It just kept coming. The snow and the ice
and the wind and the cold and the dark and the emptiness of it all never ended. More snow than anyone knew what to do with would continue to fall, not swirling about hypnotically like Christmas snow, but pounding down, driving furiously and without mercy to earth. How the pick-up trucks, the makeshift fleet of ugly red and rusty blue would strap on thick paddles to their fender and haunt the streets at night, having overwhelmed the sidewalks, piling mountains of snow in the middle of the street over the concrete strip of starving shrubs and mulch hard as gravel. In the watery light of morning, they would pour out of their homes in snowsuits and scarves in muted colors and parade silently to school, climbing over the boulders that spilled over the sidewalk.

She remembered the morning it broke her. Tired of tumbling over piles of snow, tired of blowing hot breath down her jacket to soothe the gooseflesh on her chest, waddling to class only to stare dead-eyed at multiplication tables. She could still feel her thighs trudging leadenly through the snow that came past her knee, looking both ways before scrabbling up the mountain in the middle.

Reaching the precipice she had begun her journey, struggling much less in the dim morning light on the icy peak, barely sinking in. Seeing the school not far off, she picked up her pace. She sped past her classmates and neighbors, not sinking nearly as far with each step high above them. As she neared the dormant fields that in three months would be graced by miniature baseball players in sweatpants and fleece she broke into a near trot. She felt the ball of her left foot miss, then felt her ankle crumple. Then the world jerked, and she found herself at the base of the ridge. The headlights baring down upon her blinded her and the horn deafened her as she scrambled backwards on all fours, throwing herself into a pocket in the snow. As the boxy sedan whirred past her, she panted, wild-eyed, like a deer caught in a trap. She felt that same look reflected in Jean’s eyes, staring over her shoulder from the front seat of the car as it sped away towards the mountains, far from the high school.

She looked that way, up the bowl where the city was nestled, towards where she knew she was. Where they all were. She gave her best guess as to the ridge where they were all invariably sitting, stewing in their loathing for each other and themselves.

She turned right, and felt the familiar smooth undulation of the car over the rolling hills the road traversed.

It was sooner than she remembered, there on her right. It looked the same; a shame. The new owners had redone the siding, a glitzy and artificial fake wood. She threw the car into park and let it idle alongside the curb there.

The same weeping willow was there in the front yard, its branches slumping lower every year, never recovering from the loads of ice shoveled upon it like clockwork as the sun grew weaker.

Craning her neck from the car, she could just barely peek over the fence. The shed had been torn down. Good riddance. It had never served any real purpose. Wedged up at the bottom of the steep hill that made up the backyard, it was always buried in with snow for five months of the year and buried in a mire of mud and torn up grass for the rest of the year.

The mud had felt cold underneath its thin sunbaked surface and it sucked greedily against her legs as he pinned her back against the back wall of the shed. His hands were calloused and clumsy, and felt simian against her milk-white skin, still new to the hopeful May sunlight. His lips were fat and rubbery but his back was broad. She wrapped her arms around his torso, thick as a tree trunk. It felt good to hold something. She gazed at his squat face pressed close against her, the way his eyes were squeezed shut and freckles amply dusted his nose, spilling out onto his cheeks.

His hips bucked into her. She ground back at him through the denim. He rocked her into the thin wall of the shed as his tongue jammed into her mouth with all the grace of an invading army. Through
the old planks of wood whose white paint was peeling off, she felt the lawn mower rock gently back. She let her eyes shut gently again, leaning into him and felt herself begin to enjoy it. His hand pawed at her silky hair. She breathed heavily. He smelled clean, but maybe a little smoky. Her neck loosened and she leaned her face into his.

A second hand joined his in her hair. It was not apeish, with fat fingers, but gnarled and gaunt. For a split second, her jaw hung open against his in confusion. Then Ruth yanked. Her neck snapped back and to the left. The base of her skull whipped into the shed before she fell hard, down and to the left, landing at the feet of Ruth, her shoes encased in her “summer” shoes, as block and utilitarian as her other shoes, but an unnatural white that only came from her scrubbing them twice a week. She feared what was above her but she couldn’t help but look up. Ruth’s green eyes were wild and wide, like a panicked horse.

“Get out!” She rasped. He took off wordlessly, scrambling to the left and up the hill, skirting around the edge of the party that had ground to a halt in confusion. Ruth hauled her out of the shadow of the shed, hand still knotted into her hair, legs pumping up the hill as Anna stumbled behind. Edward’s dopey smile was frozen on his face in confusion, still staring at the street into which his fellow linebacker had disappeared. The rich May sunlight imbued the backyard with a superficial warmth that hid the cold that still crept up from the soil and the time flowed like sap, caught sunbathing. The forced cordiality was frozen on the faces of neighbors and family.

Stomping across the deck, Ruth yanked the screen door open and threw Anna into one of the old buff kitchen chairs and paced to the kitchen. Glaring out the window onto the porch, she set about washing, peeling, and dicing vegetables wordlessly for dinner.

The food remained fresh out on the porch, but the mood had soured, more from the glare coming from the kitchen than that from the sky. A single-file line formed of handshakes for the new graduate, hushed congratulations whispered to Edward as his face remained fixed in a hollow smile, left hand twitching up to wipe hair from his eyes every few seconds.

Ruth sucked her teeth watching him, then turned her glare back to Anna. The sun had sunk beneath the mountains and dusk was thrown upon the sky like a peach shadow puppet. Stephen, Edward, and Jean all wordlessly ate their dinners from the leftovers still on the deck, the raw vegetables still on the cutting board.

Finally he walked in, taking measured, heavy steps. His flannel was tucked tightly into his jeans and his hard chin and cheeks, blistered from years of abuse from cold and wind, were fixed into a grimace. He looked at her first, chin resting in her hands, elbows propped on the kitchen table, dark hair cascading down, hiding the corners of her face like too-big curtains. She gazed back at him mournfully.

He turned to Ruth wordlessly. Her eyes were fixed and nearly gray like flint or dirty lake water.

“John, I want her-” He held up his hand. “Go to your room, Anna.” She rose poutily and shuffled out. John walked close behind her, turning on the old ornate lamp in the corner of the living room, its yellowly light supplementing the clean sun now resting. As she rounded the corner and felt the light fade against her back she heard him bellow.

“Edward!”

They slunk past each other on the stairwell. Her face was a placid mask. His seemed nauseous.

She laid in her bed, staring at the ceiling, watching it slowly fade till it was as dark as the night outside. Closing her eyes, the voices downstairs echoed through her head faintly.

“-Bringing someone like that into our home! Putting your flesh and blood in that position!”
“John.” Her voice quavered slightly with rage. Anna could see her as she laid in bed, eyes wide and clear with anger, hands clawed around the edges of the table.

A silence followed.

“Go to bed, Edward.” Her voice had not lost any of its flinty edge. Anna looked at the clock. 8 PM. She heard him shuffle wordlessly up the stairs, then silence.

Hints of the whispered battle being waged downstairs wafted up to her. She would rather they yelled. There was something unsettling about the quiet of it all, like being stalked by a predator in the forest. She heard a flat palm pound the kitchen table, then the drywall. Then silence.

The next morning a stony silence hung over the house until well past noon. When she dared to creep downstairs her father locked eyes with her and shook his head. Stephen snuck her a sandwich an hour later.

Come dinnertime, they sat mutely and ate quickly.

She shook her head to shake off her daze and gripped the steering wheel. They had all tried so hard to pretend it never happened that it almost didn’t.

As she rolled away she glanced up. Already the sun had passed its noontime zenith and was falling quickly. She missed California, with its forgiving warmth and gentle cliffs, unlike these mountains, roaring forth from long-dead earth like bear’s teeth.

The earth swirled around those teeth, a coat of pines so dark green they were nearly black concealing the turmoil underneath with a blanket of placidity. The blanket was stripped away all across the valley, the brittle giants giving way for homes that came out of construction already looking dated, ugly split-levels and duplexes that hunkered down against the wind and scars of asphalt across which cars whose sides were nearly-permanently stained with road salt zipped. Was it any wonder, when they ripped off the protection, that they were horrified by what laid beneath?

Winding through the foothills, she saw the spire of the Cathedral, a last-ditch attempt to bring the wealth that laid deep beneath the surface to those who lived atop it. It was a feeble attempt at Gothicism, the tallest building in town built from material hauled from quarries around the state and perched on the ridge of a hill so that the blindly religious of the valley could squint their eyes and pretend to be attached to the ornate Cathedrals of Europe and the coasts. It was unnatural, and punished all those who stepped inside it, its soaring ceilings filled with icy drafts of air that poured down upon the faithful all mass long.

Her confirmation mass had been on a Friday in May, the sort of days when winter mounts one last effort to remind you that it never really leaves. The rain that fell had been thin and miserable. The pin on her chest read “Anna Agnes McCormick”. Ruth had insisted she pick a virgin saint. The bishop, a squat old man, had anointed her forehead with a sausage-like thumb, smiling through his miniscule glasses. By the time she was in the car headed home she had wiped all the oil from her forehead, faking smiles at the ancient family members rubbing her shoulders in congratulations.

The next morning she collected all the money she had shook from the cards of congratulations, biking through the brisk fresh air that still smelled like rain to the one art shop in town tucked behind an old Italian restaurant in the town square to buy the oil paints she had been coveting for months, gazing at the still-lifes her father had painted as a young man that lined the walls of their home.

She never did finish a single painting, growing frustrated at the clumsy imitations that came from her brush, fat rude attempts at capturing the beauty she saw within her mind.

She turned sharply as the road hair pinned and began to snake its way up to the inevitable ridge she approached.
To her left a lone copse of aspen trees stood, skinny and defenseless without their leaves against the onslaught of winter.

The copse of trees had seemed young and full of life that night, when the June sun rode low and sent the valley into a pinkish dark, still glowing with its warmth. Alan had a mischievous look in his eyes, a look she had never seen in him when he still lived at home. His own graduation from law school was just a year away, and he had sauntered in just two days ago, dark and handsome, his face still taut and lean, but not gaunt the way it was in high school. He had picked her up effortlessly despite his own skinniness, and twirled her around as Edward, the solid rock of youth just returned a week earlier smiled from the couch.

That night, however, his dark eyes sparkled as he looked at her.

"Graduation isn’t the real ceremony. Come on."

They had mumbled some nonsense about going down to the town square to John and Ruth, reading that morning’s paper under the yellow light of the living room lamp and trudged out to the aspens, where Alan shrugged off his backpack and pulled out a bottle, clear and elegant to Edward.

"Tequila. This is the real test of adulthood. I doubt they have it anywhere north of Denver."

Edward chuckled and threw his head back, taking a long pull directly from the bottle.

“Animal.” Alan laughed. “I brought glasses for those of us who aren’t brutes.” She could see his grin light up the dark as he handed her a shot glass, its thick glass bottom heavy in her palm.

Blurred with time and alcohol, she recalled the aspens dancing along with her as she whirled through the woods with her brothers. As the darkness deepened, Alan frowned.

"We’d better head home or mom and dad will be upset. The walk will sober you up too."

Her face scrunched in disappointment. “Buzzkill.” She grabbed the bottle and took a long draught directly from it. Lowering the near-empty handle from her lips, she turned her cheek haughtily away from Alan. “I’m my father’s daughter, after all.”

His eyebrows arched in false dismay. “You said it, not me.” Edward chortled happily from the base of an aspen that could barely support his hefty weight where he slumped in a hazy joy.

They set off stumbling, the fifteen minute walk, cutting through common grounds and deer paths, skirting the edges of buttes turning into closer to a half hour. Alan stopped them as they neared the house.

"Go straight to bed, guys. And be absolutely quiet.”

They walked through the door, pantomiming sobriety, steps cartoonishly measured, frowns fixed stupidly upon their faces. Anna stood for a second, then bent down to take off her shoes.

The nausea formed suddenly, a wave overwhelming her, surging from her gut up through her throat. A second and third soon followed. A poorly defined sense of doom settled over her and she rose woozily. Ruth had gone to bed long ago. John looked up from his newspaper in the living room, reclined in a chair, so comfortable he seemed to have merged with it. He blinked, and sniffed twice.

Her rose, and paced stoutly over to the three of them. His face as blank as ever, he slapped Alan, staring directly at him.

"Get out of my house."

Alan looked down at the man he now towered over, his eyes suddenly clear.

“Gladly.”

He walked out of the house without another word. Edward and Anna swerved up the stairs as quickly as their leaden legs would allow them.

The next morning, their heads were foggy but the hallway was clean, no hint of what had happened just a few hours earlier remaining.
The next she heard from Alan was a few weeks later when she received a letter from him. The return address was in New York. She frowned. She couldn’t remember the last time Alan had returned after that. His funeral, she supposed. And now.

She could hear her call, her vacuum sucking her in. Every rolling hill she crested, just to plunge down and rise up to climb the next, she felt herself draw a bit closer. Something stirred in the pit of her stomach. Her fingers were still numb with cold, and her toes ached, but a single bead of sweat rolled down her side. She wiped it away, brushing her elbow against her ribs.

She could see the house now, blossoming out of the snow ahead of her, square and friendly, its sandy siding looking like it was built in Arizona then relocated here. She made the left turn overly cautious, every jostle of the car over the congealed ice sending aches through her body as though she were feverish.

She parked the car, nestling it between two sedans, and sat back, closing her eyes to take a deep sigh and brace herself. The sun was sinking lower now, the deep winter weighing it down.

She clenched her jaw as she cracked the car door open. The cold that rushed in nearly pushed her back against her seat. Taking a deep breath, feeling it sear her nostrils, she wriggled out and tiptoed past the icicles as tall as her and stomped her way through the foyer to shake the snow from her boots.

The woman at the front desk was a cheery lump of a woman who greeted her with a beam.

“Afternoon, darlin’. What can I do for ya?”

She replied with a weak smile. “Oh, nothing, thanks.”

“You sure? It’s a rabbit’s warren up there.”

“No, no, I’ll be fine. Thanks.”

“Alright, if you insist, sweet pea.”

Anna walked away smiling dimly. The cold shaped everyone differently. Some, like the bubble of warmth that had greeted her, burrow into themselves like rodents into the thick coats of fur they plume up for the season, guarding the warmth closely, staying soft and gentle in the midst of the harshness. Others became calloused to it, a thick protection built up, roughening them and covering up any exposure or vulnerability they might have. Some, rather than fight it, threw themselves open, letting it rush in and fill them until there was no heat left within them and they mirrored the wilderness around them, as cold and unforgiving as the blank landscape.

The plush red carpeting of the hallways was filthy, pale stains of road salt and wet patches of now-melted snow dotting it. She wrinkled her nose. Up two flights of stairs, then turning right, right then left. She neared it now.

She could read the name beside the door. She stopped a few feet short of it to steel herself, biting down hard on her cheek and sucking her teeth. She took two steps closer to the door. She cocked her head towards the door, hoping to detect some trace of movement within. Nothing. She raised her fist and brought it down on the door harder than she expected. She compensated with two lighter raps.

She heard confused shuffling within the apartment and a heavy pair of footsteps drew near. Opening the door, Alan had aged more than she expected—he looked more stern than his Facebook pictures betrayed. He was wiping his hands dry with one of the ratty dish towels Ruth kept littered around her apartment, refusing to buy new ones.

His eyes were hidden behind thick frames, but she could tell they were as dark and glassy as ever. His hair had more traces of silver than she expected. He was as skinny as ever.

He pursed his lips ever so slightly. He always would rob them all blind at poker over Thanksgiving.
“Anna. Welcome. Come on in.”
The truck rumbled over the undulations of the packed down snow, the teal of its sides matching the tint of Edward’s sunglasses fixed tightly to his nose to block out the dazzling glare of the snow. Next to him, Sarah hummed along off-key to the honky-tonk pouring out crooning on about the Chatahoochee. The pair jostled about like rag dolls as the Ford made a sharp left off of the highway into the hotel parking lot. He guided the car down the uneven slope to the overhang in front of the main entrance where he braked suddenly, sending them both jerking forward.

“Alright, hon,” Edward said. “Get on in there and say hi to Sharon. And be careful. I’ll pick you up when I get off of work.”

“I know, hon. Into the lions’ den!” She cackled and paused, brushing blond hair, overstraightened, out of her face with an acrylic nail. He smiled weakly as she bounced out of the car into the stiflingly cold morning, pausing to lean into slamming the door then tottering into the lobby on her stilettos, clomping over clumps of salt. He paused to soak in her figure before accelerating away suddenly.

Sarah wobbled into the lobby with a confidence that did not fit someone perched upon such unbalanced shoes. From behind the front desk, a cartoonishly rotund man purred “Good morning,” to her. She kept moving, legs swinging in short and rapid steps. She paced down a long hallway lined with old warm lights lined with wine-red carpeting and wallpaper lined with creamy alternating stripes of off-white and gold. She swung to the left at the first intersection and, without pausing to knock, clacked into a janitorial closet, calling out as she entered, “Hey, girl!”

From behind a pile of cheap white towels, a small head popped out. Bustling around a cart filled with cleaning supplies, the woman wrapped Sarah, who towered over her in her heels, in a breath-taking hug. “How you been, Sarah? I ain’t seen you in forever! How’s Eddie? How’s work?” Her voice sounded as though her nose had been permanently plugged shut.

“Oh, you know, Sharon, it is what it is.” Sarah replied dismissively. “Aside from the nincompoop up front it ain’t bad at all.” Sharon struggled to sound out nincompoop. “What brings you around here?”

“Well, I was wondering if you could help me out. Eddie’s brother and sister are in town and they can be a real piece of work and they’re stayin’ here and I was wonderin’ if you could…”

Sharon cut her off by raising her hand. “Say no more. I know how the in-laws can be. You got their room numbers?”

Sarah pursed her lips and nodded. “Sure do.”

Sharon’s murky eyes smirked. “Girl, I got you. Don’t even worry about it.” Reaching into her apron she pulled out a room key. “Have fun. And let me know if you find anything really fun.”

“You know I will,” Sarah replied. Sarah swung back out the closet as the two of them erupted in peals of cackles, peering at a sign on the wall before setting off in the direction of Jean’s room.

Waddling down the hall, she came to a halt before an inconspicuous door. The dark wood was sunk into the door frame. The card slid in and a grin slowly split her face as she heard a click. Opening cautiously, she side-stepped in. The room’s high ceiling distracted from its otherwise cramped dimensions. An electric stove and refrigerator were pressed up against the left wall with cabinets haphazardly scattered around them. A love seat and reclining seat shared an ottoman as they idled about a small flatscreen. Against the far wall sunlight bounced recklessly off the vast white emptiness, broken only by the lonely highway and feeble barbed wire fences and trickled through the slatted blinds. Sarah paced right and waltzed through a narrow door into the bedroom. The bedsheets looked barely used, with
only a few wrinkles betraying the shadow of a woman who had slept in them the night before. A small suitcase lay on the floor beneath a bony silver lamp. She paced over to it and glanced in contemptuously, tapping it with her right foot with the disgusted intrigue of a child finding a dead creature in the woods.

Seeing nothing but clothes with a few hats dotting the top, she turned to the bedside table. It was a simple piece of cherry-colored wood. The complimentary Bible stood atop it, removed from its drawer but untouched. Jean’s phone was plugged in. Sarah picked it up testily, pressing the home button. Coming to life, a single text message appeared. The text was blocked until unlocked. The text was identified as coming from Colin. Sarah frowned. She hadn’t seen him in years. Shaking her head and brushing a strand of hair from her face, she resumed her search into the bathroom. A small travel bag sat there. She opened it. Nothing. She picked it up, checking the front pocket. A small package of dramamine. Seasickness medication 500 miles from the ocean. An overused toothbrush rested on the counter. She rolled her eyes. Not even worth the trouble. Walking back out into the hallway she turned to the left and continued down three more doors before sliding the card in once more before hearing a click and pushing the door open with her shoulder.

Coming into Alan’s room, she noticed nothing out of the ordinary. Identical to Jean’s there was no mess anywhere. She shut the door lightly behind her. Heading straight for the bedroom, she smiled upon opening the door. Alan’s suitcase sat neatly pressed against the wall, clothes neatly folded in a pile. Peeking her head into the bathroom, her lip curled, peevd, at the sight of nothing but a toothbrush and toothpaste. She turned her attention to the target she had been saving for last, the bedside table covered in papers. Picking up the thick and disorderly she began to page through it. Bills and invoices for the most part; a few legal notes. Cocking her head to the side, she clawed out an envelope with two acrylic nails. The envelope was short and squat, more the kind used for birthday cards than for legal papers. Reading the name on the address, she arched a single penciled-on eyebrow in intrigue. It was still unsealed but fully addressed and stamped. She lifted the fold and fished out the letter within. As she opened it, dollar bills fluttered out. Snatching them up, she counted them. $240 in bills of $20. She put seven bills back in, sliding the rest into the cup of her bra. She turned her attention to reading the note scrawled inside in tall narrow cursive.

“Dear Christina,

I know it is not much, but hopefully this will keep you from being spread too thin. I talked to your mother on the phone last night. She continues to fail to disclose your current status. I would not worry too greatly about that. She is a proud woman; you of all people should know that. I hope you keep faith that this will get better. Please come visit me in New York should you need any help.

Love,

Uncle Alan.”

Sarah frowned and checked the location to which the letter was addressed. Santa Fe. The letter was dated about two weeks ago. She set it back atop the pile. At the bottom of the pile was a legal notepad. She swiped it out and proceed to flip through its baby blue pages. She stopped when she got to a page titled “Executor Duties.” She skimmed through the first half of the page but her eyes nearly bugged out when she got to the bottom.

The silence was shattered by a timid knock at the door. Sarah’s heartbeat suddenly thundered in her ears. Three more knocks in rapid succession echoed through her ears. A mouse-like voice called out from the other side of the door.

“Alan? Alan. It’s me. I know you probably don’t want to but I just want to talk.” The fear in the voice outside the room rang up some distant memory in Sarah and she tensed frowningly. Whose
voice was that? She could not place it. She heard a sigh followed by retreating footsteps. Every muscle in her body relaxed. Turning back to the paper she scanned the numbers once more. Split evenly fourteen ways. She gritted her teeth and pulled out her phone, dialing the number more out of habit than intention.

“Hello?” Her husband’s voice was gruff.

“Come pick me up, babe. I’ve got some news.” She could feel him smile through the phone.
Sean slammed the door of the sedan shut behind him then glanced over at his father next to him.

“You ready to go?”

“Are you?” He retorted.

“I don’t know.” He smiled faintly.

“You’ve got all your schoolwork with you?”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe being stuck in a car with an old codger for a couple days will be better than the library.”

“I doubt it.” Sean laughed now. Stephen smiled. It never was hard to get him to laugh.

“And all your professors are okay with you leaving?”

“They’re all lectures, dad. They don’t care. Besides, Friday is just discussions.”

“And you don’t have any exams?”

Sean’s pause betrayed him as they pulled off the college campus.

“Sean, am I going to have to turn this car around?”

“No! I’ve got it handled.”

“Fine. Just don’t tell your mother.”

“Deal.”

One highway turned into another and they rolled to the west, towards the mountains. A nervous energy settled over the car’s cabin. Sean hauled a textbook open and propped it open in his lap. He pulled the black raincoat he had wrapped tightly about him and rolled up the sleeves of the hoodie underneath.

“Jesus, Dad, it’s so hot in here.”

“I’m just gearing up for where we’re going. Do you even have enough clothes packed?”

“I don’t know. You never took us out in the winter.”

“That’s for a good reason. You’ll see soon enough.” Stephen’s crooked smile was boyish. Sean raised his eyebrows and turned back to his textbook.

“Do you mind grabbing a CD from the glove compartment?”

“Sure.” Sean slowly closed his textbook and opened the compartment. “You know, you could just buy a streaming service like the rest of the world.”

“I’m paying for three college tuitions. I’ve got to save money wherever I can.”

“It’s, like, ten bucks a month!”

“You know what I could buy with ten bucks?”

“A CD.” They both laughed.

“Jesus, Dad, did you pack anything other than Bruce Springsteen?”

“Why would I? He’s the Boss!”

“Sometimes you’re so old it hurts.”

Stephen laughed. “Play Nebraska.”

Sean obliged him and returned to his textbook.

A silence settled over the car. The watery winter of the Atlantic set in about the car, pathetic and weak, more petulant than harsh. The highway narrowed as Appalachia began to unfold before them as evening fell.

Stephen’s stomach fluttered with anticipation, but he was unsure of what. It had been nearly three years since he last attended a funeral, an old coworker of his. It had been a somber but joyous occasion. A true Southern funeral, at a Baptist Church, full of “y’alls” and mac and cheese. Death felt different there somehow. A passing on.
He remembered John’s funeral. It had been cold, but that was to be expected. No one died in the summer out there. He was unsure if it was because the winter killed them or merely made them reconsider the benefits of life. Rows upon rows of silvering mourners, their best years long behind them. Jaws long softened and waistlines long bulging. Ill-fitting suit after ill-fitting suit, with formless black dresses petering into dark stockinged legs filed by him, offering their condolences. It had felt numb to him then. He recalled glancing down the line standing by the casket. Alan and Jean, both grim-faced, accepting each hug and handshake with a frown seemingly fixed in wire. Edward’s eyes were dry from tears and his face looked discolored, blushing along the cheeks but deathly pale by his eyes and lips. Anna, in front of him, was beside herself, sobs wracking her chest. In front of them all, a matriarch in her final performance, Ruth was remarkably composed. He remembered watching her as a child, searching her face for any trace of emotion, lighting up whenever he could find any. Years later he had realized those brief moments when he sensed the mask was lifted were her intent, a precious gift to him as a reward, carefully plotted. He had spent years pulling, tugging, shifting and pushing, searching for something real, pulling back each layer just to find another, even stronger, underneath. He only ever saw what she wanted him to see. He himself had been in tears, silent in fear of hearing himself choke if he dared to speak. He looked out across the rows of the cathedral, looking for them. He couldn’t find them. He frowned.

He heard the pitter-patter of feet and looked down to see Sean, just a few years old, alongside Colleen and Samantha, a few feet in front of him, hugging tightly to his grandmother’s waist. He could see just the profile of her face, but even so, saw a flash of contentment slip across it. He still wondered if it was real.

The sun was falling fast now and all around him headlights blinked on in anticipation. He flicked his on even as the swirling in the pit of his stomach forced him to squirm. He watched North Carolina turn into Virginia and he noticed the silence of the car, having stopped the CD from replaying and Sean having long ago forgotten to switch out one CD for another.

The road had grown wet and treacherous, carving between the ripples in the mountains, gas stations and fast food restaurants having long ago turned into out-of-business adult bookstores and family-owned restaurants, then back into gas stations and fast food restaurants. He swallowed hard and his ears popped as the car wove its way deeper into the mountains and they shot into West Virginia, the shadows of the mountains deepening. The unrest in his stomach mounted and the waves of nausea began to swirl higher and higher. Sean had long ago pulled a booklight from his bag and continued to read peacefully to his right. His hands twitched to the side and sent them onto the shoulder, his foot guiding them to an abrupt halt. Sean looked quizzically over at his father. He unfastened his seatbelt, throwing it over his shoulder, and opened the car door just enough to lunge out of it in one swift motion. Trotting in front of the car, he made his way over the barrier and found a spot at the base of a tree relatively free of ferns and began to heave once, twice, until it was all out of his system. He heard the car door slam and Sean trot over.

“Dad? Are you okay? Oh, my God. Are you okay?”
He righted himself.
“Yeah, I’m fine. I think it’s just the elevation.” Even in the dark he could see Sean’s eyes narrow. Neither of them believed that lie.
“Do you want me to drive?”
“No, no, it’s fine.” He paused and lowered his head. “Yes, please.”
They climbed silently back into the car.
“Dad, are you sure you’re good? You don’t need to stop for food or get something to drink?”
“No, no, I’m fine. Just don’t tell your mom.” They both laughed.
Stephen fumbled about in the dark, then found a half-empty plastic water bottle wedged between two of the back seats to wash the taste of bile from his mouth.
“Have you ever driven out, Dad? I’ve only ever flown.”
He paused to think. “Once. There’s a reason you’ve never done it.”
“Why’s that?”
Stephen laughed. “Because it sucks. Not a whole lot to look at when you’re driving through both Dakotas.”
Sean laughed, tired. “Why did you drive out then?”
“This would’ve been my first year in grad school. It was your grandma’s birthday so I decided to surprise her. I made it the whole way in two days. I don’t think I was much fun for her actual birthday—I’m pretty sure I was asleep for most of it.”
Sean’s laugh opened up. “Did she enjoy the surprise?”
Stephen smiled. He could still remember it. The joy on her face. Joy for herself, not for him or anyone else. There because of him. “Yeah, she was.”
“So, you think it’ll take us two days to get out there?”
“No, in all likelihood it’ll probably be closer to three. I’m not as good as I once was and they actually enforce speed limits now.”
“So we’ll make it there by Saturday?”
“Yeah.”
“Isn’t that when your plane tickets were for, anyways?”
Stephen froze, and a deafening silence absorbed the car, if only momentarily.
“Yeah.”
“So…why are we doing this?” It was the question he knew was coming but he still wasn’t prepared. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m on board but…why?”
“I don’t know.” Stephen’s voice cracked. Sean’s grip on the wheel tightened. “I don’t know. I guess I couldn’t take sitting at home waiting for the weekend to come. I guess I would rather feel like I’m doing something even if it doesn’t really do anything at all.” He swallowed hard. “Does that make sense?”
“Yeah.” Sean’s voice cracked back. “Yeah, it does.”
“So why did you say you wanted to come with me if you were too busy to fly out.”
“I guess I figured I had a second chance. I didn’t want to pass that up.” Stephen grunted his agreement. “I mean, I guess it didn’t really hit me until after I had already said no but like, this is it. And I was going to pass that up because I wanted more time to study for finals? Worst case scenario I have to stay in college for another semester. And don’t tell Mom I said that.”
They rode in silence a while. The road followed a trail blazed by a cold winter rain into the mountains. The leftover clouds swirled like milk in coffee about the night sky and played tag along, chasing after the rainfall just a few miles ahead. The few stars that woke for the night were smoky smudges of blue light in the sky that grayed out across the nose of the car. Packs of trees lined the highway to the right and the brave branches that stuck out over the asphalt dripped fat slow raindrops onto the windshield. The droplets splattered and sent echoes through the car cabin.
The punctures of raindrops on glass were interspersed in a soft silence that turned into a soft low whistle. Sean looked over. Stephen’s head slumped to the side. His glasses were tilted slightly askew.
Sean gently swiveled his head between the road and his passenger, smiling gently at the sight of his father in childish slumber.

It struck him that his father was no longer his father. Not the one he had grown up with; the one who had coached his baseball teams, threw him all across the pool like a ragdoll, held him when he was too tired to stand and too restless to sit. That father was relegated to hazy photographs, dust coating their gloss, and memories that moved as if suspended in oil. The impish face he remembered grinning back at him, features sharp as if carved from wood were softened a touch with age, sunken slightly into themselves. His boyish eyelashes, long and delicate, had thinned some. His sideburns had lost their reddish hue in a silver burnishing. His hair remained stubborn and wiry, tufting out rebelliously, but had thinned and begun to bend underneath their own weight. His face was fixed in a stubborn position, clinging iron-fisted to sleep, furiously refusing to lose any more rest.

Sean blinked sadly. He turned his head suspiciously, then whipped back to the road. His peripheral vision had told correctly. Wedged under the back seat was a splash of royal blue he recognized instantly, dotted with stains, crumbs engrained deeply into its fabric. The lunchbox that had served him for so long was tucked in, no doubt the handiwork of his mother. He supposed his father’s distaste for spending money had found its perfect match in her disdain for eating fast food.

His eyes then pivoted from the road to the floor of the passenger side, where the empty wheat thins box reminded him of the supposed meal he had eaten hours before.

He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand as his stomach rumbled to life to match the engine. He glanced over at his father. Fast asleep.

He craned his neck, noticing the exit sign that swooped overhead almost too late. Columbus was approaching. He looked over. No sign of movement. He couldn’t keep this up.

The car sidled onto the exit ramp, the rough paving barely rattling the interior of the car. He made a right. The side road was even darker and completely empty. It wound its way through the trees that had pooled in the crevasses between the mountains. Sean snaked his way around a corner. The Best Western appeared suddenly like an oasis, just a handful of Jeeps in its parking lot. Sean eased the car into the lot and brought the car to a gentle park.

He placed his hand on his father’s shoulder, rocking him gently. He blinked awake and mumbled questioningly.

“We need to get a room for the night.”

He nodded understandingly.

“Sean, why don’t you stretch your legs while I pay for the room?”

Sean nodded wordlessly and unfolded himself from the car, railish legs stretching to their full extent as he set off pacing around the hotel.

Stephen wandered inside sleepily and tottered over to the front desk where a short woman, perhaps in her thirties, sat waiting with a child. Stephen peered at her, entranced by her platinum blonde hair and brownish gray roots before blinking hard.

“Could I get a room for two?”

“Sure thing, darlin’. Just one night?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

As she typed his information into the computer, Stephen smiled warily at the young girl who scribbled out nonsensical doodles in green pen. Her pigtails shook as she grinned back at him, lips shiny with chapstick, and her little pearl white squares of milk teeth still crooked.

The woman handed him the two keycards as Sean walked in cautiously, two bags in hand.
“You’ve got everything in your bag?” Sean gestured to the duffel in his right hand.
Stephen nodded, impressed.
“Thanks.”
“What room?”
“0124. You ready for bed?”
Sean smiled ruefully. “Always.” They set down the hallway, out of the lobby. “You know they have a basketball court here? I don’t know why we haven’t come out here sooner.”
Stephen chuckled. “Who could say what was keeping us from Appalachia.”
“Exactly. Do you just want to eat the sandwiches Mom packed?”
Stephen’s face was lit by a dim smile. “That sounds pretty great.”

The hotel room was a simple affair. A closet of a bathroom was nestled against the far wall and two queen beds were covered in the kinds of comforters common in hotels, rich red fabric criss-crossed with fake gold embroidery, underneath which sheets whose thread count was more befitting of burlap than the cotton from which they purported to be made.
Sean flung himself onto the far bed, fishing the remote from the bedside table to flip on a meaningless NHL game. Stephen held up two sandwiches.
“Ham and cheddar or turkey and provolone?”
“Whichever you don’t want.”
Stephen rolled his eyes. “Guess we’re going half and half.”
Stephen carefully sawed the sandwiches in half with a plastic knife buried at the bottom of the bag, apportioning each triangle carefully, pushing two towards his son, then bowed his head in prayer. As if by magic trick, by the time he lifted his head again, Sean was halfway through his second half.
“I pray fast, Dad.” Sean shrugged at his father’s mock disgust. Having swallowed the last of dinner, Sean flopped back onto the bed and gazed at the television. A scrum had broken out on the ice, and the puck skittered away. Icing, and apparently a power play. The referee had skated over sternly, pulling players apart with the sheer strength of his self-import. Finger flying in players’ faces, he looked as bad as the aggressors on the ice. To his right, Stephen munched silently. Sean paused, staring quizzically at the TV screen. He determined he was still hungry, the kind of hunger that lies dormant until you begin to feed it a little bit.

The puck fizzled out of the faceoff like a spark and began pinballing around the rink. Sean’s eyelids grew heavy and his chest rose and fell slowly. The radiator to his left pumped heat that cocooned around him slowly until his breaths trickled out in soft whistles.

The summer sun shone down glorious and warm as they trooped out of the dusty field into the cool shelter of the faded evergreen copse. His hand felt sweaty and slick in his mother’s tight grasp. Colleen lagged behind with their father while Samantha kept gamely on their mother’s other side, resolute in her preadolescence. His legs swung back and forth and he occasionally broke into a trot when he felt his clammy fingers start to slip from hers, struggling fastidiously, babyish chin scowling.

He hadn’t been on very many vacations, but already he noticed this was something his parents liked to do—hikes to some obscure natural occurrence no parent in their right mind would think of bring three children, all in various states of pre-adolescence, along to. His frown deepened as he tried to remember what it was he had been told they were marching towards. A waterfall. That’s what she had said. He had never seen a waterfall before, only seen them drawn in books or in TV shows. It was hard to imagine something so spectacular could exist in these woods, not so different from those back in North Carolina. Just a little bigger. Everything was a little bigger out here. The food, the laughter from his dad,
the hugs from Aunt Jean. The bedtimes were a little later and the ice cream scooped a little higher. He
didn’t mind it at all.

But here they were in the middle of the woods. How long had they been walking? It felt like
hours and miles. How long was a mile, really, anyways? He wanted to be done with this nonsense, to be
back at the hotel where the pool was warm and inviting and the man at the front desk always winked at
them. His scowl deepened even further in imitation of the look he saw on his father’s face as he plowed
through a crossword puzzle every Saturday morning and in his mother’s face whenever she got lost on the
road.

He heard something faintly now, and it grew with each step. A kind of rushing, just a whisper
that blended with the tramping of their feet over long-compactd dirt with odd boulders peeking out
through it. That’s one thing he liked about Montana. Rocks as far as the eye could see, out before you.
Not like North Carolina, all flat and soft. The waterfalls in TV shows and movies were much louder. He
let out a giggle as he thought of how high it must be, how dangerous. The water must be cold, so cold,
like the water in the lakes that dotted the park that his mother would snatch him right out of as soon as he
got it, swaddling him in blankets and holding him close until he stopped shivering and his smile stopped
chattering. Ice water, they told him. Just melted from glaciers, big mountains of snow like icebergs on
land. He slipped his hand free from his mother’s and tottered out before them, legs moving fast enough to
not feel their fatigue. He turned back to look at them. His father smiled kindly but too tired to show his
teeth. His mother eyed him drily. He kept on ahead of them. He heard a shuffling in the forest, a
muffled movement out through the trees where the slope intensified upwards and the pine needles formed
a dense carpet. He stopped to peer out to their left. The muffled movement was barely distinguishable
from the dull rush of the waterfall still out of sight. He heard the plodding footsteps of his family behind
him shuffle to a stop as well.

The bear looked unreal, a small furry lump, its limbs too stout for its body and its fur matted with
water, eyes wide and searching, just like his. It looked friendly. None of the formidable fangs or claws
he had been warned about since he got here. This bear wasn’t a mascot, or a warning. No ferocity. Just a
friend.

The footsteps behind him were fast and firm, rapping out over stone and mud alike. The arm he
knew so well, lean and tanned, wrapped around his chest, and he heard his mother whisper hushes into his
ears as she snatched him and beat a hasty retreat down the slope of the trail.

“Stephen, move,” She hissed as she trotted past the two sisters and her husband. She adjusted
Sean, slinging him over her shoulder like a sack of potatoes, the way only his father had ever carried him.
Never her. He watched behind the trail, seeing the bewilderment in the bear’s eyes, the methodical
obedience in his father’s eyes as he grabbed the hands of the two girls to each side and broke into a gentle
run after them. He jostled along and his mother’s bony shoulder dug into his ribs as her backpack
bounced along with him.

When they had gone far enough, she slowed to a trot, then a walk and slung him off her shoulder,
setting him down on a rock and taking the backpack off to sip needfully from a water bottle she procured
from within. His father followed along seconds later, the two girls stoutly jogging alongside him.

His mother looked down at him and pulled a granola bar out of the backpack, offering it as a
peace offering to appease his confused displeasure.

Stephen came over and kneeled down next to him and put a hand on his shoulder. “Sorry about
that bud,” He consoled. “Wish we could’ve seen that waterfall.”

“Dad, it was just a baby.”
“I know, bud. But if you see the baby alone, the mom isn’t too far away. And we don’t want to make her mad. Would you want to be caught between you and Mom if she were mad?”

He looked up at his mom and giggled at the thought of his mother, all arms and legs, flushed and sipping from the water, angry.

He jumped awake suddenly, breaking out of the warmth that had wrapped around his immobile body. He shook the daze of sleep from his eyes and champed down on the sleep that coated his mouth. The only light in the room came from a small lamp back against the window. The game, long over, had ended in a tie. The room was empty. Stephen’s duffel bag had been opened but there was no hint of him anywhere. Sean glanced at the clock. 12:30. His brow furrowed. He put his shoes back on, turning back to turn the lamp off as he slid out into the hallway silently, slipping his hoodie over his head. Turning to the right, then the left, he saw no trace of his father. He continued back towards the lobby. A new man sat at the front desk, stroking a reddish beard that sprouted out from his Mountaineers baseball cap as he watched the news playing on the television suspended over where, in a few hours, the continental breakfast would be served. The man looked up silently, then nodded toward the front door ahead.

Sean nodded, feigning understanding, and stepped out into the bracing cold of the night. A sharp wind had begun to swirl about. Sean paused. Behind him, ever so slightly, he could hear a faint echoing bounce, pounding softly and rhythmically. He set off at a trot around the building.

The basketball court was tucked into a thicket of trees, wedged between the harsh asphalt of the parking lot and the dense verdure of the forest. Roots had begun to wedge themselves underneath, and hints of their corruption bulged like veins across the smooth surface of the court.

Stephen wore just a hoodie and jeans. The wind carried dead leaves and hints of snowflakes on it. Sean looked up. The clouds had begun to clot, petroleum on water blurring the moon and the stars. Stephen’s face bore a look of intense concentration Sean had never seen. He dribbled twice, dropping his shoulders low and pounding his elbow down, ball crossing across his chest, then rose up, arms arcing high and ball spinning from his outstretched fingers. It spun through the rim without touching it, whipping into the net, which wrapped around it momentarily before sending it tumbling to earth.

Sean snatched the rebound before it could ricochet up off the court and fired a sharp pass into his father’s chest who caught it with a look of mild surprise before firing off another shot. This one careened off the back of the rim, rolling up the backboard before popping off. Sean ran after it.

“You okay, Dad?” He bounced the ball to him, low and wicked. He caught it by his knees and drove in for a layup, faking right before finishing with his left hand.

“Not bad for a righty.” He congratulated himself, then grabbed his own rebound and dribbled back out beyond the arc. He shot twice more in silence. Both misses.

“You know, growing up, you could see the neighborhood basketball court from our house’s kitchen.” His bank shot fell in, deadened. “In high school, for two months before tryouts, Mom would make me go out and stay there until I made two hundred shots. She would watch while she made dinner. Some days if I was lucky she would come out and rebound for me. Then I would never stop at two hundred. I would just keep shooting until my hands went numb.”

This shot clunked into the rim and flew back the way it came. Stephen’s hands whipped up and managed to catch it before it crashed into his face.

“And I never did make the team.” He tried to shake some of the feeling back into his hands.

“Dad, we should probably go to bed so we can start driving early tomorrow.”

Stephen raised the ball to his face, judging his shot. “You’re right.” The ball bounced once, twice, then fell through the rim. Stephen collected the ball, then paused, and turned to his son.
“Do you want a shot?”
“No, thanks.”

They trooped back into the hotel in silence, dropping the ball back off at the front desk. Reaching their room again, they both floated towards their beds as if drawn by magnets. The two were asleep within seconds.
The room was hazy. Too warm. The blankets lay too thick. Forced me down, pushed me down heavy but Alan is far too far and too concerned with anything else just a few feet away but his mind much farther. Any wonder any wonder.


“Out.” I hear it but I don’t feel it rasp in my chest and I watch her eyebrows furrow. That’s good she always was a miserable actress showing up here when she knows what she did. “Out.” I spit it out again and again but she doesn’t move until she does and it starts in her eyes with sadness in her eyes across from the fear in Alan’s. Both, buried deep under the blankets but I want them all out and all gone.

Blink once then twice then she’s gone and I feel clean again not quite healthy but not sick anymore. Good. The hate flowed out of me like a spring flow but I can’t remember why and now Jean floats above all elbows and pursed lips. Now this. More pills. Pills for more pain, pills for less pain. What for? Just three more days. Or four? Either way far too long when you’re ready to be gone. Stern look on her face. Why bother? The scorn wasn’t hard to see. Disgusting. Falling, grasping wildly the way that girl did when she yanked down just to pull herself up. Pathetic.

“No.”

Did they leave me because me forced too many bitter pills down their throats. No that’s why they left her and I hear myself say it out loud. Just one more taken dry and her face scrunches up the way it did when I would mash them up and stir them into applesauce. No surprise there when she’s all weak just weak and there’s no change she’s my daughter or maybe she was just the test case. But the pain is in my back now sharp like a knife stabbing through my stomach and making me gasp for air and my lungs burn and my legs feel crushed under the blankets because nothing can survive for long buried so deep down all those blankets shoveled on top till they turn to coal and are dug up to burn hot and smoky so you sweat then choke because life can’t last long underground but nothing can last long. She’s gone and she floats out to the side and the world spins and the door slams shut.

Alan floats back all angry but that’s fine I wish he was angry more especially with that girl with that nerve to come here. Angry. Let him be. Good. That girl. That nerve. Coming here. Better she stay gone with all this anger of mine. From where? What did she do? It dances out of reach just like John the way his cologne would hover when he would hold me before the whiskey chased it away but that was John John all gone too soon when he left me here and he broke that promise he made to me back when we would dance and I would bury my nose to search out that last bit of cologne floating off unmoored by his sweat because he broke his promise. A lifetime of love was all I didn’t think that was too much to ask but it was and that love was gone well before his life left. Life left too soon too for good measure but I. I never stopped loving him not once never stopped because I kept my promises to him just like I still do like my promise to Anna. But what promise? Left alive out here because it’s too cold to rot but I stayed for him I waited for him. Gone east. She followed him east but then west. Why did she follow him east what did he leave her there. It was mine. I don’t know what it was. Mine. Mine. What’s mine now. Anger. An apartment full of broken memories and grown children still pouting after all I gave them because I kept my promise and I gave and gave and gave to them. Gave for years. Cough syrup and time and hugs and kisses that made me sick and food and shelter from the sky and from him and from me but just the same he left me after I gave them all and then he left me. Left what I made for him when he broke. He was weak and selfish and even though I gave and gave for him he left just the same he left.
Didn’t appreciate what I made him because it was too cold for him. Kept him warm and he was too cold just the same. Why bother then? Why bother when the cold wins out. The cold is too constant. Everywhere. Drives you out or beats you down in the end. Drives out to the east where he took her.

Took so much joy in what I made him. He did. He did. Loved it and cared for it. But the flaws came out one by one, flew out. Bats out of hell. Took him a bit at a time. She was fifteen the girl was just fifteen not old enough to go out with boys but too old for me to tell her that so she went out with boys. Came home with officers. Caught with the red sprayed on her hands. The light left his eyes that night and it never came back and I searched and searched but it was gone just another bitter pill. Made it another thirty years. A wonder. Haven’t even made it twenty and I always keep my promises not sure who I made it to but I’m keeping it even though it’s different alone because it’s different alone. He just kept taking taking and taking for thirty years all taking it all to give to her even though I kept promises she never could because he believed someday she might give it back but she didn't she never did she never could because she doesn’t keep her promises not like me but here she is just the same and now she shows up and thinks she belongs. She needs to be gone and they all need to be gone because I want them to be gone yes I want to be gone.

First time it left was in those mountains. White dress ripped off my body my body shivered fear and excitement or one pretending to be the other when that white dress came off my body. New car rolling up to the lake and he woke up early that morning to surprise so he made breakfast and I crawled out sleepy and told him the eggs burnt. I told him and so it vanished when it all danced back across just as quick.

It would leave, then come right back for years. Flickering on and off. But that day it was gone for good. First the cigarettes replaced the alcohol, then it accompanied it. Just him, then me. I smoked for the warmth. Started smoking late. Needed something to put in my body after the last one left. The one before took the most, left me hollow. He couldn’t see. It was a wonder he made it, the little one.Weak. He was the one that needed her protection. They all did. But he got it. The smoke filled her up. Filled her in a way she couldn’t be filled, seeping in but rushing back out. No substance. No substance left. They took it all. Took and took and took and never gave. The smoke filled her up with something new. Something warm and rank. Better than the air here. It was too late before I realized the smoke was too heavy. His light suffocated, choked by warmth choked by warmth. My legs. Buried. Smoke killed his eyes the same way it hid mine. It hid everywhere in the old house. Every pore, every crease. This new cell doesn’t smell of it the same way, isn’t filled the same way. Sometimes I smell it, if just a waft for just a second. But it’s always gone. And soon I will be too. Bitter pill.
Jean drew her coat tighter around her as the doors slid open and the wall of coldness hit her hard as bricks. Sometimes she worried she was too much like Ruth. She saw it all the time, the ugly fingerprints there every time she spat venom in the face of her children or Colin.

Poor Colin. He deserved better than to be tied to the McCormick anchor. He got out soon, but never got out fully enough, always easy enough for her to pull back in. The nerve of Ruth, to twist that blade further. She blinked, then shook her head. Perhaps fifteen feet in front of her, Anna sat hunched over in the cold, chin tucked in as the wind rushed over her.

Jean rolled her eyes. Anna always did have a sense of theatrics. What did she expect anyways, turning up unannounced at the door of the woman she hadn’t talked to in over a decade? If she expected Ruth to have learned the value of forgiveness in that time, she was sorely mistaken.

Jean felt her lip curl into a scowl. She could feel her resemblance to Ruth flare up. Her shoulders sagged. She breathed deeply, then regretted it as her lungs stung. She sighed once more, then pulled out her phone. She dialed the number she knew by heart.

His voice was hearty as always, as if always on the verge of a chuckle.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Colin,” She immediately regretted it.


“Cold and cold,” She forced herself to smile. He guffawed. She saw Anna turn around out of the corner of her eye, then paced a few more feet away.

“Listen, I gotta tell you, I’m real busy right now. Work is a mess and I’m supposed to leave in fifteen for dinner, but I’d love to call you back. And I’ll for sure be at the funeral. Plus, we gotta sort out what we’re doing with the kids for the holiday.”

“Okay.” She slumped. She didn’t bother to ask who he was getting dinner with. He still referred to them both as “we”. He still kept hope after all these years. Maybe that’s why she married him. Even then she had hoped he would rub off on her. All these years later, she saw, they had merely rubbed each other way. She remembered that morning numbly. He had made her breakfast, chopping up bananas for on top of the blueberry pancakes he had made, had let her pick the crumbs from his beard like a fretful mother bird before he told her they needed to split. She had known, had seen it coming, but it still punched her low in the gut. She nodded her head. A failure. She had thought about the good moments at first, then remembered the days, weeks, and months in between. The times that had blurred to gray together, muted by indifference and fatigue. She couldn’t blame him, couldn’t blame anyone who wanted to get away from her and her family’s shadow of apathy.

Anyone else who wanted to get away. She dialed the number automatically, thumb shaking slightly as she hit the last few numbers. It rang twice before someone picked up.

“Hello?” The bright voice at the other end sounded confused.

“Maggie?” She whispered, casting a glimpse at Anna, but she remained hunched over, either too far to hear or too far gone to care.

“No, I’m sorry, I think you might have a wrong number.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Have a good one.”

“You too.”

Jean hung up, cutting her off. She didn’t have a wrong number.

She tucked her phone under her armpit, crossing her arms. She glanced back over towards Anna. She looked out of place. She had been gone too long. Had forgotten how harsh it could be. The retirement home had always been a bit melodramatic for her taste. It was carved into a slight plateau in
the steep side of one of the valley’s mountains, about a third of the way up. The driveway arced
dangerously close to the edge of the plateau before swinging into the garage, sunk deep into the ground.
On the other side of the driveway, jutting out over the slope, was a small viewing area with a pair of
benches, where Anna now huddled.

Jean took a step towards her, but her phone lit up and began to vibrate against her rib cage,
catching her by surprise. She answered the phone, the hopeful surprise in her voice impossible to hide.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Jean, it’s Dr. McAdoo.”

“Oh, hello. How are you?”

“I’m good, I’m good. How are you?”

The question caught her by surprise. It had been too long since she had heard it. Her voice
captured in her throat.

“I’m….good. I’m good.”

“Okay, well, I know you said you were going back to Montana for the week but I know how
harsh it can be out there so I just wanted to remind you not to go too hard on yourself and try to get some
rest. I got the latest tests back but I don’t want to talk about them with you until you get back. Are we
still on for our appointment next week?”

“Yes, yes, of course.” She blustered. “I’ll see you then. Thank you for calling.”

“My pleasure. Have a good one.”

The doctor hung up before Jean had time to register what had just happened. She pushed it to the
back of her mind. She set her chin once more, resolutely, and walked over to Anna, placing a hand on her
shoulder. Anna turned to look at her, surprised, and Jean sat down. She immediately regretted it, feeling
the cold of the bench sear her legs.

“Mom didn’t mean what she said back in there, Anna.” She could see the tears welling in her
eyes.

“Yes, she did, Jean. I don’t know what I was thinking. I should go back home.”

“She’ll mellow out tomorrow. Don’t worry about it.”

“We’ll see.” Anna sniffled.

Jean looked at her, pity evident. “Did you forget how cold it is out here?”

Anna laughed weakly. “A little bit. I left before I had time to get my jackets out of storage.”

Jean shook her head, smiling. “Some people never change, I guess.”

Anna scowled and shifted away from her. “Fat lot of good that did me, too. You should head
back in. It’s awfully cold out here.”

Jean shrugged. “I’d rather not.”

Anna snickered. “She kicked you out too?”

“I kicked myself out.” Jean retorted.

Anna nodded understandingly. “Of course. I understand.”

Jean shifted closer to her. “Do you need another coat?”

“No, no,” Anna assured her. “I’m fine.” They paused and let the sound dissipate out into the
valley, listening for the broken faint signs of life that trickled back to them, like weak static.

“We should probably head inside,” Jean remarked. Neither moved as the stinging cold set in
about them, summoning silent tears up in their eyes that smudged the golden lights far below them until
they danced like faraway candles.
Alan drummed his fingers irritably on the table at a breakneck pace, reading through Jean’s text once more. Unbelievable. He looked out the window. Ruth would probably want to go to bed soon, hopefully. If he started cleaning up now he might be able to escape before Edward got back. He rose, then turned hesitantly. In her armchair, Ruth had begun to murmur lightly, so he could barely hear her. He drew near and dropped to one knee, stooping to hear her mutters.

She frowned when he approached and spoke, her voice groggy and rough.

“No damn pills.” She formed each word deliberately, rasping each one slowly.

He stood and looked down at her, shaking his head scornfully.

“I’m not going to give you any pills, mother. I don’t care.”

She dug deeper into her armchair and her scowl deepened.

“You know, Mother, I would suggest you ask yourself a question. Is this really how you want to be remembered? We’re all here. This is what we’ll all remember when we think about you in a week, or a month, or a year, or ten. Is this what you want us to remember? A bitter old woman who refuses to think about anything else but herself and her alcohol?”

She looked up at him and inarticulate guilt flickered dimly in her eyes childishly.

“You know, I’ve been here for two days now, and I have yet to hear you say ‘thank you’. As a matter of fact, I think it’s been about fifteen years since I’ve heard you say that. And, oh, I know, all you did was give and give and give for us. But you’ll forgive me if I don’t enable your pathetic little conception of justice. Fairness isn’t a quantity. It’s not some jar you fill up, then crack open and use it to buy whatever you like. You’ve spent the better part of the past two decades sitting in your little cave in the wilderness lording about over us, twisting our arms over all the goodness you did for us as children, and expecting us to kowtow for our forty year old sins. So you’ll excuse me if I’m not inclined to indulge your pathetic begging now that you’ve realized you haven’t earned our care.”

Ruth shook her head, as if chasing away the tears that had begun to bead in her eyes. “I just want some whiskey,” She rasped desperately.

“Of course you do.” Alan sneered, and stalked to the kitchen. “It’s been fifteen years since he left. And you weren’t even sad. I saw the alligator tears you shed at the funeral. What a show you put on for them. Was it so they didn’t kick you out of bible study? The book you’ve been reading your whole life but have never taken a single damned lesson from? Oh, but once you were alone. Inconsolable grief for the crowds but inconsolable glee before us. Do you remember? Do you remember what you said to your daughter when she cried when they lowered him into the grave? You told her she was embarrassing herself. It was all a performance to you.

“You spent your whole life slaving away to make him happy, to impress him, to free yourself from his burden. His shame, his anger, his wrath. For fifty years all you wanted was to be free of the judgement in his eyes. And what did you do? You became him. You’re a coward. All your friends are gone. But that’s not what scares you. What scares you is that your tormentors are gone. So you put on their pants and drink their liquor and turn around and take the knife from your back to stab it into ours. Because that’s what you’re most afraid of. That if you don’t make us suffer we’ll forget your own pain. If you can’t make us feel it, if you can’t push us down, then it ends with you. You take that anger from the world. And then, God forbid, this family might be healed. And you can’t have that. Because healing would make you just another scar.”

Taking a crystal tumbler from the cabinet, he filled it with tap water, adding a dash of maple syrup from the refrigerator to color it. He paced over, his hand swallowing it, and slammed it onto the
coaster next to her as she rocked back and forth, eyes closed, pretending the doctor had already come. He plummeted down into the loveseat opposite her.

“And do you know the worst part? You’ve won. Do you see it in them? In me? Every time Jean sneers or Edward shames or Anna snivels? You did it. You’ve passed it on. We weren’t strong enough to resist you. Your weakness begot more weakness and thought itself strong. Maybe the next generation will be able to. They won’t. But I can hope.’

He paused here and stared long and hard at her. She looked so delicate, like a bird in its down preparing for winter.

“Does it feel good? Knowing it won’t die with you? Mother.”

She awoke suddenly when he called to her, his voice gravelly and dripping with frustration. She peered at him confusedly for a split second, then tilted her head to the side.

“John?”

He went pale with rage and flew up.

“What did you call me? What did you call me? You have the gall to mistake me for that man? That pathetic excuse for a father?”

She shook her head slowly, the present rushing back to her. She stared up at her agitated son who now prowled about the apartment, weaving between Catholic mementos.

“Do you know why, Alan? Do you know why he hated you?”

Alan laughed, high-pitched, his eyes turning a sharp blue with rage.

“Oh, I would say I have a pretty good idea, Mother.”

“He hated because you were too much like him. Too stubborn. Too afraid.”

“Afraid? Of what? Of him? I would say my fear of him was perfectly justified. And I’ll remind you that I was the strong one. I was the one who stayed. I was the one who survived all those years of him bullying. All those years of him breathing down my neck. And I was the one who watched him die, who dropped him into that dirt. But I wasn’t the one who took his whiskey and took his hate and kept them both strong.”

“I remember the winters. Do you?” Her eyes had grown wistful now. “The winters in the house? Do you remember the drifts that would bury the house? How we would make you dig us out and chip out our driveway?”

Alan lowered himself back into the loveseat and glared at her.

“Eddie would wait till it had all stopped. Then he would go out and shovel for ten feet, then come in and take a nap. Shovel another ten feet. Come in and eat lunch. On and on.’

‘Stephen would set alarms in the night. Go out every few hours to clear it away, an inch or two at a time. Always on guard.’

‘But you. You were different. You would sit and wait. Stare out the window until it stopped falling. Then you would go out. And you wouldn’t come in until it was all gone. Stayed out there for hours and nearly killed yourself. Almost broke your back. Broke a few shovels. Because you were afraid. Just like him. Not afraid of your weakness. Just afraid someone else would know it too.”

He rose like a shot, not pausing to look at her as he threw on his coat and flew out the door, her words catching him like arrows in his back.

“You think you’re so different from him? Just because you don’t drink his whiskey? What do you think killed him? He died because he preferred that to asking for help.”

Alan stalked down the hallway, flying past the front desk and its enforced cordiality.
The sliding doors barely parted in time for him, and he flew through them. The cobblestones under his feet were glazed with ice. He felt himself freeze. Before him the valley unfolded, empty of any hint of life. He glared out at it, haunches bared and breathing heavily. The cold air sank into him and stayed there, settling into his gut. He felt his body slow down as his lungs continued to heave, striving to pump it out of his body.

To his right, he saw two familiar figures hunched over stonily in the cold. He shuffled over to them, still snorting like a bull in the cold. He positioned himself to their left, standing and staring out, wanting nothing more than to return to the valley that for years he had longed to escape from.

Jean turned to look at him, her eyes almost sleepy. There was something unsettling in her eyes. Apathy.

“She kicked you out, too?”
“I kicked myself out.”
Anna turned. “Someone should probably stay with her.”

They turned back and gazed out across the valley in silence, digging deeper into themselves to protect against the cold that continued to rain down upon them.

The stars began to blossom out against the dark canvas of the night sky, blueish needlepoints that sparkled like diamonds, weakly fighting the dim yellow glow that hung about the valley like a fog. Somewhere between the two, in the hollowness of the bowl, there was an inky openness, where birds and spirits wheeled freely in the air, buoying themselves up and away from the mundane burdens of reality beneath them, while the stars high above laughed faintly, swatting down any who dared to look up at them in envy. Alan felt all three of them strain to join the blankness of it all, to occupy the vast emptiness of the valley, but all tethered to the anchor of beckoning death behind them. None stirred.

The crunching of snow, lulled into inactivity and crystalizing into ice before being churned up by heavy tires shook them awake. The teal Ford stumbled past them over the uneven dips and potholes of ice along the driveway. Its high beams were blinding. Alan stared unblinkingly into them.

The truck came to a halt before them and the passenger side window rolled down. Edward peered out at the three figures, looking more like totems or a strange Nativity scene than his sisters and brother.

“Is anyone with Mom?” He chewed forcefully on something, his jaw chomping down like a horse’s.

Anna shook her head.
“Well, alright then. I’ll see you all tomorrow.”

The truck rumbled away.

The three figures rose in the dark and shuffled away, following the truck into the driveway as if it were the North Star.

Anna forged ahead and they tucked behind her, the wind sweeping in to their left as they paddled along. Anna winced with every crunch in the snow.

Three successive sighs of relief escaped as they entered the garage. They echoed about the cavernous space. Anna tramped lightly over to her car, softly trying to shake the snow from the bottom of her boots. Jean stomped twice forcefully, and Alan followed suit. Each clapping of rubber sole on glossy concrete rang through her ears. She clenched her jaw.

Jean called out behind her. “Could we take your car? I don’t want to drive.”

Anna slumped, then turned and nodded wordlessly. They followed her as she continued to her car, peeling layers of hoods from her head in a dreamy state. Her hair shook out, blond, wet, and flat, fraying from its bun. She rounded to her right as she arrived at the SUV, using the turn to gauge her
companions’ reactions. Jean merely pursed her lips and Alan raised an eyebrow as a smile danced across her lips. The best she could have asked for. She pressed the key twice, and cracked her door open, just enough for her to slip in. She sat there, breathing oddly heavily. Jean slid in beside her and Alan wriggled into the middle seat in the back and leaned forward into her periphery.

They sat there and breathed in the silence. Anna fastened her seatbelt and the other two followed suit. Alan cleared his throat, then thought better of it and nestled back into the seat as Anna reversed out of the spot.

The car pulled out into the night and the three sat, listening to the smooth rush of four-wheel drive over the rugged ice that gave way to rippling seas of crystals that danced up in the wind and sparse pine trees, roots digging into the hard earth like a fist, fighting for life.
He retucked his flannel into his jeans and hitched them up before swinging the door open and pacing in. He knew how light the door was as he shoved his shoulder into it. It swung open, rapping into the wall and sending the trinkets that lined the walls rattling before ricocheting back into his waiting forearm. Her head jerked toward him. All the better.

“Pills, please….” Her voice was pleading. He shook his head, then righted his posture.
He kept his shoes on, fixing himself behind the kitchen counter to pour a tall glass of water and shake the pills out into his hand. He was always surprised at the horse pills they gave such a frail old woman to swallow. What a waste, medical school was. Years memorizing the human body just to come out and realize you didn’t know shit about real folks.

He swaggered over to his mother, placing the pills and water just outside of her grasp on the table before lowering himself into the loveseat. He turned the switch on the lamp twice more. The apartment lit up. He crossed his legs and pinched his glasses off of his still ruddy face to polish them with his flannel sleeve. He sighed deeply and picked up the half-finished crossword that laid on the table to his right, peering at it, jaw fixed in a grotesque caricature of thought.

Ruth leaned forward with a wince as her shoulder blades left the back of the seat. Her fingers grasped feebly around the glass. She pulled it back towards her, then leaned back forward, smacking her flat palm down as if swatting flies and pulled the pills back towards her. Her eyes cleared some as she peered at him.

“What do you want, Edward?” Her voice had an edge to it. He looked at her aghast, face contorted with guilty surprise.

“What do you mean, Mom?”
She turned her eyes upward, looking for help.
“Edward, it was always a wonder to me you ever even started gambling. You never could lie. What’s your bluff.”
He sighed and leaned back in the loveseat, hitching his pants up a bit higher. “Well, you know, Mother….”
She swallowed the first of the three pills and stared at him levelly. “Spit it out.”
“I saw your will, Mom.”
She set the glass down heavily. “And what of it?”
“I know it. I don’t suppose you’re coming here to tell me I should’ve included Anna.”
Edward laughed ruthlessly. “What’s the meaning of that, Mom? All nine? Evenly?”
“What’s the big idea? What’s your problem?”
“Why include them? Maggie? Andrew? What have they done? They don’t even talk to their mother anymore! And their mother? She gets an even split? Running across the mountains and only coming back to live with us and bleed us dry when even her husband can’t put up with her?”
Ruth clenched her jaw. “Watch the way you talk about your family, Edward.”
“Look, I understand why you have to include Stephen. The happiest accident since the chocolate chip cookie needs more money he’ll never spend. But his daughters? How many times have you even met them? A half a dozen, maybe?”
Ruth glared at her water and swallowed her second pill.
“I stayed, Ma.”
“Don’t call me Ma, Edward. I raised you better than redneck trash.”
“I stayed. Even when I didn’t want to. Even when I didn’t think I could. I stayed and stayed and never asked for anything from you or the old man. For what? For you to write me into a paragraph on your will for some chump change. And you’re giving the same amount to my daughter? My daughter? The daughter who turned tail and ran as soon as she could? The daughter who calls once a year? The daughter whose zipcode no one even knows? The one whose nose is turned up so far she won’t even bring herself to come back for your funeral?”

“Is this what this is about Edward? Your own bruised ego? Do you know the difference between you and I, son?” She rasped.

“Do you think this is what I wanted, Mother? Do you think I wanted to waste away here for you?”

“The difference between us is you don’t know why you stayed.”

“I stayed for you.” Edward sprung up and glared at her, his eyes clear with rage.

“Is that what you’ve told yourself all this time? When did I ask you to stay? When?”

“If I hadn’t done it, no one would’ve. We would’ve all left you here to rot.”

She laughed mirthlessly. “It’s too cold to rot here, boy. So that’s what you think. You stayed for me. I suppose you think you stayed for your wife and lovely daughter too, right? No. That’s not it at all. There isn’t enough nobility in this family line for that to be true.”

“You and him stayed here all these years, bleeding the wealth out of this land, and you’re going to turn around and give it to your children too weak and too selfish for them to ship it back off to wherever the hell they are! That wealth is ours! Not theirs. Ours. Mine.”

“The only reason you’re still here is because you lack the imagination to leave. But that’s the story you’ve concocted. My little white knight. Pathetic.” She stared at the last pill in her palm.

“And I suppose you stayed for all the right reasons, Mother? Your motives were so high and mighty?”

“No,” She stared at the pill. “No. I stayed because I thought I was stronger. I thought I could.”

He sneered at her. “And what did that get you?”

“The same thing it’ll get you.”

She placed the final pill, a garish blue and yellow oval on her tongue and took a sip of water. She gagged and spat it out, holding it in her hand as tears streamed to her eyes

“So that’s what they want. They want me dead.”

“Oh, quit being so dramatic, Mom. Who wants you dead?”


Ruth melted into tears, murmuring to herself between each sob, chin dropping to her chest so her tears dripped onto the blanketed enwrapping her. She placed the pill back in her mouth and made a few paltry gagging attempts to swallow it before she settled back into the seat, tears still streaming down her face as the pill dissolved in her mouth, the bitterness invading every corner of her mouth.

Edward looked on with disgust then reached over to turn out the lamp. The apartment dimmed and shadows from the lone light in the kitchen leaping out across the room, overtaking her sobbing.

“Come on, Mom. Let’s get you to bed.” He pursed his lips and lifted himself up before taking her gaunt hand in his beefy palm and hoisting her up in a pathetic attempt at gentleness.
She wiped her tears on her wrist and tottered behind him to her room.

He closed the door and leaned against it, arms crossed, as she changed. When she had collapsed into bed he heaved blankets down on top of her. Stepping back, he was amazed at how small she looked under all the blankets, just a trace of an outline leading to a grim and lean face, brow relaxed and eyes lightly closed, searching for the peace of sleep that had not come in decades.

He sighed once more and turned off the lights. “Good night, Mom.”

He took a few steps then shook himself from his daze, glancing around his surroundings from his vantage in the middle of the living room. He walked back to behind the counter and opened the fridge to fish out a beer. Cheap stuff. But it would do the job. He halfheartedly tried to keep quiet as he cracked it open. He took two long pulls from the can. He looked around one more time, then took another pull.

He placed the mostly empty can back in the refrigerator, slipping into his jacket. He let himself out, easing open a closet and fishing out a painting buried behind three shoeboxes before he carried it out into the hall with him, not locking the door.
The casino was small, but bustled with business nonetheless as men with faces as worn as the leather of their jackets ferried their way between the bar and the pawn shop next door. Anna hunched over her fried chicken in a small booth to the side, a beer growing warm next to her as her head hung between her shoulder peering at the drumstick that spun slowly in her hands.

She wouldn’t think about eating something like this back home, but something about the cold made it seem necessary. Like eating poutine in Quebec. She picked at it. It had barely yielded a few good bites and now she sat, pecking odd bits of meat from the bone like the bird it had come from.

She pulled her flannel tighter about her. It was already red, and the light of the bar bled into it, saturating it. The honky tonk waltzing through the air felt wrong, somehow. The twang combined with the beer that sat heavy in the air to fend off the cold. She took a sip of the beer. She hated IPAs. She dripped a bit of hot sauce on the drumstick, by the gristle at the end of its handle, and nibbled around it, pinning the whole drumstick between two fingers.

“Anna McCormick?” The man’s voice behind her was high with surprise. She slumped lower in her seat as the dread at the prospect of a confrontation filled her. She turned, forcing the corners of her mouth upwards.

“Oh, my God, it is you.” The woman’s voice that accompanied was sickly sweet. She recognized them immediately, her eyes stripping away the decades that had softened their faces and thinned their hair.

Mark Olsen was still handsome, and had aged kindly. His brown hair was only lightly sprinkled with silver and was still swept to the left in gentle waves. His paunch was small and hid beneath his shirt, a rarity among her fellow alumni. His jawline was still sharp, but less austere than it had been their senior prom, when he had tied the corsage gently to her wrist and bit his lip as she stabbed him over and over again with the boutonniere. He had never been anything but a gentleman, had kissed her hand and nothing else when he dropped her off at home. But he had dropped her off fifteen minutes late, all the curtains at the house drawn but one. That was the end of that.

Cindy Lawson was still pretty, makeup thickly layered on to draw attention to the high cheekbones, doeish eyes, and soft lips that were beginning to fade. The curls of her hair were sharper than they were in high school and frosted blonde, with the grayish brown peeking through beneath.

“Have a seat,” She invited weakly. They slid in across from her energetically. Mark leaned across the table on his elbows, protected by his own steel-blue flannel. They both grinned at her.

“How’ve you been, Anna?”
She set down her bone, then picked up her beer for a small sip, puckering her mouth.

“Oh, goodness, it’s been good. It’s been too long!”

“Amen to that,” Cindy chortled. “What brings you to this neck of the woods?”

“Just some family business. And it’s been too long since I’ve been back.”

“Well, you picked a hell of a time to come,” Mark teased gently.

“You can say that again,” Anna remarked, taking another sip from her beer.

“Speaking of family business, Cindy and I were just talking. Whatever happened to that family property of yours out by Glendive?”

Anna blanched. “I don’t know. What do you mean?”

“Well, that’s fracking country now. Has word not reached you out on the coast yet?”

Anna shook her head. “I couldn’t tell ya. I think it’s still just open land.”

The pair peered at her inquisitively. They hadn’t known her long enough to see through her lie.

“Well, go figure. I guess it really is a crapshoot.”
“You can say that again. How’ve you been?”
“Oh, you know,” Cindy quipped. “Just hanging in there. We came out for a couple of beers to carry us through that second half of the week and who do we run into! Crazy world.”
“Crazy world.” Anna muttered her agreement.
Mark chuckled along. “Although I’m sure you know all that from Facebook. How much longer are you in town?”
Anna frowned. “I’m not sure. Things are still a little dicey.”
“They always are.” Cindy nodded sagely.
Anna stood abruptly. “I’m sorry y’all. I’d better get going. I’ve got an early morning tomorrow.”
They nodded understandingly and rose with her. She bumped her knees against the table and slipped the remaining breast into a paper basket, its grease immediately bleeding out as breading crumbled off. She finished her beer with one last sip.
“Well, let us know if you’re free and in town again!” Mark exclaimed.
“Don’t be a stranger!” Cindy agreed.
“Of course!” Anna agreed as she hoisted her jacket over her shoulders, wrapping them in hugs one at a time and smiling before nodding politely to both. She slipped back out in the night and trotted back to her car, the chicken shaking in her fist. She shook her head as she slipped into the car and switched the headlights on. They pooled out across the parking lot, drawing her eyes out to the land that lurked in the distance, the land that wouldn’t stop reminding her of the trouble it never stopped bringing her.
Thursday

The sunlight filtered through the blinds clear as water. Ruth blinked the dull pounding behind her eyes away and cast a glance around her room. Same as it always was. She sighed. Another day. Another three days. She rocked her hips back and forth, ready to spring herself from bed. An unfortunate side effect of age. She drove her back upwards. The sharp pain in her trunk pushed the air out from her and she collapsed back into bed.

She took a few breaths to steady herself, then, placing her frail hand by her ribs, levered herself up. Her wrists protested and she propped herself up against the bed’s headboard, an old cherrywood affair with dust engrained in every crevice. The old engraving pressed into her back familiar and uncomfortable. She had always hated the board, with carvings of roses and camellias dancing about in but it had been a gift from John’s mother so she had had no say on the matter.

She remembered him on his deathbed, the hair that prickled up almost clear in between the liver spots that dotted his head, chuckling throatily the way he would every night after dinner was finished when she would tell him there would be no drinks served that night. He squinted at her, unable to look clearly, his brows swollen over his eyes, still bright and smart and smiled, a ghost of what his smile had been when she had met him.

“So, Ruth, what’ll be the first thing to go after me? The head board or the ottoman?”

She thought of the ottoman, a squat wrinkly leather stump that still hunched in the living room like a troll caught in daylight that he had bought while in Europe.

She cast a withering glance his way. “The tie collection.”

He writhed in his bed and clutched his heart with a snicker. “You might kill me before this cancer.”

She arched an eyebrow and returned to the newspaper. “Then it’ll be the crucifix your mother bought in Italy.”

His face became a mask of placid severity. “I suppose this is it then. Say hello to Beelzebub for me.”

She didn’t look up. “Of course. It’ll be my pleasure.”

“Just wait till you see what the heat down there does to your perm.” He smirked.

She didn’t know what would happen to it all now. She supposed in the days or weeks that followed there would be a half-hearted battle pitched between the five over who had a right to which trinket. No one would have any design on the bed board, so it might end up in a yard sale or a pawn shop where a waste of air who had staggered over from the casino next door would leer at it. In all likelihood Edward would be too proud for such a thing and bluster a claim to it so it would end up shivering away in a storage room somewhere off the highway and she would finally have her revenge on John.

She laid in bed another minute before slipping out of the comforter. The pain that throbbed in her side was hunger, not disease. Good. Her feet found the cold floor and she quickly slipped them into her ratty slippers before snatching the cane that propped against her bedside table, ruffling a few of the bible’s worn pages as she heaved herself off the ground with the bare metal hook.

She had long ago given up on taking stock of which joints hurt, and now checked which didn’t. Her left hip felt mostly fine, and her right knee only creaked slightly. Pressure was high enough that she could still grip the cane and her right shoulder felt thirty years younger than the rest of her.

She shuffled out of her bedroom, past the bookshelves and neatly arranged furniture and into the bare kitchen. She eyed her cane warily and her slippers felt slick against the tile floor. She lowered
herself heavily to the corner cabinet below the fake marble countertop and, her hand’s grasp still feeling numb, yanked out the box of oatmeal packets. Only maple left. It’ll have to do.

She filled the tea kettle and turned the electric stovetop on and shuffled back over to the couch. It would be a while before the kettle boiled. She had always meant to ask for a repair to her stove top as it boiled water about as quickly as she could by blowing on it. No use now.

She settled down and threw a blanket over her shoulders, burrowing into the sofa. Before her the bay window sprawled out across the valley like a fresco.

The mountains arched up like the teeth of some ancient predator protruding from the ground, robed in swaths of snow that surrounded the pine trees that stood resolute against the elements. The land swooped down low into the plain of the valley speckled with houses, farms, cattle and cars. She remembered why she had stayed. One couldn’t help but feel small under the big sky. She couldn’t help but feel safe under that sky, as blue and as deep as the ocean hundreds of miles away. It was a reminder of it all. How small we all were. How small we all are. The wonder of it all, that such great forces could push up mountains from plains, could batter the land with winds and snow and rain and yet life could push through. That every spring aspens could kiss blossoms out of their delicate branches, that pines could persist, green as ever, summer frozen in time in the face of frost that cut through their trunks.

Every spring, the cattle and buffalo could shake off the crust of ice that had snared them for months and trot on the earth, green again. Life could persist. Nothing could stop it then. The barons could strip away the mountains but not the fists that shoved them up from deep below. Men could gather under the dime store rotunda they had erected to carve up the land, to slice across it with scars of asphalt and dams and bridges, but they could never feel safe. They could tax the homesteaders who dared to scurry across it, but never tax the land itself. The farmers could humble the land while it slept, forcing it into neat rows and ripping its harvest with neither permission nor gratitude, but they could never tame it. Could never expect mercy when it awoke.

But it slumbered on, a mere reminder of her small place in it all, offering only a hint of a shadow to her searching eyes. A small forget-me-not that danced through her mind when the diamonds of snow swirled down from up above or when the sun hung in the sky for what felt like days, the land still soaking up its golden rays long after it had ducked beneath the mountains to cast its watchful eye across the ocean or when she stood by the capricious rivers whose minds were forever unchanged as they cut across the land, ambling broadly and placid, then raging narrow and sinewy like a caged beast around the other side of a mountain.

A wave of warmth overcame her and she rose, stumbling over with her cane to raise the window to the left of the bay. The air floated in gently, unseasonably warm and carrying with it the smell of snow that dared to melt, hopeful in the face of the refreeze that would come for it that evening, embracing her as a wave of lifeblood that she had not felt in a long time coursed through her. The kettle boiled in the kitchen.

She walked over to it elegantly in measured steps, refusing to be rushed. She turned it off slowly and emptied her packet of oatmeal into the bowl. Her arm ached as she lifted the kettle but she refused to let it bend and the hot water trickled into the bowl, a quavering stream under her stern control. She pulled open the drawer by her right hip and pulled out her old spoon, the squat round one, long dulled, with which she had fed five children. She stirred the oatmeal absentmindedly and glanced at the wall.

The car keys she hadn’t used in months hung there, next to scraps and bits of paper with phone numbers for longdead friends. Hanging off the last hook, beneath a postcard of Notre Dame Stephen had gotten for her during his semester abroad, were the keys to the cabin.
She knew, from years of practice, that if she turned and paced back to the far right corner of the bay window and peered, there, between the third and fourth ridges that crept up to the valley’s peak she could almost make out the road that wound its way off the highway and between the pines that stood as sentinels and would guide her over hills next to the creek that jostled its way down to the Madison miles away. There, perched between snowbanks with boulders buried deep within like yolks in eggshells, was the old cabin, long in disrepair where John had asked her to marry him. She had said yes, of course, then joked that she had to because he was her only ride out. It was a remnant of a time long gone, when a single room and a wood stove was enough for a family, and the trees outside fell over in their eagerness to feed the family.

It was just another one of those traces of a family John had never met that he refused to part with, like the head board or the family bible whose pages were clear as glass and whose ink had long ago smudged, turning the family tree folded in by the Pentarchech into a Rorschach test.

It was days like this she used to dream about, days John were mark on the little calendar punctuated with biblical verses they kept hanging in the kitchen as he checked the forecast over his breakfast of coffee and oatmeal.

“Those darned trees,” He would mutter, and smirk at Jean across the table from him, and she would grin back at him.

Then that weekend they would load the station wagon, warming themselves up by breaking a sweat herding three children into the back row. John would carve his way carefully out of town and into the mountains. She would sit up front, glaring at the three in the back, who nearly vibrated with excitement, then pray a few silent Hail Marys and cling to the kitty litter when the wheels began to churn in the deep snow. They would arrive and thump over the snow, unlocking the cabin. Ruth would set a fire immediately in the stove and Jean would carry in the box she had packed from the car. John would collect the bow saw and snowshoes and they would set off.

John and Alan would wander off for as long as the daylight was out, even lingering into dusk, sending Ruth into frantic Our Fathers, surveying and pruning the forest around the cabin of any branches that looked to be in danger of falling in the dampening snow.

Edward would lumber about, even a boulder of a child at that age for hours, never tiring or losing the grin plastered across his freckled face.

She and Jean would wait patiently inside, kneading out the bread, Ruth quizzing her on the novels they were both prone to rifling through, recounting Austen and Eyre to each other and Jean braiding her hair as the bread rose.

Like magic, the smell of the bread that rose through the chimney would bring them all home to roost and they would feast on the bread, warm and tender, with ruddy cheeks and soaked toes.

Then years more of age arrived and with it two more children and life was no longer the Rockwell painting it had once seemed to be.

She turned and walked stiffly back to her reclining seat in the living room with her oatmeal to gaze out over the valley once more. If she closed her eyes and breathed deeply, she could almost smell the bread, forgotten decades ago and feel those children’s fingers dancing clumsily but steadily through her hair.
The rapping on his door woke him up, but he felt alert immediately. He looked over at the alarm clock.

“Damn,” he muttered. 8:30. He never slept in.

He rose quickly and opened the door quizzically, where his two sisters waited impatiently for him.

“Little sleepy, Alan?” Jean inquired.

“Apparently,” he remarked.

“Well, we need your help.”

“A refreshing change of pace,” he muttered, throwing on a pair of slippers as he followed them out into the parking lot.

He expected steep punishment for his plain cotton t-shirt and flannel pants, but was pleasantly surprised by a gently cold day. Above freezing, he guessed, as he sniffed the air.

“We wanted to head out to Mom’s and then visit the cabin but-”

“Your sport utility vehicle got snowed in?” he cut Anna off.

“Yes. And it’s just an SUV. You don’t have to be so pedantic.”

“That’s not what pedantic means.”

“Whatever.”

“Happy to be good for something, I suppose.”

“Thanks.”

Alan blew into his hands. “How about you give me fifteen minutes to change and then you drop me off with Mom?”

“Deal.” Jean replied before Anna could.

He rushed back inside as they waited in the lobby, scarcely thinking as he threw on clothes, chomping on a stick of gum as he ran back out, skipping the meticulous hygiene routine he had cultivated over decades. All rules were going out the window this morning.

They raised their eyebrows at him as he trotted out in jeans and a flannel shirt with a thin jacket atop, his hair still ruffled from sleep and his eyes distant.

“Is anyone going to double-check to make sure Eddie doesn’t come to pick any of us up?” Jean asked.

“Does anyone care to?” Alan’s rhetorical question went unanswered.

“Alan, are those boots?” Anna sounded disbelieving as she gawked at the dark brown leather on his feet.

“You can take the boy out of the Rockies, but you can’t take the Rockies out of the boy,” Jean sniffed airily.

“No matter how hard the boy tries,” Anna added.

Alan rolled his eyes. “Do you want this car free or not?”

They fell silent.

He squatted low and dug his hands into the engine’s grill as Anna crawled in and turned the car on to put it in reverse. Jean hunkered down into a snow drift piled up next to the hotel’s overhang and Alan felt the engine growl in his hands. He dug even lower and his legs tensed and set themselves to pump like pistons. The black monstrosity slid slightly, then jerked free. Alan ran headlong with it a few steps as it freed itself. Digging his hands into the grill of the car, he felt the soft snow slipping under his boots. He felt the car edge to the right as Anna pulled out of the spot. Wrenching his hands out from the
grill, he threw himself to the left and felt himself skid, digging the tips of his toes into the snow, flailing for some bit of real ground and not its soft slick coating.

He fell flat on his chest. The blow was dull and indifferent. He rolled over and propped himself up, searching for the air that had been punched out of him before springing up and sliding into the back seat of the SUV, where Jean turned from the shotgun she had already taken to peer at him.

“You alright?”

He rolled his left wrist as its sting subsided and nodded dismissively.

“Alright.” She turned back around. “Try not to kill yourself.”

Alan raised a single eyebrow and turned to stare out the window. Anna cleared her throat and turned on the radio. She was greeted by static.

“Damn.” She noted. “I can’t remember any of the radio stations.”

Jean turned back to look at Alan.

“I live further than you do,” He snorted derisively.

“That’s not how radio stations work.” She retorted. “Besides, you always had the best memory.”

“Why would I ever bother memorizing radio stations that all played nothing but Kris Kristofferson anyways?”

She turned back around. The car ventured towards the foothills as the static crackled on.
It was too damn warm outside. Made the snow melt and get everywhere. Wet snow was
dangerous snow. Edward liked his heat hot and his cold cold. He stormed into the office mad for no
reason, clomping his feet to shake the snow from it. He dropped his briefcase in a huff, and it slid off his
desk, bouncing off his chair and narrowly missing his foot. He felt his chest grow swollen with too much
righteous indignation far too early in the morning and snorted his disgust, looking around to see if anyone
had noticed fate’s mistreatment of him.

Their heads stayed down, dialed into their aging computer screens that glowed back harsh
pixelated light under the dull fluorescent light that radiated from the ceiling and off the linoleum floor.

What a bunch of lemmings, mindless paper-pushers happy to spend their days in a lightless void
staring at a bunch of pricks’ taxes and while they listen to white noise.

He shrugged off his black leather jacket and sat down in his dilapidated swivel chair, still
seething, and opened the first document he saw on his computer.

What an ass. Some California kid drooling over the low property costs working for Oracle and
wearing a parka eight months out of the year. Edward had been doing this for a long time. Too long by
his estimation. In his experience there were two kinds of people who needed help with their taxes: evil
and stupid. This one certainly fell into the second category.

Someone without his stomach might not have lasted as long working for some of these clients,
but that was just sentimental bullshit. No good or bad or ugly, just lucky and unlucky. He was used to
hearing sermons all around, but the truth was anyone would have him combing through pages of blotted
ink for loopholes if they could afford it. But for the time being they had just enough money for a poorly
built house that froze in the winter and melted in the summer, a shit car, enough cash to buy gas to pump
into that car, and their soapbox from which they lectured down at him. Everyone would sell their soul if
they could. Sure, they would Huff and puff right until they got that right dollar sign, then there they would
be. There he would be if it weren’t for shit luck. Shit luck and no respect.

He closed out of the document and stared at his blank screen mindlessly. He opened a window
and clicked his first favorite, choking out a huff of frustration as the wirey old box began to buffer. It
loaded, finally, and he stared at it achingly.

He shifted around the map on his screen. Property values in the state.

They were on the rise. They usually were. Anywhere with a view of some rocks and a road good
enough for two wheel drive could be flipped off on some fool from the Bay Area looking to find his soul
in nature or whatever sort of mumbo-jumbo they fed themselves. He peered at the rivers that rose up
from the plains in the east where oil barons licked their lips over farm fields that could barely support
dandelions, much less a family, snaking all the way to the lakes in the west where those same barons built
their mansions with cherry groves out front and yachts in the back.

He shook his head in disbelief. Land out east was finally good for something other than a box of
shredded wheat. Then he spat at disgust, remembering the wastes of money that land went to, ingrates
who wouldn’t know an opportunity if it drilled straight into them and pumped them full of water. They
didn’t deserve it. Didn’t know how lucky they were.

Edward slouched low in his seat and felt his cell phone begin to buzz. He pulled it out and
glanced at the screen. Sarah. He put the phone back down.

It really was all just a crapshoot. Life and land. They all got the same rain and shine, but a damn
fool’s idea of what trees looked nicer could sink you or swim you. He was tired of telling Sarah that,
telling Ruth that, telling himself that. It was all a gamble, all of life, but when things didn’t go your way
it was your fault. And at the end of the day when lots were drawn, he knew where he fell. At the end.
Ruth would say it wasn’t true, the same way John said it, but he knew what was true and what wasn’t. It was a roll of the dice he didn’t deserve. Didn’t deserve for staying and listening and obeying. So that when it came down to it, to the empty lots in the plains or the empty lots outside Helena, a coin toss decided what should have been earned. John knew. Ruth knew. Alan and Jean and Stephen and Anna. They all knew. How to fuck him over. They drew pleasure from it, a pleasure they would never admit to but was there nonetheless, deep in their chests as they saw the winds turn on him and the odds break against him, as they saw money and happiness and luck slip out of his reach like a roadrunner. Never got tired of that anvil falling on him. But he still stayed. And he couldn’t tell anyone why. Not even himself. Some sick duty that kept him circling the valley like the drain of a tub. And all he got for it was a ninth of a share. Unbelievable.

He rose and paced to the break room to stare at all the food he had no interest in eating. A few stale danishes. Burnt coffee. Bananas brown as mud. He grabbed a cheese danish and poured himself a cup of coffee, taking an apprehensive sip and scowling. Lukewarm at best. He emptied two packs of cream into it and took a bite of pastry. He looked out the hole of a window carved into the wall, at the mess of a street, lines buried deep under a mess of snow with cars that barrelled past regardless of the stupidity of their actions, shooting down a road going nowhere worth their rush. Maybe they had good insurance policies.

He savored the dull gray of the day. It was the kind of day that he could tell was beautiful just a couple miles away. But not for him. Not here. It was the kind of day just nice enough to make people forget about summer, forget their longing for the days when the sun hung high for fourteen hours. The winter never bothered him. The summer was gone, and it would return when it damn well pleased. He couldn’t fault it for that. Summer was a respite from winter. One he respected but didn’t need. This was the land as it was meant to be, not the other way around. Life would warm just enough to trick you into letting your guard down.

He had married Sarah on a May day. The morning had sparkled, the sky so blue it was white, and she sparkled along with it, cackling through the mountain of hair she had done up for the day. By the time the electric organ struck itself up the sleet that had begun as they ate lunch had turned to snow. By the second chorus of their first dance the power went out. And so it went.

Warmth was to be appreciated but not expected. He had learned that long ago. Ruth had taught him, then forgotten herself. Nine months of cold. Then, when the sun came brilliant in compensation, it burst colors out across the state, and they were bathed in the blood red of cherries and the royal purples of huckleberries. Ruth would stand in the kitchen for hours, her fingers sliding over countless cherries, punching out the pits, bored from the years of this familiar task. She would bore her eyes into him as he did the same, slapping the back of his head when he missed a pit. He didn’t mind. He knew her real slaps.

He finished his danish. He glanced back nauseated at his desk, wanting to take off and leave it behind him. Maybe come back in tomorrow. Maybe another sick day. But he had nowhere to go. He glanced at his phone again. The same few unread texts. Sarah needed a ride home from work. Jean was either needling him or herself about something useless. Some things never change. Stephen was in West Virginia. What a damn fool. Driving that whole way for an extra day. A few hours, maybe, knowing how he drove. Suppose it wasn’t too bad. Price of gas wasn’t too high. But still. Sentimentality wasn’t worth a sore ass and three days of searching for a radio station.

It was just like him to turn up late but pathetic like a puppy for the sympathy. Catholic guilt at its finest, maybe. He probably hadn’t even thought ahead to make a reservation. Plus his Cackalacky car
probably didn’t even have four-wheel drive. But that was just like him. Turning up a disaster with a half-hearted gesture, so everyone fawned over him enough to forget how much of a mess he had made.

Same shit Anna pulled. They had always been coddled. Bumbling their way through an apology and expecting a pat on the back for it. Meanwhile Jean and Alan insisted on lording everyone else while their own shit hit the fan. Not a practical bone among the four of them. And he was the village idiot for staying behind.

He took another sip of the coffee. It was decaf after all. He’d have to take a nap. Oh well. Taxes weren’t due for another couple of months still.
The cream of the ceiling was cold in the gray morning light. Sean shifted about under the heavy comforter, rolling onto his side. He sighed. No rest for the weary. He sat up and fluttered his eyelids in a half-awake attempt to clear the sleep from his eyes. He squinted and searched about the strange hotel room for a clock. It was an arm’s length away to his right. Idiot. He glanced at it, then shook his head and looked at it again. He fumbled for his phone on the bedside table and stared disbelievingly at the screen. 11:48.

“Dad?”
A muted mumble came from the bed where Stephen lay wrapped in a cocoon of blankets.
“It’s almost noon.”
“What?” His voice was faint.
“I said it’s almost noon.”
He bolted upright. “How?”
“I don’t know. I guess we just didn’t set any alarms.”
“Jesus.” He flew out of the bed in a flash and was in the bathroom. “Go get breakfast while I use the bathroom. We’ve got to hit the road as soon as possible.”
“I don’t need breakfast.”
“You’re nineteen and had a sandwich for dinner last night. You need breakfast.”
The wave of hunger hit him like a shot low in the gut that radiated out across his chest.
“Never mind. Text me when you’re done.”
“You’ve got it.”
Sean paced out of the hotel room as fast as his legs could swing and the knot in his stomach increased until he was almost doubled over in pain. He staggered around the corner to where the kitchen was, nearly flattening the housekeeper cleaning up. She caught him and held his arms in both hands, face creased in a motherly smile as he gasped.
“Sorry, ma’am, is there any breakfast left?”
“Packing up the last of it, dear. What do you want?”
“Whatever you’ve got.”
She chuckled. “Just like my son. I swear that boy’s got a hollow leg.”
He sat down with a plate of fake eggs, fake sausage, and stale cereal, a stream of apologies and thanks tumbling out of his mouth before falling on the food like an animal. He didn’t look up until he was finished and already regretting eating the rubbery yellow lump they had passed off as scrambled eggs. His stomach still grumbled but she was gone. He looked at his phone. Dad was done anyways. He headed back to the room. The door stuck on their duffel bags as he tried to open it.
“Sorry,” Stephen barked from around the corner. “Shower fast.”
The shower was either too hot or too cold depending on how he jiggled the loose handle. He didn’t bother to shave—Stephen hadn’t so he wouldn’t have to worry about prodding elbows and wisecracks about his peach fuzz grown wild. He dried off quickly, but not quickly enough for Stephen, judging by the increasingly urgent knocks on the door.
He came out, hair still wet and a bit overwhelmed by the speed of it all. Stephen was already lugging the two duffel bags out from where he had propped the door open with them.
“I already signed us out. Hurry up.”
“How did you get my card?”
“You left your wallet on the bedside table. Try remembering where you put things.”
“Then where’s my wallet now?” His voice raised with alarm.
“In the shotgun seat. What the hell did you think I was going to do with it?”
They bustled past the front desk.
“I don’t know. You left our door propped open.”
“I can’t imagine many people around here have a ton of use for a twenty dollar bill, a student ID, and an unused condom.”
“Dad!”
“Don’t worry, I’m sure your RA gave it to you.”
“I don’t know if that’s better or worse.”
“Me either. Now do you remember how to get back onto the highway?”
They pulled out of the parking lot, still blotchy with rainwater and peeled cautiously out onto the road, searching for their exit.
Sean shook himself alert to the gentle rumbling of the car and turned on the radio, only to be greeted by a wave of static. Putting it on to scan he stared out the window. Talk radio came on and Stephen raised his eyebrows at the gruff agitator.
“It’s too early for that mess.”
Sean skipped it. A country station.
“Is that a synthesizer?” Stephen pondered aloud. Sean skipped to the next. The station loudly announced itself as the home of classic rock. The highway was beginning to open into farmland. The station launched into Radiohead.
“Absolutely not.” Stephen skipped ahead.
“Not a fan, Dad?”
“Not classic.”
Dolly Parton crackled into the car, and the signal seemed to strengthen a bit.
“This’ll do.”
Sean chuckled. The sky above was clear as a bell, a rich blue that sparkled in the sunlight. He cracked the window open. The air that tumbled in was cool but not sharp. He inhaled gratefully. Dolly Parton turned to George Jones and the car rolled on. Sean pulled one of the books he had brought from his backpack and opened it in his lap, only to stare at it blankly. Sean’s head jerked as they swerved into the parking lot a gas station.
“Sorry. I’m starving.” Stephen bolted from the car. Slipping into the bathroom as Stephen browsed for snacks, Sean splashed some water on his face, glancing at his face in the mirror before regretting it and pulling away almost immediately. He stumbled out of the bathroom, head still spinning from his rude awakening, only to be hit in the head by a bag of fritos launched expertly by his father.
“Heads up,” Stephen called, a beat too late. Sean caught the bag and held it in his hands, frowning at it momentarily. “Really, Dad? Chili Cheese?”
He looked back up. This time he was quick enough to catch the car keys that came flying towards him.
“If you want different snacks, you can buy them.” The door was already swinging shut on his father bolting back out to the car. Sean broke into a trot after him.
“Do you want me to drive?”
“I have to eat. You have no problem texting at stoplights so I imagine driving while snacking on fritos shouldn’t be a problem for you. Now hurry up and unlock the car. My hands are cold.”
Sean clicked the keys in bewilderment. Stephen seemed at least twenty years younger. Younger, certainly, than Sean had ever known him. He was right, though. It was cold, and Sean shook some life into his hands as he slid into the driver’s seat, wincing at the cold seatback that tensed his whole spine. The car edged out of the parking lot and he snuck cautiously onto the highway.

Stephen shook his head. “You’ve got to be the only kid your age who drives like your mother.”

Sean cast a wary eye over at him. “I’m telling her you said that.”

He shrugged. “I’m right. And besides, we have somewhere to be.

Sean gunned the engine and the engine climbed towards seventy. “Better?”

“Much.” Stephen began to munch. “Oh, you’re right. I shouldn’t have gotten chili cheese.”

“Told you. I think I know fritos better than you do.”

Stephen chuckled. “You’re not wrong there.”

The Buckeye State faded to a blur as they cut further and further away from the Ohio River, valley hills and forests fading into farmland, the highway beating a path across rusty earth and worn-out rest stops. Sean shifted his hands on the wheel and settled into his seat, feeling the smooth rush of the highway underneath him. The rustling and crunching slowed, then stopped next to him. He looked over.

Asleep again. Amazing. Over fifty years old and he slept like Sean’s eighteen year old roommate.

“Come on, Stephen,”

Stephen shifted in his bed, drowsily fighting the inevitable.

“You’ve got thirty seconds before I open a window.”

Stephen rolled over with a newfound sense of urgency. John looked the same as he always had. He had aged, no doubt, hair thinning and peeling over to the left in surrender, fighting the good fight against an ever-encroaching forehead. Blue eyes still bright and beady like a crow’s, but with more and more lines, sharp and thin, slicing out around them. Skin purpling and blotting from years of too much snow and cigarettes. But he had yet to lose that step, the undefinable, intangible process of aging. He still appraised his teenaged son sharply and quickly, taking two shuffling steps towards the small window wedged into the wall by the foot of the bed, bluffing his son into nearly tumbling out of bed in fear of the February winds that lurked outside.

“I’ll be down soon,” Stephen grumbled.

“You’d better,” John warned, “Two minutes.”

“Two minutes?” Stephen echoed incredulously, repeating the familiar old steps of their daily morning ritual.

“You heard me,” John said, closing the door behind him.

Stephen stumbled down the narrow stairway bleary-eyed. As he rounded the corner into the kitchen his teenaged limbs were quickly outgrowing, the golden light of dawn had lingered as it was washed out by the light of day.

“Dad, what time is it?”

John was silent.

“Dad, I think I’m going to be late. What time is it? Has school started already? It’s too late. Dad!”

His father stared wordlessly at the newspaper placidly.

Stephen looked around the near-empty kitchen. “Dad, where’s Mom?”

John looked up, vaguely bothered. “She’s right there.” He nodded back towards the kitchen absent of any life. “Don’t be rude.”
“Dad, she’s not there. Dad!”
He nodded and grunted his assent, clearly no longer listening in the slightest.
Stephen stumbled into the kitchen, searching for his mother. “Dad? She’s not back here!”
He looked at the clock. The hands were gone, but he knew he was late. “Dad! I have to go!”

Stephen jerked awake. Sean looked over worriedly. “You good, Dad?”
Stephen shook his head in shock. “Yeah, yeah. I think so. What state are we in?”
Sean laughed. “Still Ohio, unfortunately.”
Stephen threw up his hands incredulously. “This country is too damn big!”
“Well,” Sean tempered him. “The good news is we’re almost to Indiana. If that counts as good news.”

Stephen grunted his disappointed agreement.
“I think we should be able to make it to Chicago for tonight,” Sean noted. “Maybe not past it, but definitely to it.”

Stephen glanced at the darkening sky. “Are you hungry?”
“No,” Sean reassured, then paused a beat. “Are you?”
Stephen chuckled. “You’re a terrible liar. And a nineteen-year old. What do you want to stop for?”

“Well,” Sean mused. “Can we stop at a Skyline? We’re not too far from Cincy.”
Stephen raised an eyebrow. “Have you had Cincinnati-style chili?”
“Well, no,” Sean admitted. “But it’s chili and pasta, so how bad can it be?”

Stephen shrugged in surrender. “You’re a terrible liar. And a nineteen-year old. What do you want to stop for?”

“Sorry about that,” Stephen noted.
“Yeah, me too. I’m getting sore.”

“Check the pancake butts on all your uncles when we get to Montana. It’s my fault.”

Sean broke into peals of laughter as he tuned on the radio, and the sounds of gentle Pete Seeger guided them onto a ramp peeling them off from the highway.

Stephen eyed the brownish mess before them warily. “It’s not too late for Subway, you know. I won’t tell your mother.”

“Don’t tell me you’re chickening out now,”
“No, no” Stephen dismissed him. “I’m just worried about that freshman fifteen,” He shrugged as he stuck a fork into his dish.

“So that’s how it is, huh,” Sean smirked. “Yeah, okay. Watch your step, old man.”

Stephen stuck his fork in, then paused. “You know what?”
“I don’t like that look in your eye,” Stephen fretted, as Sean paced out the door.

He returned seconds later with a devilish gleam in his eye and a small bloodred bottle in his hand.

He set it on the table. It was a novelty hot sauce they had purchased on a trip to Nashville that had sat in the car unused for a few months.

“Yeah,” Sean eyed his father mischeviously.

“Is that a joke? I’m twenty years too old for that shit.”

Sean raised an eyebrow as he cracked the bottle open. “As you wish, coward.” Tapping the bottle over his chili, it fell out in thick splots. “Shit.” Stephen dissolved in laughter as Sean eyed the chili
with resignation. “Can I try some of yours to see what it’s supposed to taste like?”

Stephen pushed his bowl across the table grinning. “It’s actually pretty good. Good idea.”

Sean scowled as he took a bite, blowing on it as it steamed by his lips. He nodded in pleasant surprise. “Pretty good.” He began to mix his chili in surrender. Now mixed, he eyed it tiredly, then took a bite, chewing slowly, face fixed in reflection, then swallowing hard.

“It’s not….bad,” He pondered, then coughed twice. “We get free refills here, right?”

Stephen resumed his giggling.

Sean began breathing heavily as he chugged his water. He set it down and glared down at the chili. “Dad, why doesn’t Grandma like Mom?”

Stephen frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve seen that woman drive to Georgia for the funeral of a roommate’s sister’s husband she’d never met before, and she’s not going to Montana? I’m not that dumb.”

Stephen sighed. “I guess you’d have to ask your Grandmother.”

“Seriously, Dad?” He began to shovel the chili into his mouth.

“Slow down there,” Stephen chuckled.

“I think it’s better if I eat it as fast as possible. Question still stands.”

Stephen shrugged. “It’s a lot of different things. I guess early on your mother made a mistake and Grandma decided she wasn’t good enough for me.”

“And that’s it? You’ve been married thirty years? How bad was this mistake?”

“Well, everyone seemed to think it was pretty bad, but I forgave her, and that’s what matters.”

Sean looked up from his chili suspiciously. “Did she cheat on you?”

Stephen set down his fork and pursed his lips, crossing his arms over his chest and staring at his bowl. “Not exactly.”

Sean set down his fork. “Oh.”

“When we met, she happened to be in a relationship, and-”

“Dad, I really don’t want to know.”

Stephen nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, I would imagine you wouldn’t.”

He stood abruptly. “You finished all your water yet?”

Sean nodded guiltily. “Could I get a refill?”

Stephen took the cup and nodded wordlessly headed back towards the counter.

Sean began to cough as sweat started beading along his forehead. Better to eat it slowly, then. Stephen returned a few minutes later, two cups full of water in hand. Sean’s chili was gone. “To Chicago, then?” He asked his son, who nodded wordlessly. “I’ll drive,” He said, putting down a water and extending a hand for the car keys.

“Aren’t you going to finish your chili?”

Stephen bit his lip through another wave of nausea. “I’m not that hungry anymore.

Sean nodded wordlessly, and rose. They walked out into the parking lot as the sun tottered down, turning the wisps of clouds that lingered around for the night’s inescapable embrace into cotton candy-pink shadow puppets that danced across the deepening blue.

Stephen stopped and peered at the night sky. His son turned to him. “What’s wrong, Dad?”

He pointed to a bright point on the horizon. “Is that Venus or a satellite?”

Sean squinted along his father’s finger. “I’m not sure. It’s been too long since I’ve looked for it.”

“You spent so much time stargazing whenever we went camping!”
“You know I was lousy at astronomy. The only thing I could ever spot was Orion and that’s just because of the belt.”
“I guess you did have a pretty lousy teacher.”
Sean hissed out a laugh. “No, I was just always more interested in the s’mores afterwards.”
Stephen unlocked the car. Sean turned his squint to his father’s face, where the faintest hint of a smile crept across his lips.
Anna readjusted her grip on the wheel and swallowed hard. She felt Jean’s worried glance casually blaze into her. She turned to her sister. “Don’t you think it’s a little warm in here, Jean?” Sweat trickled slowly down her side.

Jean looked over at her and held her gaze as Anna pivoted back to the road. “No, no, not really,” Jean replied ponderously. “But I have a jacket so we can turn the heat down if you want to.”

“No, that’s fine.” Anna reassured her. “Actually, if we could, that would be great.”

Jean sighed and shook her head as a tired smile found her. She peered at the dashboard before her for a minute before cranking a few dials down.

“These newfangled cars have too many dials for my taste.”

Anna shrugged nervously. “You’d be surprised how quickly you get used to it.”

Jean raised an eyebrow in disbelief. “I’ll take your word for it.”

Anna wet her lips again nervously, eyes shifting across the highway as it curved gently between the undulating slopes that rolled their way slowly towards the mountains that loomed over the windshield.

Jean looked over her. The lines of age had begun to set in, albeit much slower and concealed under a subtle layer of makeup. She twitched nervously at the wheel. It reminded Jean of that Saturday evening decades ago, curling her baby sister’s hair as she waited for her first ballet recital. She had been fine. Not good, not bad. She knew all the moves, but spat out a panicked babble in her lap that afternoon all the same. She quit dancing within three months of that recital. It wasn’t backbone she lacked, as their mother suspected. Just something in her that couldn’t let her sit still. A bee in her bonnet, their aunt used to say. Jean had always suspected it was something deeper. Something a bit more ingrained than that. She had no idea where it came from, but she had bolted from everything the first chance she got, ricocheting from one class to the next, from the piano to skiing to basketball to reading to writing to ice skating then back to the piano, taking off from the mountains for beaches, from one man’s attention to the next as the winds wished. From one study to the next. Then one day, all of a sudden, something had changed. Jean remembered visiting her for the first time while she was on the coast. Something had seemed different as she sat there, the man she’d come to know as Ben leaned up against her, an easy-going arm thrown around her as she smiled too hard, her formerly blonde hair cast over her shoulders in alternating layers of high and lowlights, her skin too tan and her eyes too wide. All that running had caught up to her. Jean couldn’t explain it, maybe envied it. The way she had just decided one day. Jean didn’t know when, or why, but she had changed it all one day, entrenching with one man in one spot, two kids, and a white picket fence, until their Homeowner’s Association made them get rid of the picket fence but let them keep the kids.

Even now, Jean could see the restlessness fighting to the surface of her eyes, flaring up in flashes like heat lightning. Perhaps Anna was right to burn it all out of her system, waning the restlessness inside down until she could bury it deep enough to make sure it would stay there. Not like Jean, pretending it was never there, following behind Ruth, imitating the motherly purse of her lips and her matriarchal stride as long as she could remember, forcing herself to swallow back the discordant voices that surfaced when she tied an apron, or shrugged into her scrubs, or married the first man who looked at her the right way. She made small concessions as it wore upon her, fleeing, but not too far. Far enough to still feel the cold and spend Christmases and Thanksgivings pursing her lips the way she always had, legs crossed in an old armchair as her children and the children she had spent a childhood pretending were her own mixed on the carpet. Too old to be a proper sister, too young to be a proper mother.
Anna let out a stifled gasp next to her, and Jean knit her brows as she turned back to the highway before them. There, a young deer limped, head drooping and haunches beared, blood matting its leg as it dragged its way across the highway. Anna stepped sharply on the brakes and the car squealed to a halt.

“Is it okay?” She turned to Jean, and for a second, Jean felt like the mother she had always wished to be.

“Well, it doesn’t look that way.”

“Is it a mother? Was it a bear? A car? A hunter?”

Jean stared at the deer as it continued to venture across the road, rutted by ice alternately packed down and worn down to the asphalt beneath.

“I don’t know.”

“Can we do anything to help it?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do I do?”

Jean swallowed hard. “I don’t know.”

The deer continued its path, its blood falling, so red it was nearly black, on the dirty brownish ice of the road as it continued off the road.

“Should we call someone?” Asked Anna.

“Maybe,” Jean replied, dead-eyed, trained on the deer ahead of them.

Reaching the guardrail, it lept weakly. Its front hoof clipped the top and it tumbled over onto the other side, where it rose, and continued to limp down the slope that greeted it, towards an isolated housing development, where skeletons of houses yet to be completed stood, bold and out of place. Jean turned to Anna. “Someone over there will probably know who to call.”

Anna nodded wordlessly and slowly began to pull the car away, eyes trained dead ahead. Neither of them dared to look back.

“Could I have a bit more spinach?” Jean looked over at her sister, stumbling her way through her order, as the overpowering smell of bread swirled in the Subway. She began to roll her eyes, but stopped herself, before turning back to the worker who had just pulled her own sandwich from the toaster.

“Oh, uh, just some tomatoes and romaine. And then balsamic vinaigrette, please. Thanks.” She smiled curtly as they stood there, waiting for Anna to complete her order. As they shuffled towards the cash register, Anna pulled out her credit card.

“I’ve got this, Jean.” She cut off her protestations. “Don’t worry about it.”

Jean nodded, agreeing reluctantly. She smiled at the two workers, one a squat woman with her boyish gray curls stuffed beneath a hair net, the other, a man with a weak attempt at a beard patching his impossibly lean face over a body like that of a stick figure’s, disproportionate and sharp at every turn.

They sat down at a booth, and began to eat in silence. Anna smiled into her sandwich, then turned to look at Jean.

“Do you remember the one time Mom and Dad let us stop for food on the way to the cabin?”

Jean frowned. “We never stopped. There was always food in the cabin,” she recalled, imitating their father’s gruffness. Anna laughed lightly.

“We stopped once. You must have been in college. It was after the first Burger King opened up on the way.”

Jean raised an eyebrow. “Interesting.”

“I think Dad was as curious as we were. Mom wasn’t thrilled.”
“Can you imagine what they would say if they saw this?” Jean gestured out at the outcropping of life that had sprung up on the outer reaches of the valley.

Anna laughed. “My God,” She remarked. “They would lose it.”

Jean turned from the window back to her sister. “So what did you all get at Burger King?”

Anna thought hard. “I think we all got burgers. They were bad, so Eddie drowned his in ketchup. I don’t think Mom ate a single bite of hers. And that was the last time we ever stopped for fast food.”

Jean laughed. “That sounds about right to me.”

Silence fell back over the table as they both returned to their sandwiches.

Anna sniffled once, hard. Jean peered at her, but her face was buried in her sandwich. She returned to her sandwich, but lifted her head once more at the sound of a second sniffle. She tilted her head in curiosity at the sight of her sister, chest heaving as her body was wracked by silent sobs she stifled with her lunch.

A wave of concern washed over Jean, followed immediately by tears that welled unexpectedly in her eyes. She bit her lip hard and sniffled once, snatching up a napkin to dab away the tears she could not explain. They both finished their sandwiches, fighting back the fit of tears that had arrived unannounced.

They stumbled out the Subway, headed for the monstrous black SUV. The day had grown even warmer, but Jean still pulled her coat tight around her. “Anna, are you okay?”

Anna turned and wrapped her up in a hug, quick as water spitting in hot oil. Her head buried into the parka that protected Jean’s chest, knocking the breath out of her. Unsure what to do, Jean wrapped her arms around her younger sister as best she could, arms moving in small soothing circles between her shoulder blades and on her upper arm. Anna’s sobs took on a severity now, long and gasping.

“I’m so sorry, Jean,”

“For what?”

“For everything.” Anna dissolved into another round of tears.

“Anna, you have nothing to be sorry for.”

“I do. I do. I really do. And I am. I’m sorry.” Anna’s cries were muffled by Jean’s parka.

They stood there, wrapped in each other, until the gasps and snorts from Anna subsided. Jean stood her upright, and wiped the tears from her eyes with the corner of her coat sleeve. She held her face a while that way, palms fixed to her jaw, thumbs running along her cheekbones.

“Do you want me to drive?”

Anna nodded wordlessly and handed her the keys and they trudged to the SUV, sweat beginning to form under too many layers.
“Alan, I’m hungry.”
Alan looked up from the newspaper folded neatly in his lap to glance at the clock hanging in the over the refrigerator. He hummed an affirmative.

“Are you going to make me something?” Her voice had grown gravelly.
He peered down his reading glasses at her. “Are you going to clear your throat?”
Without dropping eye contact, she reached across her body to the delicate table that flanked her, raised the small glass there to her lips, and took a sip.

“I don’t want anything big.”

“You need to take your medication with food and if you eat now you won’t be hungry in an hour when you need to take your pills, and I have no interest in explaining to Jean why your digestive tract is stripped raw, or why you won’t stop complaining about the pain you’re in. So we’ll wait.”
Ruth shrank further into her blankets. Alan picked up the pen next to him as the gentle rush of air from the vents overtook the room. “Five-letter lake in California. Must be Tahoe, right?” He pondered to himself as he smudged his way through the crossword.

Ruth gazed at him. “You know, you don’t look very different from before you left here at all.”

“You’d be amazed at the wonders being able to eat vegetables year-round will do for you,” He countered absent-mindedly. “Five-letter PNW river? The PNW? Good Lord, is the Northwest trying to make itself trendy?”

“Same eyes. Same hair. Not like your siblings at all.”
“I mean, at the end of the day, they are still Idaho, aren’t they?”
“You always did have that look in your eyes. Sometimes I think you came out of the womb with that look.”

“And what look would that be?” Eyes still trained on his crossword, Alan drily humored her tangent.

“The very one you’re giving that paper right now. I wish Eddie or Anna had it in them. Or at least that they’d fix that look on something worthwhile. Lord knows you didn’t get it from me,” She chuckled. “You must have gotten it from your father.”

Alan slammed the paper into his lap and stared flatly at his mother. “Snake.”

“Beg pardon?” She shrank back into her seat.

“Dreadfully unoriginal name for a river,” Alan sighed, picking the paper back up to ink the answer in. “Can’t say I’m terribly surprised. They are the PNW, after all.”

Ruth sighed softly and settled back into her seat, her forlorn gaze fixed upon her son, set intently upon his crossword in silence.
The air in the apartment was hot and dry, almost feverish. Clearing his throat sharply, Alan rose, taking his own glass and grabbing Ruth’s impatiently before filling them wordlessly, ignoring Ruth’s nod of thanks upon his return. He sat back down and ruffled the newspaper open in his lap once more.

“Archimedes’ exclamation? Six letters.”
She stared at him wordlessly.

“Eureka,” He muttered, answering his own question busily.
“I’ve missed you, Alan.” The apartment’s silence swelled once more like a wave.
He raised an eyebrow, chin tilting up to match her gaze from across the room. “Funny way of showing it.”

Ruth let her gaze drop.
Eyes returning to the paper in his lap, Alan began to drone. “Do you recall the ford on the Yellowstone? Out by Grandpa’s? Where we would go every summer?” Ruth had fallen silent.

“As I recall you would stay in with Grandma, but every day Grandpa would take us out to the ford to go fishing. There isn’t much else to do out there unless you’re interested in tilling soil.”

“We would catch a few fish a day. Nothing bigger than my forearm at the time. And he would always make us throw them back in. ‘Let them grow,’ he would warn. Honestly, we just had no room in the icebox and he was more than happy eating elk burgers until that heart attack finally came for him, I suspect. One day, Eddie, idiot that he was, somehow scratched a fish he had caught with the hook while he was freeing it. Had a long mark all up its side. Maybe it was a rainbow trout. It doesn’t matter. And we turned it loose just the same. The way he told us to.’

“For some reason that fish kept coming back to us. Just kept biting. Sometimes it would take a few days, or a week, or a year or two, but that fish always came back. And we’d haul it out every time, see that scar, and throw it right back in. I don’t think it ever got much bigger after Edward scratched it. Maybe a bit. Maybe he hit something important. Maybe it just couldn’t. But we found it every time. I don’t know how. It was in a river. Surrounded by millions of gallons of water carrying it down to the Gulf of Mexico, and it stayed there just the same. Stayed there after it got caught time and time again. It never learned. Not once.’

‘Do you know why you’re just hearing about it now? It was some kind of sad joke to us. Just between us. The same dumb story for us to repeat to ourselves when nothing was biting, so we could wonder if maybe this was the time we would catch it again. And sometimes it was.’

‘Sometimes I wanted to just take it and throw it as far as I could. Take it in a bucket and drop it somewhere downstream. Probably wouldn’t have to be far. Maybe just a half a mile or so. Because as much as I laughed at that stupid fish, I pitied it. I don’t think Edward did. But he’d just as soon piss in a river as he would drink from it. Probably in that order, to. But I never did. I always dropped it right back where I caught it. Because I knew it would come back. And it would fall for us all over. Same bait, on the same line, in the same place. And it would still keep biting.” Alan coughed sharply in the hot air once more, but this time his knuckle ventured up discreetly to wipe at his eye quickly.

Ruth’s chin dropped lower. “Alan, I’m so sorry.”

“No. No, you’re not.” He shook his head quickly, almost childishly. “Five letters for Joe, of Goodfellas.”

Ruth wrapped her blankets tighter around her and the tide of silence swelled once more.
The older sister Anna recalled was still there. The one who had flounced out of the house every morning in neatly pressed skirts, the one who cooked dinner and held her when she cried when she was young, then assured her that she had been happy to do so once Anna was older was there, hidden beneath a rubbery mask of age.

Lines creased her face. Worry lines, not laughter lines, Anna noted sadly. Her hair was short now, not the long, flowing reddish-brown it had once been. The glasses big like magnifying glasses that had occupied much of the real estate of her face upon the returns from college she would spend holed up in her room studying were long gone, replaced by a smaller pair Anna had spotted quickly last night, or the contact lenses she could just barely detect hovering over her irises now, as Jean’s jaw clenched and the SUV rumbled over the snow that coated the mountain road thickly as they wound their way towards the old family cabin. Jean’s neck craned forward like a turtle’s, in a way it had never done in their youth, Jean’s perfect posture the thorny stick Ruth had used to prod her younger children toward guilt. But now it shot forward, low and straight, as though she was looking as far ahead as she could for danger. Or as if there was a great weight on her head.

She was just as skinny as she had ever been, maybe more. It seemed a little more dangerous now. A bit more austere. Sharper than she had been before, elbows looking like spears and hands that could almost be called gaunt wrapped tightly around the plastic ring in front of her as if it were a lifeline, not a steering wheel.

She turned to her sister as they plowed on in silence. They had left radio range back at the base of the mountain.

“Why is this road so bad?” She wondered out loud. “Doesn’t anyone every come up here anymore?”

Jean smiled, pursed lips cracking ever so slightly to reveal her teeth underneath. “It’s not so bad.”

“Tell that to your jaw,” Anna replied. “Did you bring a grind guard with you?”

Jean let out a quiet laugh of admission. “Besides, it’s not people coming up here you should be worried about. It’s people leaving. Everyone who lives up here year-round is a crackpot. Didn’t you ever wonder why we never talked to any of our neighbors?”

Anna frowned. “I guess. But not even for food?”

“You think they trust the food in grocery stores? They’re probably still living off of canned beans from the Reagan administration.”

Anna laughed, then paused. “Jean, you’re the oldest.”

“None of you will let me forget it.”

“Did Mom and Dad ever love each other?”

Jean raised her eyebrows, eyes still trained on the road.

“What do you mean?”

Anna nodded wordlessly.

“I don’t know.” Jean corrected herself. “And sometimes I wish I did.’

‘For a while it seemed like they did. It really did. But maybe that was just the fifties. Maybe they really did. Or maybe they just thought they did. Maybe they thought they were on CBS, the way they acted. Played the roles of loving husband and wife. Maybe it was for them and maybe it was for us. I don’t know. And I wish I did.”

“What changed?”

Jean paused and pursed her lips even tighter and glanced down at the dashboard.
“You know how difficult your birth was. On her. But on both of them.”

“So it was my fault.”

“No. No. Of course not. It’s just that something changed. They were getting older. Things were changing. Even out here in the valley. Maybe we let them down, disappointed them somehow. Maybe having kids wasn’t what they were expecting it to be, whatever that was. I don’t know. But things were different after that.”

“How?”

“They still respected each other, of course. Were still nothing but polite around us. Maybe a bit cold. Maybe parents aren’t supposed to be polite. But they were. They seemed more like they were in an agreement, not a marriage. A partnership. It wasn’t worse, really. It wasn’t. It was just a little less Leave it to Beaver. Maybe for the best. I don’t know. They both took your birth as a sign. They just took it as different signs.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, Dad thought you were a little miracle. And Mom thought the miracle was that she survived you.”

Anna shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

“I could be wrong. Don’t ask Mom, though.”

Anna laughed mirthlessly. “I wasn’t planning on it.”

“Good, good,” Jean muttered, peering to the roadside. “It should be coming up soon, right?”

“I think so. So what happened when Stephen was born?”

“I’m not sure. I was just headed off to college. I think Mom took him for her own little miracle, and Dad took him as trading one mouth to feed for another. He still loved Stephen. Of course he did. Just not like Mom. Stephen just added another few years till Dad’s retirement.”

Anna smiled weakly. “Sounds like Dad.”

“Especially towards the end.” Jean nodded. “Sometimes I think Mom did love Dad. But she had to act her love.”

“What do you mean?”

“All those years? Playing that role? Must be exhausting. But she changed after Dad died. And I think we’re both familiar with that change.”

“Maybe she just changed. Maybe it wasn’t a role.”

“No. She’d let the mask down sometimes. The facade would crack. You know that as well as I do. No. Do you remember what she told Colin after we got engaged? She told if we made it to our twenty-fifth anniversary she would pay for us to go wherever we wanted.”

Anna laughed in dismay. “I had forgotten about that. Jesus.”

“We made to fifteen too. Would’ve been twelve, probably, if we hadn’t convinced ourselves all the bullshit was worth it just to see the look on her face.”

The two sisters laughed, faces warm from the sunlight that beamed through the windshield, ears almost burning.

“Oh, Jean, here it is!” Anna pointed excitedly out her window.

Jean veered the car excitedly, glancing into a snowbank as they rumbled to a stop. “Sorry about that. Careful getting out.”

Anna smiled. “Don’t worry about it. Better than my parking’s been since I got here.”

They slid out of the car carefully.
The cabin, hidden in a copse of sleepy pines, tall and sparse with gentle needles, looked the same as it always had, caught in a time in which it did not belong. Hewn out of logs that had been stacked, still splintered and unpolished, icicles hung from the edges of its sharply angled roof, caught dripping down from the snow that laid atop the roof shingled by hand with wooden slats. A small electrical box that clung to the wall was the only sign of modernity.

It looked just as it always had, though its windows were now boarded up with plywood, a precaution against the branches that fell, more and more frequently, from the surrounding trees, who had been caught by time before the cabin managed.

They tramped around the cabin slowly, remembering the look of it, as well as the feel of snow that had never born witness to a hint of human action. The cabin looked almost natural there, perched neatly in between the pines, right above the bank that sloped sharply down to the creek that bubbled along, hurrying down towards the valley, hoping not to freeze, caught in the mounds of snow that encroached from its edges.

The temperature had cooled somewhat this deep into the mountains, but it was still a gentle cold. Anna’s face broke into the smile of a child as she gazed up to where tree branches danced and mingled together like dancers, far above the cabin that dug itself into the soft earth interspersed with chunks of rock to protect against the cold. Jean fumbled with the door, finally casting aside her gloves to yank the key through the rusty padlock and heaving it from the door.

Jean peered around inside. “Same as ever,” she called back out to Anna.

“I don’t doubt it,” Anna muttered absentmindedly, still staring up at the weaving veins of tree branches across the sky.

Anna followed Jean’s lead and stepped inside, ducking her head through the cobwebby door. The fine coat of dust that layered the entire cabin was not as thick as Anna had expected, and already a few motes swirled in the air from the gust that accompanied their entrance. The drafty room felt like a cave, the lone source of light scattering through white and pure from the door. The lone signs of modernity, a rusty electric stove and some chipping plastic beach toys were stowed shamefully in the corners. A single loft, long absent of a mattress or a user, was pushed against the back wall. In the middle was a single rickety table with five equally frail chairs, seemingly one strong breeze away from collapse, ringing it. The table was pushed dangerously close to the corroded stove that rested wearily in the corner.

Anna nodded. “Just as we left it.”

Jean smiled fondly. “Some things just weren’t meant to change.”

Anna shrugged. “I guess.”

Jean looked at her quizzically.

“We didn’t really come here very much. Especially after you and Alan left.” Anna explained. “Just for the Fourth and things like that.”

Jean nodded, surprised. “I guess that makes sense. It must’ve been hard for them to keep up.”

Anna nodded. “I guess.”

“You were all so busy,” Jean cautioned.

“I guess,” Anna nodded. “Not that busy.”

Not for the first time that day, Jean peered at her younger sister. Her face was relaxed in a way it hadn’t been since Jean had seen her. There was an old look in her eye, one Jean remembered clearly even now. Mopey, they would joke when her face fell like that, eyes wide and mouth pouting downwards at the corners. The look was so acutely attuned from decades ago that Jean could have sworn that Anna
should have been in pigtails. It was the face that would prompt another bout of prodding and the resurfacing of her nickname Eeyore. Jean looked away.

“Anna, I’m going to step outside.”

Anna looked up, lost in her own thought. “Yeah, okay.”

Jean padded her way back out front, beneath the feathery pines, glanced down at her phone. Reception, by some act of God. She dialed the number she wished she didn’t remember.

“You’ve reached Colin! Let’s cut to the chase and just leave a message at the tone! Call you back soon!”

Even in his voicemail he sounded a pin drop away from bursting into laughter. She shook her head as the tone sounds.

“Hey, Colin. It’s Jean. Sorry for being a nuisance. You probably can’t hear me. I’m up in the mountains by the cabin, if you remember it. I just wanted to ask you to call Maggie, if she gave you her new number. If you can, tell her I miss her. Talk to you later.” She frowned as she hung up. Hopefully he wouldn’t call back. If he couldn’t hear her message she could just pretend it was about something else. She sighed, and watched the plume that escaped her mouth spiral up slowly. Behind the cabin she could hear splashes, that intensified as she rounded the shack.

Anna sat on a log, where she had brushed off the snow, and was tossing snowballs into the creek that tumbled down the ravine behind the cabin. She looked at her sister.

“What was that about?”

“Oh, nothing.”

Anna shrugged and returned to packing snowballs in her mittened hands.

“Aren’t you a little old to be working out angst?”

Anna looked over at her. “Aren’t you a little eager to be changing subjects? Sorry,” She apologized immediately, noting the chagrin that overtook her elder sister’s face. “You’re never too old for angst. Especially not here.”

The sun was near setting but neither moved from the log, staring at the darkening pines, the stream’s trickle interrupted only by the splash of snowballs thrown from two pairs of hands.
“What are you thinking?” Stephen queried, glancing over at his morose copilot. Sean had been slouched in the passenger’s seat for over an hour, textbook in his lap stuck on the same unturned page for most of that time.

“What nothing much.” Sean murmured back.

“Really? Because chemistry is boring, but it’s not nearly as boring as Indiana in the dark.”

Stephen nodded out the window where Sean was staring.

“I’m thinking I’m ready for Daylight Savings Time to come back. It feels like ten o’clock.”

“Is that bedtime for you?” Stephen teased.


Stephen snorted lightly. “At least it’s not humid.”

“It doesn’t get humid in Indiana,” Sean dismissed him.

“Maybe not in Indiana doesn’t. But we’re almost into Illinois, and that’s humidity city.”

Sean rolled his eyes so forcefully even Stephen could tell from his peripheral vision in the dark.

“You know, Dad, sometimes I don’t think you show your age at all, but then you go and make a joke like that.”

“Worth it,” Stephen assured his son.

Sean glanced at the dashboard clock. “Is it too soon to say I’m hungry again?”

Stephen smiled. “I was hoping you would. How would you feel about another regional delicacy?”

Sean shifted, disbelieving, in his seat. “What is that, corn?”

“Close. Kansas City barbecue.”

“Nothing says Kansas City like Indiana,” Sean snorted.

“We’re a little far east, but this is as close as we’re getting. Plus I think it’s Mom and Pop.”

The restaurant was indeed Mom and Pop, a building more adequately described as a hut rather than an establishment, a few pick-up trucks and sedans, all well-rusted, nestled into the gravel parking lot. Stephen eased the car into the lot, barely more than a few feet from the exit off the highway, and looked over cautiously at his son. “You ready?”

“You know, I’m not that hungry anymore,” Sean eyed the restaurant warily.

“Oh, you’re nineteen. You’ve got a hollow leg. You’ll live.” Stephen brushed him off. “Let’s go.” The air was as unseasonably warm as it had been all day, but carried a slight bite to it, and they drew their light jackets tighter about them as they trotted towards the restaurant.

“You know, some people in Carolina would have us tarred and feathered for even being here,” Sean alerted his father.

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“They’ll live,” Stephen guffawed. “Plus, we’re in Indiana. It’s like you said. This barely counts.”

“I didn’t say that!” Sean exclaimed as they strode in, cheeks already growing pink from the cold, before rising to a blush in the wave of warmth that greeted them inside.

The restaurant’s sense of decorum could be best described as that of a dive bar’s. Chiefs and Royals kitsch covered the walls like insulation, and tinny blues music blared indistinguishably.

“Seat yourselves!” A ruddy woman with thinning hair called to them cheerily from behind the bar where a handful of men, their muscles from high school football long atrophied, lounged, nursing Budweisers.
“Isn’t Budweiser in St. Louis?” Sean whispered to his father. “They seem a bit thematically confused.”

His father brushed him away with a snicker and the back of his hand. They slid into a booth.

“How is this booth both sticky and suspiciously not sticky at the same time?” Sean pondered.

“Most people stretch their legs instead of being a smartass when they break from road trips,” His father replied as they turned their attention to the menu.

“Jesus,” Sean whistled at the menu. “How come no regional delicacies in this country involve vegetables?”

“Just get a salad and quit complaining. Thank you,” Stephen smiled at the waitress who dropped off a basket of stale-looking bread and two waters at their table.

“Is that a joke? All these salads are made with iceberg lettuce.”

Stephen rolled his eyes as the waitress bounced right back to them.

“Hi, my name’s Mikayla!” She beamed at them. They both smiled back, tight-lipped. “What can I start you gentlemen off with?”

Stephen nodded at Sean. “I’ll just have a water, I guess,” Sean answered.

“And if I could have a Bud Light that would be just perfect. And we’re trying to keep moving, so could we both just get some brisket? We’d hate to take too much of your time.”

“Y’all road tripping?” She asked. Seeing their blank faces she added, “We get lots of roadtrippers. Not usually this time of year, though.”

“We are actually,” Stephen smiled at her. “From North Carolina to Montana.”

“Montana?” Mikayla gasped. “What are y’all going up there for? Sounds cold.”

The two locked eyes over the table. “A wedding,” Sean stammered. “And it’s not terribly tropical around here either.”

Mikayla burst into a fit of giggles. “I love weddings! I’ll get that brisket for you two right away.”

Stephen turned to Sean as she flounced away. “Good cover there.”

Sean shrugged. “It’d be a bit of a bummer if we answered honestly.”

Stephen nodded into his menu, then folded it.

“You should ask her for her number,” He goaded his son.

“Why not! We could stop by on our way back.” Sean spat sardonically.

Stephen beamed at his son. “Love finds a way!”

“Sure does. Especially when she looks older than Samantha.”

“She doesn’t look older than-” Stephen was cut off by his youngest.

“Have you seen your daughter recently? That waitress looked at least twenty-eight.”

Stephen shrugged. “Whatever. I guess the gals down in tobacco country are too tempting.”

Sean glared at his father. “Sure. That’s it.”

They fiddled with the laminated menus a bit longer, and Mikayla whirled by quickly, depositing a foamy glass in front of Stephen. “Do you need my ID?” He teased. She cackled. Sean shook his head.

A few minutes later she shuffled back triumphantly, two platters of meat raised above her shoulders, which she laid before the two of them. “I’ll get you your bill now, so you don’t have to worry about it when you’re done,” She assured Stephen.

“I don’t know why you’re telling me,” Stephen told her. “He’s paying,” He nodded towards Stephen, who glared up at him, mouth already full of brisket.

“That’s not funny,” He growled through the beef.
The waitress howled along with Stephen.  
She strutted away again, and Stephen turned back to his son.  “How is it?” 
“Not bad,” Sean admitted, dabbing a mahogany sauce on his plate.  “Not bad at all,” 

Sean nodded knowingly.  “It’s just dreary.  It feels like we’re in lockdown in here.  Claustrophobia isn’t helping much either.”

“You have claustrophobia?”  Stephen frowned at his son.

“No, I just like a little elbow room.  Not the same, but close enough, I figure.”  Sean shrugged, not lifting his eyes once from the plate before him.  “Man, you can taste the clogged arteries.”

Stephen chuckled and returned to his plate.  He remembered the winters in Montana, dark and white all at once, and how he would mutter to himself as he trod to school down the same roads, salty and slick, every morning, cursing like a sailor, remembering the mild breezes summer brought with it.  It was all be worth it, he would assure himself.  Not just for the summer evenings when the entire neighborhood seemed to be on the grill and the sun seemed to stay up till nine, only to hide behind the mountains, casting dusky peeks over the summits for another hour, but for the winter nights when he could lie under a pack of blankets and hear the wind whistle across the roof a few feet above him.  It was never the cold that bothered him.  It made him feel alive, carried a kiss of life, or maybe a bite.  A reminder that they were all trapped in the valley together, ranchers, policemen, truckers, and whoever else had showed up in time.  Bottled up together, or at least until the snow melted.

No, it was never the cold that had bothered him.  Just the cold and something else.  The cold and wet, or the cold and waking up.  The cold and speaking, maybe.  But the cold alone was just fine.  A reminder they weren’t alone.  There was an old adage lectured to them by parents, teachers, or anyone else with an agenda to push.  No one could survive the cold alone, they would warn.  It could be survived, he thought to himself.  We just chose not to.  That was the greatest good of cold.  It reminded you what you were.  You were not cold.  You could escape it.  And you were not alone, like the cold, trapped sitting in pockets until it was chased away.  Winter was only a few months.  A small price to pay.

He looked across at Sean, already picking at the remaining brisket.  He smiled warmly.  The beer, the meat, the hot air, and the giggles shared with Mikayla brought the hints of sleep with them, the heavy eyelids and the arms that burrowed into their sides.  His son didn’t know the cold.  Maybe he didn’t need to.  Only knew the warm and wet.  The stickiness that chased you inside or underwater.  They were different, Stephen concluded.  The warm and the cold.  But he knew which he would choose.
There were no real honky-tonks left, no real dive bars. This was as close as it came. Trashy new stadium country pounding through your lungs, trashy beer, at double of what it was sold at, and triple of what it was worth. But the only other option was Fireball. Trashy people screaming along, hands gripping cheap button-downs gripping tube tops. But it was somewhere Maggie could go to pretend she wasn’t alone.

She was alone, but not lonely. Perhaps guilty over being alone, but nothing more. Better to be alone than to be lonely with someone. Better to be alone than to fight no one in particular for years the way she had seen her parents do for years, all because they were convinced they had something to prove. She shook her head and took a long pull from her bottle.

Some jackass came up behind her. She spun around at the touch on her arm, a bit above her elbow, registering the shock in his face at the quickness of her movement, still unimpaired by the swaying lag of alcohol. “I’m too old for this anyways.” She informed him. “Don’t waste both of our time.” He stumbled away and she took in his outfit, seemingly a Tobey Keith costume, down to the black cowboy hat. Everyone wanted to be a cowboy, she griped to herself. Dreamed of herding cattle and shooting fast as Butch Cassidy, but kept a space heater in their room just the same.

She lifted her aluminum bottle of beer once more and shook it suspiciously. Empty. The bartender was busy so she set it down and paced away from the bar, elbowing her way through bottle blondes and jackasses who thought their goatees distracted from the fat accruing beneath their chins. She stepped outside and was surprisingly braced by the air. Not enough to need a jacket, but still not bad. She missed the cold sometimes. But only sometimes. She had never known a good, proper cold. Just wet and miserable.

The music faded behind her as the door closed and she took a seat on the curb, a few dozen feet from the pairs broken off, either in sloppy tears or hissing the beginnings of their break-ups at each other. She was too sober, she decided. Tired. Not drunk. A shame. She rubbed her face, feeling the makeup she forgot she was wearing come off. She looked down at herself and shifted her legs. No small task, given how tight her pants were. She didn’t know how long she would keep do this. Doing it here, or doing it at all.

Every man she had found had been utterly boring. Either incapable of intelligent conversation or listening, or styling their hair without product. And it only took a little while before they became like Andrew. She thought about him, bounding about the house, a stupid smile always plastered on his face. A puppy dog with poor enough sensibility to bond with both their parents. He’d preferred their father, of course. Not a hard decision. But like their father he had insisted otherwise, still bounding up to their mother whenever she beckoned. Such a golden retriever he might as well have slobbered like one.

She didn’t know why she ignored her mother. Pretended she didn’t have one. Not that she was dead, or any teenaged nonsense like that. Just that she didn’t exist. That somehow Maggie had been found, tilled up in a field, or fished out of a river. She couldn’t point to one event, or one behavior. Or even one straw to break the camel’s back. She had just stopped. It was a question she had heard too much, in every therapist’s office, from every friend who came to pry too much. Up north was where her mother followed her around, and Phoenix had been where questions about her mother had followed her around. And now here she was.

She’d heard every theory there was. They were too alike. They were too different. Maggie had issues. So did her mother. They had the same issues. They both resented Colin. None of them were true, and even if they were, she did not particularly care to find out. She should feel bad, that much she
knew. But she didn’t. She did not, just the same. Maybe she felt bad she didn’t feel bad. But only maybe.

She fished her phone out of her pocket with some trouble, using only two fingernails that dug into the soft case. She glanced down. A voicemail from Dad. Colin, she corrected herself. She unlocked the phone, then thought better of it. She strode back to her car, past the wobbling girls in wedges and miniskirts and stumbling idiots slurring pathetic attempts at pickup lines. Opening it up, she reached into the glove compartment and fished out the bottle she kept there for emergencies. Maybe not an emergency, but she had no desire to re-enter the frenzy inside and it might make her life a bit easier.

Taking a sip, and then another, and then a third, she opened the phone and clicked the voicemail.

“Hey Mags,” Colin sucked his teeth, the way he always did when he was unsure, which was often. “Just wanted to check in and see how you’re doing. Your mother called me this afternoon. I think you should give her a quick call. I don’t know if you heard, but your grandmother will be ending her life this weekend. Just so you know. Your mother’s mother, by the way. My mother’s dead. ‘Course, you know that. Sorry if this is a bad time for you. Call me back if you can manage. Love you. Jean wanted to let you know that she misses you. Talk to you later. Hopefully. Oh! Your mother’s number—”

She cut him off before he could start reciting the number. Any other parent and that voicemail would likely be laden with guilt. But not Colin. With Colin it was just clueless. And parroting what Jean wanted. She took another pull.

She needed more alcohol. She heaved herself up from her car, walking back towards the bar, breaking into a trot as she felt herself begin to sway.
Cassie stared at Colleen across the dinner table.
“Dear, are you doing alright?”
Colleen looked back in concern. “Yeah, of course. Are you?”
“I’m fine, but that wasn’t my question.”
“Why do you ask then?”
“Well, you leave for a conference soon and you’re still at home.”
Colleen shrugged. “I figured you could use a little company.”
“And you’re sure that’s all it is?”
Colleen turned back to pushing around the rice on her plate. “I guess I could use a little company too. You don’t mind, do you?”
Cassie nodded knowingly. “As long as the telecommuting isn’t hurting your role in the presentation.”
Colleen laughed confidently. “Please. Professor Madden loves me. And I bet everyone else in the group prefers it when I just skype in. They can mute me whenever they want.”
Cassie snorted into her chicken. “Can’t say I don’t get that.”
Colleen set down her fork in fake dismay. “I’m telling Dad you said that.”
Cassie took another bite placidly. “Good. He’ll agree with me.”
They dissolved into giggles. Colleen chewed on an apple thoughtfully.
“Mom, how come you’re not going to Montana?”
“Someone’s got to stay and hold down the fort.” Cassie parried quickly.
Colleen raised an eyebrow. “Seriously?”
Cassie shrugged. “It’s not my place.”
“You married! You changed your name!”
“You know how my relationship with your grandmother is.”
Colleen frowned. “Do you not like each other?”
Cassie gazed up at the ceiling. “It’s...complicated. But we mostly leave each other alone.”
“Why don’t you get along? Why didn’t I know this?”
Cassie shrugged again. “She didn’t think I was good enough for Stephen.”
Colleen snorted. “She thought Dad was too good for you?”
Cassie nodded. “She wasn’t wrong. Plus, he was always her little baby.”
Colleen pried further, still unsatisfied. “Why did she think he was too good for you?”
“A lot of reasons,” Cassie mused. “I think she blames me for keeping him from going back west.”
“Did you?”
“No, of course not,” Cassie brushed the suggestion aside. “A lot went into why we stayed out here. We thought it was the best place to raise you. And she did start to warm to me after we had kids.”
“She started to?” Colleen repeated in disbelief.
“Especially after you. I think she might’ve suspected I had Samantha as leverage.”
Colleen guffawed. “We’re talking about the same woman, right?”
Cassie nodded. “I’ve got nothing but love and respect for her. But we’ve preferred a quieter relationship for a couple decades now. I just doubt she would want me out there for what’s happening right now.”
Colleen nodded slowly. “I guess that makes sense.”
“Plus,” Cassie added. “I’ve been out there in the winter, and it’s pretty miserable. I’m not cut out for that.”

Colleen nodded. “Makes sense,” She admitted. “So did she get mad at Dad for marrying you?”

Cassie shook her head. “More peeved than anything else. She had some reservations, but none of her kids went on to have a housewife, much less one as good as she was.”

Colleen tilted her head. “Grandma was a housewife?”

“Is that really so hard to believe?”

“Yes.” Colleen replied adamantly.

Cassie raised her eyebrows wryly. “I guess you’re right. She changed a lot after your grandfather. You didn’t really know her back then.”

Colleen nodded. “How did she change?”

Cassie pursed her lips. “I’m not really sure it’s my place to say. She just seemed like she sort of stopped trying. Like she really started living for herself. That’s not fair, though. She was still a great grandmother to you guys. I guess with John gone she started to feel like the head of the family. And she started to act like it. I think that’s how she was always meant to be. It felt like a more honest version of herself.”


Cassie nodded in return. “I don’t doubt that she loved him, or think that she resented him or anything like that, but I guess when she didn’t have that duty she was able to be herself. But I never saw her wear a skirt after he died.”

They sat in silence. The house phone chirped to life, trilling at them from across the kitchen.

Colleen bolted up, then paused. Cassie nodded at her and she took off for the phone, then turned to stare out the inky window.

Colleen picked the phone up without even glancing at caller ID. “Hello?”

There was a pause, and she almost hung up before her brother’s perpetually sleepy voice crept through the receiver. “Colleen?”

“Jesus, Sean. Speak up. I almost thought you were a telemarketer.”

“Oops.” There was no hint of apology in his voice.

She snickered drily. “What’s up? Where are you guys?”

He sighed into the receiver. “I’m not sure. Somewhere outside Chicago?”

“Are you asking me?” She laughed into the receiver.

“It’s called an informed guess, Colleen,” He retorted. “Is Mom there?”

“Yeah, she’s here. Good to talk to you too.”

“My pleasure. Thanks for letting me know you were home. And thank goodness you stopped by to say hi on your way home.”

“Allright, point taken. Here you go.” She passed the receiver off to her mother, who looked more tired by the minute, propping her chin on one hand at the kitchen table. She took the receiver with a grateful bow of the head to Colleen.

“Hi, honey,” She sighed into the receiver.

“Hey, Mom,” He greeted her. “Dad told me to call and check in with you just to let you know we’re doing alright.”

She smiled faintly. “How’s the trip?” Her voice was almost a whisper.

“It’s alright,” He mused. “Turns out there’s not a whole lot to look at in Indiana.”

“I could’ve told you that,” Cassie replied, mockingly exhausted.
“I guess. Also the food out here is something else.”
Cassie frowned. “What have you been eating?”
“I’m not entirely sure. But I haven’t seen a vegetable since I left campus.”
“And I’m sure you were swimming in broccoli there,” she chuckled.
“I’m healthy!” Sean protested.
Colleen cleared the two dishes away and tiptoed upstairs.
“Of course you are, dear. How’s your Dad doing? Can I talk to him?”
Sean sighed. “I’m not sure. He’s been pretty weird lately. Not that it’s his fault.”
Cassie bit her lip thoughtfully. “How so?”
“So what you’re saying is I have that hotel bill to look forward to.”
Sean laughed, high and pure, in a way she hadn’t heard him laugh in months. “Yeah. You sure can. Just wait till you see what we get from room service.”
Her mouth spread into a silent smile. “Oh, good. Do you think I can call back later?”
“I don’t know. It might be pretty late.”
“Okay, dear. Well, just ask him to give me a call whenever he’s ready.”
“You got it, Mom.”
“How are you doing? Have you been studying?”
Sean paused. “Sure.”
“Never play poker, dear.”
He sighed. “It’s hard studying in the car. Besides, I’ve been driving for a lot of it. And I’m too tired to study when we get to the hotel.”
He could hear her frown into the receiver. “Alright. But try to get some work done.”
“Family is forever, Mom. Chemistry is only for a semester.”
“That’s not how grades work, dear.”
Sean shrugged. “Whatever. Also, chili mac is better than I thought it would be.”
“That’s good. I still won’t be eating it but I’m glad you enjoy it.”
“Love you too, dear. Get some sleep.”
The receiver clicked quietly and she set it down on the kitchen table. She wrapped her sweater tighter around her, as if the cold had transported through the receiver from the Great Lakes. She sighed. Sean shouldn’t have gone. She should have stopped him. This was McCormick business. And he wasn’t a McCormick, pretend though he may. McCormick business never ended well. But it was always best left to them.
Anna released a breath she felt like she had been holding since they left the cabin as she eased the car back into the community’s garage. “How do you think Mom’s doing?”
Jean shrugged in surrender. “I trust Alan kept her alive. Not sure about much else other than that.”
“Thanks for coming to the cabin with me,” Anna feebly offered.
Jean smiled, tired. “Thanks for asking me. I think I would’ve gone stir crazy if I had spent another day in that apartment. I’m just glad we never got stuck coming out.”
“I don’t know how we didn’t,” Anna admitted. “There were some close calls there.”
Anna slipped out of the cabin into the garage, then moaned softly and pulled her jacket tighter around her. She had already forgotten how cold it was. It was warmer than it had been since she got here, and warmer than outside under the big sky, but the garage somehow always felt colder. Like the concrete’s cold could seep through her boots somehow, then flow up her bloodstream to the rest of her body. The plume of her breath was faint, but she shivered nonetheless. Jean slipped out, and as Anna clicked the doors shut, they broke into a shuffling trot towards the relative warmth of the elevator. They crowded in gratefully, stopping on the ground floor for a beaming veteran in a wheelchair with a few remaining tufts of hair, who told them both they looked love

The apartment was dark, the only light coming from a yellowy old lamp by which Alan sat, placidly reading a dusty tome of history he had picked at random from the shelves of their mother’s room. Ruth herself was huddled under a stack of blankets across from him, eyeing them warily like a groundhog searching for its shadow.
“How was the cabin?” Alan inquired ponderously, his voice absent of an ounce of interest.
“It was nice,” Anna offered. “Hadn’t been there in a while. Hasn’t changed in a while.”
“Except for all the dead trees that’ll knock it out within a year or two,” Ruth noted from her armchair.
“Needless to say, she’s been a delight all day.” Alan assured his sisters drily.
They paused. “Did you both eat?” Jean asked.
“Yes,” Alan replied. “Believe it or not, we both had dinner.” He glared at his mother.
Jean turned to Ruth and bent over a bit, propping her hands on her knees. “Mom, how’s your appetite holding up?”
Ruth glared at her like an insolent child. “It doesn’t matter.”
Jean sighed and straightened up.
“Did you eat?” Alan returned the question, almost accusatorially.
Jean nodded, and Anna replied. “We stopped for something small on our way back in. You wouldn’t believe how much that area has grown out there.”
Alan shook his head. “All these new developments are absolutely beyond me.”
Jean clicked her tongue. “Well, are we all ready to head back to the hotel?”
Alan sprung up. “I know I am,” He offered.
They nodded at each other, and all formed a queue to wish their mother good night. She brushed Jean’s kiss aside with her hand. Alan squatted down before her, and they nodded curtly to each other.
Anna’s hand slid down to her shoulder blade gently, and she stooped over, planting a light kiss on her jaw. “Good night.” She barely whispered it as she rose and turned to the door, jacket folded neatly over her left arm. Ruth’s arm snaked out deceptively quick and grasped her wrist desperately.

“Stay here tonight,” She urged her daughter. Anna’s hazel eyes went wild with confusion like a rabbit caught in a trap.

“What?”
“I need someone to stay with me,” Ruth whispered urgently.
Anna looked back at her siblings disorientedly.
“Okay, Mom. If that’s what you want.”
Ruth’s face softened. “Thank you.”
Anna locked eyes with Jean and Alan, each of whom were frozen in the piercing light from the half-opened door, lips pursed and eyebrows arched, fighting to suppress the surprise in their faces.
“We can drive back alone,” Jean posited, fishing for something to say.
“Okay,” Anna’s voice quivered as she tossed the car keys to Alan who caught them deftly and, in one smooth motion, turned to the door and ushered Jean out quietly but firmly, hand planted in the small of her back, then squirmed into his jacket and nodded to the two of them as he bowed out the door.
The two eldest strode down the hallway quickly, Jean fighting to keep up with Alan.
“Alan, are you sure it’s a good idea for Anna to stay with Ruth overnight?”
“Not at all.” Alan frowned, unconcerned. “Not at all.”
Friday

Her breath rattled from a room over, slow and reedy. Anna shifted again, searching a warm nest for her feet and a cool one for her head. Ruth’s long, unsteady, pant stood out, feeble with a harsh edge, against the low whistle of wind against the building.

Sleep was coming fitfully, fading in between gusts of the winds that swirled, stronger and stronger, outside the window, and the dry coughs that came rare and desperate, a white flag to the cold empty air that pressed down on her tired old lungs. Anna rolled over. The queen bed in the guest room of Ruth’s apartment was not bad, laden down with layers of blankets and positioned in the center of a room just large enough to escape being deemed a closet, with a card table and a humble wooden chair wedged against the wall. The comforter was old but dignified, pear-colored and trimmed with gold like a hotel’s. The bed would be a pain to get out of the room. Anna was unsure how it had gotten in. The door frame was narrow enough for any McCormick’s sharp shoulders but a bulkier man like Colin would have to shuffle through. Not that Colin would come. Maybe he would. They had always had a strange marriage. Or non-marriage, now. She had liked Colin. She was barely into middle school when Jean had begun bringing him home, and his laughter lit up the home in a way it had never lit up before. Why Jean had chosen someone so different baffled her now. He was unburdened in a way she had never been. Maybe she thought he would take some of it of her. But she had chosen it herself.

None of their marriages made any sense really, when she thought about it. Stephen had found Cassie, somehow. Cassie, the charming blonde socialite. Charming and elegant, especially next to her frumpy brother. Anna still remembered the look in Cassie’s eyes when she had met them for the first time. Unsettled by the silence. Unsure of herself. It was a look she had had once. But she had lost it long before then. And she had somehow gotten Ben. Patient. Just patient. He was so much more than that. But that was all she needed him to be. Sarah was the only one that made sense to her. Perfect for Edward. She was always as petty and vindictive as they had become.

Ruth’s long shaky breath echoed into the room. Anna rolled over once more to face the window. The blueish white radiance of the moon was cast across the room from the window in a cold kind of glow. Anna sighed deeply, then rose, slipping out from under the dense wrapping of blankets, regretting not sleeping in socks the moment her feet touched the icy hardwood. Clenching her jaw, she crept to the carpeted hallway, from which she padded over silently to the door left ajar next to her room, tucked back in the dark hallway that split from the living room. She slipped through the door frame and crossed her arms for warmth more than severity.

Ruth’s eyes looked back at her, haunted and defeated, like a trapped animal.

“Did I wake you?” Ruth whispered hoarsely.

“No, the wind got me,” Anna assured.

Ruth grunted unbelievingly. “Sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

The blankets twitched as Ruth waved her away weakly with the back of her hand.

“Do you need painkillers?” Anna asked. Ruth shook her head silently.

“Do you sleep this poorly every night?” This time Ruth nodded.

Anna shook her head, sorrowful eyelids drooping tiredly.

“Just stay here until I fall asleep,” Ruth rasped. “Please.” She added, casting another injured glance at her second daughter. Anna nodded and took a seat in the humble wooden chair across the bed, near to the window. The cold that radiated from the window met with the warmth that rose up from the floor’s vents, swirling in a confusing melding of extremes. Anna hunched over, then rose to snatch the
shawl hanging from the doorknob of Ruth’s closet, singled out by a quick bird-like nod of Ruth’s jutting chin.

“Not the first to have that problem,” Ruth noted with a sad smile. Anna returned the smile gratefully and took her vigil once more silently.

Peeking behind the blinds, Anna eyed the snow that beamed like teeth in the moonlight. Lying back, nose tilted up at the ceiling like a sail, Ruth’s breathing calmed some. Her eyelids fluttered, then stilled. Underneath the shawl, Anna’s shoulders relaxed and slumped as her chin tilted towards her chest.

“Did you ever sell it?” She jerked alert. Ruth was motionless, and Anna wondered if she had imagined it.

“The property out east. Did you ever sell it?” Ruth’s lips barely moved. The tone was sleepy and questioning, almost childlike, but the question felt as cold to Anna as the air that rushed down on her head now. Anna’s jaw opened, then closed.

“No. No. I never did.” Anna dug further into her seat.

Ruth hummed inquisitively. “Why not?”

Anna sighed. “I don’t know. I really couldn’t tell you. I guess I’ve just been putting it off since-

“Since the last time you were here.”

“Yeah. Since then.”

The apartment was not as neat then as it was now. Now it was orderly, orderly in anticipation of its coming agreement with death. Then it was still messy, three years after, finding its place in the shadow of death. Cardboard boxes with “John” scrawled on them in messy sharpie littered the apartment, stacked high, creating a maze to be weaved through on the ground. The clearest path was to the liquor cabinet, Anna had noted sadly as she trudged in, still a child ready for one last tongue lashing on one last trip to Montana.

She had not told anyone. Certainly not Edward, but not Jean, Alan, or Stephen either. Had simply booked a ticket in silence while the letter from Ruth still sat unfolded in her lap. She tucked her hair behind her ears now in the sight of Ruth, arisen like an avenging angel in her royal blue pantsuit, not the contentedly seated matriarch she had left in the wake of the funeral. Rocky mountain summers were beauties, Anna thought as the breeze from the opened windows behind Ruth glanced across her face. A faint glimmer of hope hidden in the windows behind the looming angry glint in Ruth’s eyes.

“So what the hell is this I hear about selling your uncle’s property out by Glendive?” Ruth spat, forgoing any convention or hope of agreement.

“I don’t know.” Anna shrugged.

“You don’t know?” Ruth repeated incredulously. “Do you have any idea how long that property has been in our family? How much history we have out there? And you have the gall to turn around and auction it off to the highest bidder?” She nodded disgustedly at Anna’s gently flowing blouse with her last question.

“Mom, Dad gave that property to me. He trusted it to me. And I can do with it as I see fit. And a gas company has made a very good offer for the land that we wouldn’t be using otherwise. When was the last time you went out there? What is there? Why should we hold onto something-”

“It’s none of your fucking business messing with our family’s land. And how dare you bring up your father? Invoking that good man’s name as you turn around and sell off his memory?”

“Dad’s memory has nothing to do with an old cabin he inherited that’s seven hours away if you
speed. You’re just disappointed because none of the money is going to your whiskey.”

The ice rattled in the glass as Ruth slammed it down on the kitchen table and paced closer to Anna. “I’ll thank you to mind your own fucking business, very much. And this isn’t about the money. This is about you wanting nothing to do with this damn country. This is about you not having an ounce of appreciation for what your father and I did for you. You just appreciated your father for as much as you could swindle out of him, just to turn around and flip it for whatever you want that day.”

“I loved him as much as you did! I still do!”

Ruth’s laugh was cold and dark, almost a baritone. “You loved what he gave you. And this is just one last thing. The crown jewel from him for you to pawn off. You couldn’t imagine the love I had for him.”

“I have my own husband, Mom.”

Ruth snarled. “Of course you do, dear.”

“He gave that land to me. And it’s my business. I don’t know what you want me to do. You would take the exact same deal if you were getting any of the money. You’d probably take half as much.”

“What I want? You want to know what I want? I want you to admit that you couldn’t care less if this whole damn state got carved up by oil companies. They could dig up your father’s grave and you’d still cut the ribbon at their oil rig’s opening if it gave you a chance to show off a pair of your God damned heels. I want to see you realize that you only ever took. You only ever took from your father and I. But at least you had the decency to thank your father.”

“This isn’t your choice. Goodbye, Mom.”

“Call me Ruth,” She spat into Anna’s back as she strode out of the room, brow furrowed to pinch back the tears.

“Has the value gone up at all?” Ruth’s questions prodded, but they were gentle. She looked over at Anna as if expecting a bedtime story.

Anna’s mouth folded up. “Have you seen all the work they’re doing out there? It’s probably through the roof now.”

Ruth laughed sharply once. “You’re welcome.”

They both fell silent. Ruth’s breaths drew more steady and even, slowing.

Anna opened her mouth, then stopped. “Mom?”

“What?”

“Why didn’t you ever like Ben?”

Ruth’s sigh was weak and weary. “I wish I could tell you.”

“Is it because he’s from California? Because he’s Asian?”

“No. No. Nothing like that. He’s a good man.”

“Then what is it?”

“He was good for you.”

“And that’s why?”

“And that’s why. Because he deserved better than you.”

“Oh.”

“I’m not proud. That I’m proud. And I’m sorry for that.”

“I’m sorry too, Mom.”

Ruth’s head betrayed a hint of a nod.
Their breathing found a rhythm together, and both chins began to bow, first Ruth’s, then Anna’s. The sun found them like that, statues captured in an ugly and bitter plaster of long-bad blood.
Stephen wrenched the hotel’s curtains open. It was still dark outside. Sean shifted dozily in his bed, then saw the forlorn look on his father’s face and burst into boyish peals of laughter. “You really thought you were gonna get me with that one, huh?”
Stephen nodded sadly. “Forgot it’s winter.”
“I don’t know how. I swear I can see my breath, and I have the bed closest to the radiator.”
“Doesn’t matter! It’s time to get this show on the road. We’re making it to South Dakota today.”
“Is it any warmer there?”
“What do you think?”
“Can we at least get breakfast?”
“We’ll get something when we’re on the road.”
Sean jack-knifed his legs out of bed and swung up. “Deal. But I get the bathroom first.”
“Already brushed my teeth. Try to keep up.”
Hints of a sunrise had begun to blush in the sky over the thin blue line where Lake Michigan laid. The dark sky faded towards pastels as the cold shimmered through it like a tropical fish. Even in the car, Stephen could almost still see hints of his breath.
It was odd, he thought. The world kept turning, west to east, and they kept driving, east to west. If they could just stay in one place then she would come to him. Just to leap up and surrender the Earth’s turning. But here they were. Fighting a losing battle against the Earth. Was it foolish? Was fighting their way west just some infantile search to turn back time? The sun was rising in earnest now, hot and vibrant, the color of passion fruit flesh. The morning light cascaded through the car, gentle and golden.
They could manage to go a little further before stopping for breakfast. Sean would understand.
“How far do you think we’ll make it before the sun?” Stephen said, turning to his side. Sean was already asleep.
The dim chatter that buzzed around the hotel’s lobby grated on Jean’s ears. Bleary-eyed, she spotted Alan, camped out with a newspaper, paper cup of coffee, and self-satisfied ennui, cornered against a wall, as far from the table of children trying and failing to fit cereal into their mouths. Scooping a lazy imitation of eggs onto her plate, she pinched a pair of salt and pepper packets up before sliding into the chair across from him and began eyeing his coffee.

“Good morning, sister,” He folded the newspaper back up and dropped it into his lap, turning his attention to her. “How did you sleep?”

She wordlessly dug her fork into the plate before her. He raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. She shook her head, wordlessly.

“That bad? How many hours does it take to get you to be quiet? Two? Three?”

“Five,” She retorted. “And I’d like to see you work my shifts.”

“Again with the nursing,” He shook his head. “The self-importance it gives you must be as strong as caffeine.”

She returned to her eggs. He adjusted the sleeves of his oatmeal-colored quarter-zip sweater and ran a hand through his hair.

“We should probably head over before lunch,” He mused. “Though I can’t imagine anyone would begrudge you taking a nap before we leave.”

She shrugged. “You’re right,” he noted. “I can’t imagine Anna will be thrilled if we take our time getting there. Still,” He shrugged. “We’ll just be sitting around there.”

“You know she dies in forty-eight hours, right?” Jean asked, breaking her silence. Her voice was hoarse.

“I see.” He crossed his legs. “So you’re itching to spend all your time with her, then?”

She turned to the window, staring out across the snow-covered field that bordered the hotel, level and white, glowing faintly in the dull sunlight that trickled through the dense clouds layered overhead.

“What’s it like for you? Being back?”

“For me?” Alan asked. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Is it what you thought it would be? What did you think it would be?” Jean’s eyes remained fixed across the field.

Alan shifted in his seat and took another sip of coffee and joined his sister at staring across the field, where, in the distance, between two lines of barbed wire, a cow began to stir in the deep snow.

“I must say, I’m a bit underwhelmed. I guess I was expecting returning to be one of Hercules’ labors. But look around you,” He gestured with his head. “All over town. It’s the same old shit. Not terribly impressive.”

Jean nodded slowly, eyes now drifting over to train on the vans that shot past on the highway like stones out of a slingshot, sides flecked with grayish brown sludge. “That makes sense,” She affirmed.

“I was miserable here,” Alan pondered. “I didn’t make that up. It wasn’t youthful indiscretion. It was genuine misery. And I spent so long wishing this place would change, because I knew it never would. And now I don’t know. Maybe I ended up changing. And this place is just an empty reminder of what it used to be. Just a scar. Not the knife.”

“Was it because of him?” Jean asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe. Probably. Yes.” He paused. “Or at least he didn’t help. It’s just….uninspiring. I mean, look around.” He gestured as he took another sip from his coffee. “Look at it all. I should be filled with wonder and awe. Or loathing. Or fear. And I’ve got nothing.” He shrugged
and crossed his legs again, shifting his coffee from hand to hand. “How about you? Was your homecoming everything you expected it to be?”

She looked back across the table, pushing her plate to the side and propping her head on both palms. She shrugged. “It’s kind of… I don’t know. Disheartening?”

Alan frowned. She pursed her lips as she tried to explain. “It’s just, it’s been so long. And nothing’s changed. Here or for me. I mean sure, don’t get me wrong, there are cosmetic differences,” She stopped Alan with a wave of her hand. “But it’s all the same. I’m the same as I was when I left. I ran away and I have nothing to show for it.”

Alan nodded soberly.

“I don’t know if it’s the mountains or being around Mom or what but it’s hard to feel like I have anything to show for my life. And it’s been long, Alan. So fucking long. Maybe too long.”

Alan smiled weakly. “If it counts for anything, Jean, you seem to be the most well-adjusted of us.”

“That’s hardly an accomplishment in this family,” Jean scoffed. “And besides, Stephen hasn’t gotten here yet.”

Alan smirked. “Kind of amazing it took them five tries to get it right.”

Jean rolled her eyes. “Lots of kinks to work out, I guess. Nothing that boy can do wrong.”

Alan’s lips parted. “Even when he marries the one Mom hates he pulls it off.”

Jean nodded dryly. “Maybe I should have moved further away. Distance makes the heart grow fonder.”

“Not always.” Alan turned to look out the window, then turned back, nodding at her empty plate. “Will you be getting more, then?”

She raised her eyebrows in disgust. “I don’t think so.”

“Still tired?”

She frowned and leaned back, dabbing at the corners of her mouth with a napkin, nodding.

“How about we leave in an hour and a half?”

She smiled wearily and nodded. “Yes, please. We should let Anna know.”

“I’ll text her. And I’ll knock on your door when it’s time to go?”

She nodded once more and rose. “See you soon.”

He nodded curtly, fussing over their plates.

“And Alan?”

He looked up inquisitively.

“Thanks.”

He nodded.
Edward had passed the exits for Bozeman by the time he realized he had never turned the radio on. He turned it on, and cranked the volume dial to the right a couple times, for good measure. It was some new country. Garbage, but he didn’t mind. The wheels spun furiously as the snow, packed hard and rough into ridges along the highway faded and the road shone through, damp and gloriously black. The truck hurtled over the divots and wrinkles that crimped the mountains.

The windshields scraped, ugly and dry on the windshields. There was a hint of rain in the air. Snow. But nothing had fallen yet, and the cars flinging up splashes from the road before him had vanished. He flicked them off. It was a drive he hadn’t made in a while. And not in the winter. The houses had grown more and sparse, till shacks well past their best days only cropped up every few minutes. The cow pastures gave way to sharp cliffs and plains of shale. They would pick up again. It was this that he hated most. The no man’s land. The stretches of highway where skiers no longer bothered to venture. Where farmers had no reason to voyage. Land only truckers and snowstorms could be bothered to cross. Ugly in its lack of beauty. He was tired of everyone telling him about the land where he had spent his whole life. Every coworker. Priest. Brother and sister. Cousin. Waitresses and gas station attendant. Land you could never get tired of. Land that reminded you how small you were. Land that reminded you of the mystery of it all. Of the wonder of the world. Horse shit. It got old. It got old when it went on and on, unfolding like a shitty magic trick, the only thing between you and the old family property. There was a lot between him and that property, he thought darkly.

The air that pumped out of the vents was hot and dry, and he coughed. He could feel sweat beginning to bead under his arms, and he shifted about underneath the flannel. The sky overhead looked ominous. He might need to find a hotel out east. The drive back would be suicide, especially if the skies broke open, and they looked likely to do so. These roads were made for spinning off, into a thicket of stony blades, or down a slope to a stream that wouldn’t hesitate to flood. A hotel in the east. He shook his head in disgust. A motel, he corrected himself. There were no real hotels out there. Maybe now that there were drillers. But unlikely. At least alcohol had made its way out there. Thank God they hadn’t chosen Utah all those generations ago. He would have to take another day off of work. He hadn’t really called in today. But there were a few months to go till taxes were due. They would notice he was gone. But not enough to care. A hasty two-line email to his boss and that was that. Sarah would be a bit tricky. She’d already had to phone around to find a ride to her bingo. Or cards. Or get-together. Whatever she was calling it now. Didn’t matter. It was day-drinking either way. She’d be irritable. He didn’t particularly care. But it could make for a long weekend. What with that, and this mess with Ruth.

The road bent to the left, carved warily into the easily-sloping mountain. It arced up, rainbowing wet and mellow through a spot of fog. Edward sucked his teeth in frustration as he eased onto the brake. His neck was beginning to cramp, so he kept his foot on the brake, easing the truck off the teeth, gritting his teeth slightly as the rumble strips growled beneath the truck. That’s why he loved this truck. You could barely feel anything from inside it. Throwing it into park as it edged close to the guardrail, he leaned over, nicking his pack of cigarettes from the glove compartment, then throwing the door open and pivoted out it to light up. Sarah would complain if he stank up the car, but he would have to puff through half a pack or so for her to notice. She just wanted something to be mad about. They all did. He didn’t need reasons to be mad.

The lighter flickered and the end of the cigarette glowed ruby red. He drew deeply and held the air in his lungs. He didn’t like to smoke. Didn’t like the way it lingered in his mouth for hours, clinging to his teeth and his shirt, embedded itself in his skin. Hated chewing gum for hours, then scrubbing his teeth before bed. Usually he gave up and slept all the same, the ashy fragrance still hanging about him. It
was never good sleep and when he woke the smell had snuck its way into his sheets. But it was better than breathing the winter air around him, stinging your nostrils and biting into your lungs.

He could keep going. The way he had always wanted. Just keep driving till the road forked, turning south to face the sun, going till he hit Casper, or Denver. Anywhere but here. Keep driving till it was warm enough to keep a window open so smoke could never stick to him. There were taxes to be paid everywhere. Ruth was coughing away her final hours and Sarah would hardly notice he were gone, so long as she had enough money for some hairspray and a bottle of Jack Daniel’s for her iced tea. The anchor keeping him in that damned valley was made of wood. It would be nice. It would. To wake up to silence. To look out the window and see something. Something other than tourist bait. Something other than the same old fucking mountains.

His cheeks caved in taught as his long pull caught in his throat and he coughed it out. “Shit,” he muttered. He rapped the cigarette between his fingers as it perched on his knee. The ash fell onto his boot, and he shook it off, shaking his head. Stupid shit. The kind of thing his brothers would think. His sisters, too. Nowhere would be better than here. Right here. It wasn’t good. But it couldn’t get better. Someone had to stay. Stay out here where the wilderness was barely at bay. Where you had to take what neighbors you could get, and turned and pretended not to notice them slipping into the pawn shops, because they were better than the emptiness. Stay to remind the four of them. Remind them they were never as far as they thought they were. That’s what he was. He was the reminder. The only one who remembered.

The cigarette was shriveling up to a stub. He sucked it till he could feel the heat in his fingertips, then dropped it off, watching it bounce off the truck’s carriage, then sidled out ever so slightly to snuff it out in the wet pavement. He slid back into the cabin, slamming the door behind him. Still a few good hours of driving ahead racing the storm and nothing much to look at. His face and hands were stiff with the cold, but his lips were warm. He eased the car back onto the highway, not bothering to check behind him. There was no one else in these parts.
Sharon cackled on and Sarah puffed up from her seat in shotgun. “I’m telling you, girl, that family is something else.” Sarah preened, inspecting her nails as they veered into the parking lot. “Is everybody goin’ to be there?”

Sharon frowned. “I think Jess is a maybe. Her son’s giving her troubles again. And Paula said she might have to run over to Boise to clean up some mess her sister’s made. But I’m not sure about either of those. I tell you, that son is goin’ to be the death of Jess. Don’t be surprised if we have to go to her funeral before your mother-in-law’s.” They both let out snickers as they slipped off the vinyl into the icy parking lot, prancing their way to the church’s basement where rounds of hearts were already underway.

They found their way to two seats at a table buried far in the back of the room, but still near enough to the side exit. Their companions huddled over the table like hens, beaming as they approached. The squaks of greeting were sharper than the buzz and slap of cards on the plastic tables. Sarah made her way around the table, treating each to a meeting of cheeks and a puckering noise, careful to spare her makeup.

“Paula, you look good as ever. Glad you could make it today.” Sarah sat down, clutching her purse in her lap as she greeted the rail-thin woman next to her, whose dense hair fell like a helmet to her ears.

“Oh, thank you darlin’. But that’s family.” Paula placed an unseasonably tanned hand on Sarah’s wrist. “And besides, I’m sure they’re giving me less trouble than yours are giving you.”

Sarah smiled at her. “Well, you know. Those McCormicks’ll do what they’ll do.”

“And I hear they’re all back in town! It’s been a few years.”

“All but little Stephen. He’s still on his way.”

“Oh, that’s right!” Paula exclaimed. “I always did forget about him. Who was the one who graduated with me?”

“That was Alan,” Chimed in the pear-shaped woman huffing from across the table as she shuffled the cards. “And don’t worry darlin’. I know there’s five now. I’ll just deal.”

“That’s right,” Sarah nodded. “And it’s good to see you, Alice.”

Alice nodded back. “And you look lovely today. I guess I spoke too soon. I’m supposing the two of you’ll be joining us for hearts today?”

Sharon nodded from next to Sarah. “That’d be right. And some of that sweet tea of yours, Beth.”

Beth smirked, crossing her hands in front of her, propping herself up, struggling to match her card-playing companions for height. “Gosh, I hope I brought enough for all of us.”

The table joined in a round of chuckles.

Four hands snaked out, picking their hands, and drawing back their cards, taking brief glances.

“That’s right. It was Alan. Where is he now, Sarah?”

“He’s some big-shot lawyer back east. Or so he tells us. To be honest, I wouldn’t be surprised if he were a paralegal in Ohio or something. Seems more like a stooge to me, if you ask. The family wouldn’t have any way of knowing if he were lying, anyways. First time he’s been back in years.”

“You don’t say,” Paula mused. “You remember him, don’t you, Beth?”

Beth shook her head. “I was still a year or two behind y’all.”

“Doesn’t matter. No way you couldn’t notice him. Tall and handsome. Darker than all those tree stumps of football players bowling their way through the hallways back then. Just real polite. And really skinny.”
“Well, he’s still skinny, I tell you that,” Sarah muttered, peering at her cards as the first round was set out. She pushed forward a ten of clubs.

“Not sure why he ever felt the need to go so far,” Paula continued, leafing between her cards before finally settling upon one. “Wasn’t no one in that class that had a problem with him. I bet he could still run for mayor if he wanted to.”

“Nothing like that sister of hers, then. Whose King?” Alice posited from her perch, where she slid the round to Sharon. “Real piece of work. What was her name? Jane? Janice?”

“Jean.” Sarah corrected. “What was she like in high school?”

Alice stroked her chin as Sharon presented the Jack of diamonds. “Figure she just thought she was better than everyone else. Always flouncin’ around with all her books. Thought she was royalty just because she fancied herself the ideal woman. Always actin’ like she had somewhere better to be. Just real flighty. Took off from anywhere any chance she had. I’m surprised she’s managed to stay down here long as she has.”

“Well, I tell you, not much has changed,” Sarah nodded sagely. “Only she didn’t fly too far. She’s a nurse over by Spokane so now she thinks she’s the only one qualified to watch her mother swallow pills. Been a real sourpuss since her divorce twenty years back or so.”

“Don’t get me started on Washington,” Paula shook her head. “Someone needs to tell them that livin’ in the same state as Starbucks doesn’t make them fancy. They’re just Idaho without the Mormons or the views.”

Another round of cackles broke out around the table.

“And that youngest daughter of theirs?” Jess ventured. “I’m trustin’ she’s still the wild child?”

Sarah set her hand down on the table and rolled her eyes back into her head. “That one. Girl somehow ran off to California and managed to tie down enough money to walk around at family reunions lookin’ like Eeyore in designer dresses. How she managed it is beyond me. Dull as a rock, that one. Not the best conversation.”

“Well,” Jean sucked at her teeth from across the table. “If he’s got as much money as you say he does, I’m willing to wager half of it she didn’t have to do much talking. You know how they are out there.”

A round of hums from the table affirmed her.

“Don’t have to make good conversation so long as you make up for it.”

A chorus of hems and haws rose in agreement.

Alice slid the hand to Paula, who replied with a Jack of spades. “You know,” Alice added, “From what my sister says, they all saw it coming back in high school. That girl was set on finding trouble.”

Sarah nodded. “I know it.”

“Cute as a button and shoo-in for prom queen. ‘Til everyone found out no one else liked her, that is.” Approving clucks rose from the table as the hand was collected.

An ace had been slipped in, but no queen to match. Sharon nodded smugly as she collected the hand.

“Some girls just weren’t made to grow up,” Sharon added knowingly.

“Some never do,” Sarah corrected.

“Well, I tell you,” Jess whispered to the table, “I wager that whole family was a mess of trouble. And I tell you, the apples don’t fall far from the tree. Real shame only one of ‘em managed to find someone with a reformer’s heart,” She added, with a nod to Sarah.

Paula snickered. “You’ll pardon my saying, Sarah, but Paula’s got a real point. That boy of yours was dumb as a rock in high school, from what I’ve heard.”
“I won’t fight you there,” Sarah admitted. “Eddie had more hair’n brains when I met him. And not by a little, either. Now, speaking of reformers, Beth. I don’t suppose it’s time for you to break out that tea of yours.”

The tittering of the table hushed as Alice flipped over the hand to reveal a three of hearts. The first point was collected ruefully by Jess. Beth pulled out a pair of mason jars from underneath the table, filled to the brim with tea so dark it was almost black. Pouring it into little plastic cups, she dealt them out far smoother than Alice dealt the cards. They all took appreciative sips.

“Oh, that and more,” Alice chortled. “That girl raised five kids and refused to let a single one of ‘em make a friend with a mother who couldn’t deal poker.”

She looked around at their laughs and held up a seven of hearts. They bustled through their hands once more. “Now, just as I was startin’ high school, she was itchin’ to make a scene. Figure she must have been getting tired of winter, or of the rumors about her and that husband of hers.”

Jess looked up owlishly. “Rumors?”

“So she pulls up to a PTA meeting, looking like she’d robbed Miss Hepburn on her way there. There was whisperin’ ‘mongst the mamas there that she was drunk. But my mother and I just figured she was belligerent. Either way, they come around to talking about a bake sale or something else, when Ms. McCormick gets half a mind to pull a Camel out and start puffing right away. So of course the other mothers there start raising Cain and insist she put it out, but she refused. Just kept puffin’ away. Well, then, they get on their high horses, and hold a vote to kick her right out of the meeting. So she leaves without a word. Still puffing on her cigarette. Meeting goes on another hour or two, just the four mothers there. So the next week they’re back. Not a trace of Ruth McCormick. And no one’s heard a peep from her all week. All her kids have been real quiet in class, keeping their heads nice and low. Those McCormicks could be real meek when they set their minds to it. Well, now it should’ve been then and there that that association should’ve smelled some shit. Because they sit around an hour or two, talking about this or that. And now this must’ve been January or February. Cold as all get-out. One of those nights. You know the ones. So they bundle up and they head off. Wind’s blowin’ real loud. And I mean, real loud. And they get home, and what do they find? Someone’s shoveled the snow back into their driveway!”

The table burst out into laughter, that quieted to sullen mutters at the dirty looks they received. “Well, so they all start gettin’ shovels together to dig themselves in, and what do they find? Well, they find that Ruth McCormick sprayed all the snow down with water! Not sure how she did it either, since a hose must’ve frozen up right away. But now they’ve all got mounds clear in the middle of their driveways, as good as glaciers!”
Sharon frowned. “Well, now, Alice, how would you know all this? We’ve all heard some stories about her. Who’s to say yours is the gospel truth?”

“Well, I tell you Sharon,” Alice retorted, “you can believe me because I was out there with my mother chippin’ away at that ice like Michelangelo himself! President of the PTA! You can check with the high school if you don’t believe me!”

The table dissolved in another round of mirth, as Alice revealed three hearts and the Black Maria, all won by an eight. Jess shook her head as she collected.

“I tell you,” Sarah nodded sagely before taking another sip of tea. “There’s a hand I don’t fancy being dealt.”
The air rose from the cars before them pinched together head to tail like sardines, thick and heavy as if from smokestacks.

“You think the traffic’s going to be this bad the whole way through?” Sean eyed his father behind the wheel nervously.

“It’s Minneapolis,” Stephen cautioned. “I doubt it. But I’ll have to see. Start playing with the radio. See if you can pick up any intel on the situation.”

Sean frowned and began to fiddle. “You know, we don’t have to mess with the radio.”

“No,” Sean replied solemnly. “It’s ugly. And we have phones now. Welcome to the future, Dad.”

“How am I supposed to trust that thing?”

“Dad, it knows more about you than you do. Every science fiction book you read growing up is true. Welcome to the Twilight Zone.” He began to fiddle with the tuner just the same.

The static felt warm inside the car, where it echoed around the narrow cabin, surrounded on all sides by a mountain of snow, as well as similarly bottle-necked cars, all tired and dirty with salt.

“How much further do we have on this road?” Sean turned to his father.

Stephen shook his head. “I told you not to drink all that water so fast.”

Sean shifted in the passenger seat. “That’s not why I was asking.”

Really?” Stephen’s eyes stayed fixed on the immobile station wagon in front of them.

Sean shifted again. “Don’t worry about it.”

A smile snuck across Stephen’s face. “You got your mother’s bladder. Just hop out and pee on the side of the road.”

Sean swung around, aghast. “You want me to pee? Outside? In Minnesota? In the winter?”

Stephen looked over, non-plussed. “Unless you plan on running to the gas station two exits up. In Minnesota. In the winter.”

Okay. Point taken.” Sean turned back ahead. “But still. I’ll have to pee in the snow.”

“What’s your point?”

“I’m not a dog, Dad. I’m not trying to mark my territory.”

Stephen shrugged. “Couldn’t hurt. Let ‘em know you’re passing through out here.”

Sean rolled his eyes.

“Look,” Stephen added. “You won’t be alone.”

A steady line of passengers had formed, clad in hastily pulled on beanies and gloves, clumping delicately through the snow as they filed towards the side of the road.

Sean harrumphed briefly, then shifted once more, resolving himself. “What do you think the temperature is?”

Stephen paused to think. “I’d say about ten below.”

Sean’s eyes went wide. “Is that a real temperature? And people live here?”

Stephen shrugged. “Once you break zero it all feels the same. Unless the wind starts up.” He glanced at the naked trees, shivering with each gust. He gave Sean a soft smile. “Good luck, kiddo.”

Sean glared back, then rolled out of the car, jogging as quickly as possible while keeping snow from tumbling into his shoes.

Stephen’s smile subdued, but didn’t fade as he turned his attention back to the road.

Stephen fiddled with the radio a bit more. Still nothing but static. He inched forward a bit more. The cars seemed frozen in the cold, stuck still as though hibernating. He shifted in his seat and turned the
heat down a bit, feeling the heat seep into his feet and his cheeks begin to flush. He could feel the warmth crawl through him and he squirmed and chafed under the thin layers he had left on.

The splat of the snowball on the side window shook him from his reverie, and the second one thumped into the windshield as the first slid down, wet and loose. Sean flew into the car, lurching over his seat, nearly headbutting Stephen.

“Hey Dad,” He was grinning, and his cheeks and nose had already taken on a rosy tone that was quickly spreading up his temples and down his chin.

Stephen rolled his eyes. “You’re awfully cheery. Was it marking your territory? We really are descended from apes.”

Sean grinned. “I’m just so damn happy to be in the land of 10,000 lakes. Also, I was talking to some guys while we were waiting for a tree to open up.”

“Jesus, Dad, we’re not animals.” Sean brushed him aside. “No, I was talking to them. Turns out a big rig jack-knifed on the highway a couple miles up.”

“Jesus.” Stephen shifted both of his hands beneath the steering wheel and leaned back into his seat uneasily.

“Jesus.” Stephen turned to frown at him, brow creased in worry. “Of course.” He paused to bite his lip.

“I don’t know. I’m not sure,”

Sean shrugged. “You know how I feel about traffic. And this weather isn’t helping.”

“Yeah,” Sean nodded uneasily. “You still think we’re going to make it, right?”

Stephen grunted gently.

“Are you scared?”

Only the gentle whisper of hot air filled the car.

“Yeah. Yeah. I am.”

“Me too.”
Colleen sighed, and flipped through the book. Twelve pages left in the chapter. Jesus. She shifted around in bed. It was never a good idea to read in bed. She had learned that as an undergrad. And here she was. She glanced at her phone. Still no new emails. She couldn’t tell if that was a good sign or a bad one.

Acronyms had started to blur together. She sighed once more and set the book down. She should be taking notes. She couldn’t even bring herself to highlight anything. Too lazy for a cop out. Amazing. She pressed on her temples and breathed deeply. Across the house, she could just barely hear Cassie stirring as she moved about the house. She glanced at her phone once more. Unbelievable. The change just being back home could make. At her apartment she would have finished this chapter by now.

Strange, she thought. She still thought of here as home. Maybe one month out of the year was spent here. All her possessions, all her investment, was hours away in a cramped little apartment with a shit view and worse plumbing. In that light, it made sense, she supposed, that this should be home. She considered herself a realist. A realist in a family full of them. And yet here she was. At home. Whatever that meant.

What was home for Dad? For Mom? They were impossible to read. They would have been great poker players. Dad was just placid, she supposed. Mom was unexcitable. The difference was subtle. But it was there. She was different at home. That she knew. She could say that for herself. Some switch was flipped. Not better. Not worse. Maybe both. But definitely different.

She took another furtive peek at her phone and fired off a text. The reply came as quickly as she had sent it, and the video call followed on its heels. She flicked the screen, and Samantha lit up.

Sean was the only true McCormick among them. It was a look it had taken three tries to perfect, from the frown to the suspicious eyes to the gangly hands. The mark was present in Colleen, but it was buried under traces and dashes of elegance and coastal grace, a southern charm smoothing off piney edges. Samantha was a wild card, the oldest child, her tanned skin and dark hair framing wide eyes that set her apart when surrounded by sullen relatives.

“Hey, Colleen. How’re we doing?” Her beam occupied most of the screen.

“I’m dying, Sam. How have I read so much? Like ever? It’s crazy.”

Sam chuckled. “I’m telling you. You picked the wrong field. You know how long it’s been since I’ve opened a book?”

Colleen shook her head. “Better be careful Mom doesn’t hear you.”

“She’ll live. I still read the newspaper, anyways.”

“The newspaper? You sure you’re only three years older than me?”

“Mind your business,” Sam cackled. “I’m an old soul.”

Colleen shook her head. “How are things up north?”

Sam shrugged. “They’re fine. They’re cold. It’s so cold, Coll.”

“Don’t have to tell me.”

Sam raised her eyes imploringly. “What I wouldn’t give for sixty degrees. Just for a day. But how’s being back home?”

“Boring,” Colleen shrugged. “Did you hear Dad and Sean are driving out?”

“I did,” Sam frowned. “How’s that going to go? They’ll make a county a day, given how fast those two drive.”

“I don’t know,” Colleen pursed her lips. “Last I heard they were in Minnesota.”

“Sounds cold,” Sam advised.

“I’m sure they’re no colder than you,” Colleen reassured her.
Sam rolled her eyes. “I have better things to be doing,” she blustered, then paused. “How’s the conference prep?”

Colleen shrugged. “It is what it is. It’s dry.”

Sam nodded. “Conferences usually are.”

“Not for all of us,” Colleen rose her eyebrows. “How is Jason, then?”

“He’s alright,” Sam shrugged. “He’s being….Jason.”

Colleen shook her head. “I can’t believe you saw him present and then decided to go out with him anyways.”

“Don’t be mean,” Sam scolded. “We’re closing in on two years.”

Colleen sighed. “Unbelievable. He never met Grandma, did he?”

“No.” Sam answered quickly. “And for good reason.”

“Not gonna argue with that.”

“She would’ve torn him apart,” Sam shook her head.

“Poor boy wouldn’t’ve stood a chance,” Colleen agreed.

“Yeah,” Sam nodded. “He’s been happier lately.”

“Do you just mean less of a sadsack than usual?”

Samantha paused, weighing her options. “I guess that’s one way to put it.”

“The right way to put it, then,” Colleen snorted.

“We’re going out for dinner tonight,” Samantha remarked defensively.

“And he’s been really cheery lately?”

“Yeah.”

“And it’s a nice restaurant?”

“Yeah, actually,” Sam mused. “I was looking at the menu earlier. Seafood and everything.”

“And you don’t think that’s suspicious?” Colleen smirked.

Samantha frowned, confused, then grimaced, horrified. “No! Of course not!”

“Okay,” Colleen shrugged. “But if he gets down to tie his shoe make sure to book it out of there.”

“You don’t think he would, do you?”

“Sam, it’s a nice restaurant. He’s a grad student. Do the math. Things don’t look great for you.”

“For the love of God,” Sam groaned. “I would actually die.”

“You would?” Colleen crowed. “Just imagine what Mom would do.”

“She doesn’t hate him that much!” Sam protested. “And I wouldn’t say yes, anyways.”

“If you say so.”

“I hate you.”

“But if I got a nice enough ring, you’d say yes anyways.”

“I have principles!”

“We’ll see. Enjoy your dinner. And if you need an out just text and I’ll call you.”

“Thanks.” Sam paused and shifted her phone. “How was Dad doing? I mean, before he left.”

“He was Dad.” Colleen noted ruefully. “I mean, he left, so something’s up. But he seemed same as ever when I got back. Maybe a little crankier than usual. But that’s not surprising. I guess at the end of the day I can’t really tell how he’s doing.”

“That old western facade doesn’t crack.” Sam nodded. “What’s he like happy?”

“Break up with Jason and find out.”

They both dissolved into laughter.
“What do you think Dad is like happy?” Colleen pondered.
Sam laughed, then stopped abruptly. “I don’t know.”
“Huh.” Colleen wondered aloud. “Sam?”
“Yeah?”
“How many conferences did you go to?”
“In grad school? Three or four.”
“How many do you actually remember?”
“Maybe two.” The sound of a door opening on Sam’s line was followed by the tromping of boots.
“That’s Jason. I gotta go. I’ll talk to you soon.”
“Yeah. See you soon. And stay strong.”
As the screen went black, Colleen laid there, feeling the weak winter sun pool on her. Shaking lethargy off, she rose, eyeing the closet that housed the family’s rag-tag collection of suitcases.
Jean paced anxiously down the hall, legs flying one before the other till her knees almost locked up pumping forward. “Alan, hurry up.” She scolded, heart rate rising.

Alan strode leisurely just behind her. “Jean, this pace is not as fast as you think it is. And I doubt a couple seconds’ difference in our arrival will make the difference between a murder and an attempted murder.”

Jean stopped in her tracks. “Who do you think would kill who?”

Alan shrugged morosely. “Probably the one with nothing to lose who’s had that kind of a look in her eyes for the past two decades. And I would hope she would have the foresight to execute her plan well before we came back. We did call back at the hotel, you know.”

Jean took off once more and Alan followed suit calmly.

“For all we know, they got along great! Maybe Ruth slept through the night!” Jean exclaimed to herself, more than Alan. Alan grunted an agreement.

“I hope Anna gave her all her pills. I think that’s the biggest difference in how her days go. Not that she ever notices. I don’t think she wants to.” Alan grunted again as they rounded the corner. Jean’s head lunged forward now, turtle-like as she closed in. Her purse knocked into the door and rattled loudly as she flung the door open. Striding in, she froze and Alan trooped in behind her and stopped, both their faces frozen quizzically.

Anna and Ruth sat calmly at the kitchen table as Anna sliced strawberries that she slid onto Ruth’s plate, which she chewed slowly, remnants of yogurt and scrambled eggs clinging to the edges of the plate.

“Good morning,” Anna greeted them cheerily. “Is it still morning? Mom and I got a late start.”

Ruth nodded sagely.

“You wouldn’t believe how late she slept, guys.”

“No kidding.” Jean stood still in her spot as Alan leapt into motion.

“Do I smell brown sugar? Did you have some of the oatmeal I got, Anna?” He had already situated himself in the kitchen.

“Like you’re fifty years younger,” Ruth noted with a small smile.

“I did. Is that a problem.”

“No, no, of course not,” Alan dismissed absent-mindedly. “It’s got to get finished somehow. And I think I might contribute now.” He set the kettle on to boil and turned back, leaning on the kitchen’s counter as he peered at his sisters and mother.

“How are you feeling, Mom?” Jean struggled to shake herself from immobility.


“Good, good.” Ruth shrugged off her jacket. “Do you mind if I join you?”

“By all means,” Anna nodded to the empty seat. “Mom, that’s all of the strawberries. Do you want some more?”

“That’s alright,” Ruth shook her head. “I’m going to have to sit this off for a while.”

Ruth gave a tight-lipped smile. “That should give me enough time to eat.”

Ruth nodded sagely. “Perfect.”

“So, Mom,” Jean turned to Ruth. “What do you want to do today?”

Ruth frowned, still mellow. “I don’t know. What is there to do?”

Jean shrugged. “We could watch a movie. Get you a book. Watch some TV. Go for a drive.”

“Have you heard from Stephen recently?” Ruth looked expectantly around at the three children.

“Edward said he had to head out of town for work,” Jean offered helpfully.
“What about Stephen?” Ruth asked again.
“We haven’t heard too much.” Maggie stammered, head swinging between her brother and sister.
“Last we heard, he was outside Chicago,” Alan noted from the kitchen.
“Why do you ask, Mom?” Jean inquired, leaning forward over the table.
Ruth shrank back in her seat. “It’s a tough drive to make. And I love my son.” Jean leaned back, unimpressed. “I see.” Ruth harrumphed. “He’s still a long way off.” “It’s like you said, Mom,” Anna interjected. “It’s a tough drive. Even if he’s got Sean to help out.” “Sean’s coming, too?” Ruth scoffed. “Doesn’t that boy have some tests to be studying for?” “I suppose he decided family was more important.” Alan drawled from the kitchen as the kettle came to a boil. “Go figure.” A silence settled over the table.
“Jean?” Jean turned to face Ruth. “What, Mom?” “I think I’d like to see John’s grave today.” “I see.” “Do you think that would be alright?” “It would get you out of the house. And as long as you don’t stay out in the cold too long it shouldn’t be a problem.” “Is it cold again?” Anna asked in a near-whine. Alan grunted an affirmation from the kitchen as he measured out a half-cup of water. “Unfortunately. And it would appear it’s now cold enough to snow.” Outside a few odd snowflakes twirled down, lost and well ahead of schedule. Anna groaned. “At least it’s warm enough to snow,” Jean offered. “That doesn’t help,” Anna muttered. “Not used to precipitation, dear sister?” Alan inquired as he rounded towards the table, steaming oatmeal in hand.
Anna rolled her eyes. “The roads will be a mess.” “We actually know how to drive ‘em,” Ruth growled. “It’ll be a real change of pace for all of you,” The three children remained silent.
“So are we all good to go to Dad’s grave?” Jean checked.
Anna nodded wordlessly. Alan chewed on his spoon, then silently nodded his consent, just once. Ruth sunk lower in her seat. “We’ll have to dress warmly.” The three of them nodded. “Did you all bring enough? I’ve got some in my closet.” Ruth probed further. “One way to find out,” Alan remarked.
The truck rumbled to a stop as a few errant snowflakes fell and Edward slipped out, jaw already fixed in a scowl. The wind pulled playfully at his collar and he pulled it higher around his neck and pushed his cowboy hat a touch lower so that it rested tightly on his brow, pushing the tops of his ears down. The barbed wire that roped in the property was rusty and sagging from the dilapidated wooden posts that bent in on each other, huddling against the open air. The plain was flat and continued, expansive and white with snow for miles in all directions. If he squinted, Edward could just make out the flame of a fracking rig to his northeast. He huffed in disgust and burrowed further into his shirt.

The homestead, as they had called it, was hunched in the snow, alone except for the skeletons of tractors and bales of hay that dotted the plain, and the odd wiry strings of grass that poked through the snow. Time’s ravages had yet to visit their full devastating powers on it, only chipping odd spots of paint and wearing the shingles that clung wearily to the roof. It was a bit lower than he remembered it, or maybe just a bit more humble.

He didn’t know what he was expecting. But this wasn’t it. He kicked at the snow packed tight, chipping it away with the tip of his boot until a spot of brown poked through, hard and brittle clay long-frozen.

He felt his eyes grow even beadier and the wind tear at his face. No wonder he looked like the oldest of the five. No luck for the middle child. No love, and now no luck. Except for maybe Jean. She looked like shit. Probably had to do with whatever she was taking all those pills for. Sarah hadn’t thought to write down the spelling so he’d spent a half hour trying to decode the phonetic gibberish she had fed him into Google. Nothing.

He had come close to running on that highway. Out here there was no point in running. Nothing in sight for miles. Just flat land. Flat space. The old homestead was a pitiful monument to the existence that had been carved out here, but it still stood in the landscape, visible for at least a mile in any direction. Even out here, the McCormick history was all there was. It was always all there was. It followed him. Maybe it drew him. Maybe it didn’t matter. But here it was. Hung to him like an anchor. But maybe it was better than to be adrift. Like a desert island. Safety came with a cost.

He kicked the dirt again and felt it flake beneath him. What a load of bullshit. At least it was too cold to smell the bullshit. Even the smoky smell of fracking was almost undetectable, a note dancing in the wind. A half mile back on the main highway a truck roared past. Edward shook his head. What a stupid fucking trip. He turned back. He looked up as he hopped back into the truck. The sky overhead was a light gray, like weathered shale. There was so much of it. It hung there, frozen in tendrils that blossomed and embraced each other like the bursts of flowers and bushes that sprung forth from the ground with the spring. There was a while to go till then. And what looked to be a hell of a snowstorm as well.

The town had grown some since the last time he had been there. Not enough. The people themselves looked like the town itself. Old, broken, distorted. But covering it all up beneath a veneer. The stiffness of new flannels’ collars and boots still dark from the store lined the sidewalks as Edward found a parking lot. Certainly not the only dive bar in town. Not by a long shot. Maybe not even the only one open at this hour. But the first one he found.

He strode in, plowing through the puddles of melted snow that spotted the entryway. The men who lined the bar at odd intervals were few in numbers but motley nevertheless. No particular dress code. Some looked to be vets. Some farmers. Most drillers. A few sported full beards, but more had baseball caps pulled low over their eyes. Some flannels. Some jackets. Some jeans. The only uniform were the
ruddy cheeks. There was no way to tell if they were from the weather or the alcohol. Inhaling deeply, the latter seemed more likely, but the gust from the door to his back suggested some combination of the two. Edward took a seat, giving a single curt nod to the bar as a whole. One patron, beard tumbling like steel wool down to the middle of his chest rose and swung around the bar.

“What can I get you, sir?” He was gruff and his eyes were glassy.
“How about a Bud and whatever food you’ve got lying around? And a whiskey as chaser.”
The bartender nodded. “That, I can do for you.”
Edward nodded.
The driller next to him swiveled to face him. He was young, with reddish hair and a hint of a mustache peering through his upper lip. His rubber boots climbed to mid thigh and were streaked with beige mud. His baseball cap was in a camouflage print and was emblazoned with some meaningless logo. It had been too long since he had been hunting.

“Where you from, friend?”
Edward turned, feigning surprise. “Me? Back west in the mountains.”
The man nodded. “Good skiing this time of year.”
Edward frowned. “I look like I do a lot of skiing?”
The man chuckled. “Guess not. What’s your name?”
“Edward. Yours?”
“Jimmy. What brings you out here, Edward?”
“Just checking up on family. Closing up some business. Where are you from, Jimmy?”
Jimmy laughed. “Oklahoma. You can tell I’m not from around here?”
“Clear as day.” Edward blustered as the bartender slid him his beer and he took a first sip.
Jimmy shook his head in disappointment. “I don’t feel much colder than everyone else.”
“You don’t look colder either. You just look surprised. Sound like a good ol’ boy too. Doesn’t help.”
Jimmy smiled. “Yessir. Got my license ‘bout fifteen months ago and made my way up here. Good money.”
“If you can survive the winters,” Edward cautioned.
“And it’s seeming more and more like that’s a big if.”
“I wouldn’t disagree.” Edward took another sip.
“Figures to be a bitch of a storm rolling in.” Jimmy offered.
“Sure looks like it. You got used to the snow yet?”
“Nope.” Jimmy shook his head slowly.
Edward took a sip of whiskey, then another. “I tell you something, Jimmy. I have two more of these and I’ll be warm enough to do your job.”
Jimmy chuckled. “Don’t suppose you’d be willing to do it for free.”
“It’d take a few more glasses before we get there.”
They both chortled.
“How do you like the plains, Jimmy?”
“They’re not too bad. Not too different from Oklahoma. Little less dusty. How do you like the plains? Bet it’s been a while since you’ve seen ‘em.”
“Pretty sharp of you. It’s been a while. They’re alright. Little too flat for my taste.”
Jimmy shook his head. “I can’t trust those mountains.”
Edward frowned. “You’ve already been out west?”
Jimmy nodded. “Took a week off a couple months back and went to Yellowstone with some buddies.”

“And how did you like it?”
“Not too bad.”
“Not too bad?”
“Nothing to shake a stick at. Real pretty to look at. But I couldn’t help but feeling trapped.”
“Trapped?”
“Sure. Out here you could drive miles in any direction. Run, if you really had to. Out there you’re penned in. You’ve lived there very long?”
“My whole life. Guess you’re not wrong.” he took a bite of the sandwich the bartender offered him, then shook his head. “You got anything fried back there?”
The bartender nodded. “I’ll see what I can do.”
Edward washed it down with some more beer. “I’ll need another of these soon.”
The bartender nodded again.
“Guess you think of the mountains as keeping us in. I like to think they’re keeping stuff out.”
“What kind of stuff would they be keeping out? Cell signal?”
Edward chuckled. “Those who can’t handle the mountains.”
Edward raised a glass. “Cheers to that. Here we both are.”
Jimmy raised his glass that was verging on emptying.
“So, Jimmy. How do you like working on rigs?”
Jimmy shrugged. “Like I said. It’s good money. I’m getting a little tired of motels. And it’s lonely.”
“Sorry to hear that. You’re not married?”
Jimmy shook his head emphatically. “Got a ways to go till there. Lonely can be good or bad, I figure.”
Edward nodded. “Very true. I’d venture to say in the winter it’s more bad than good, though.”
Jimmy smiled and nodded. “I’d venture to say you’re right.”
“And now which motel do you stay in?”
“Couple of us rent a room in the Super 8 just outside town. Walking distance from a bar. We can sleep there in shifts while we’re not working.”
“Sounds about perfect.” Edward took out his wallet, preparing to pay and his voice dropped to a whisper. “And now, this bar. Has it got a better selection than this fine establishment?”
“It does.” Jimmy nodded. “You planning on staying?”
“I figure I am. At least till the sky clears out a bit.”
Jimmy nodded. “Smart man.”
“I like to think so. But I will be making my way over to this house of ill repute you mention.”
Jimmy smiled and glanced at the clock on the wall. “I’m guessing I’ll be seeing you there in a few hours.”
Edward grinned at him. “I look forward to it. And we’ll see if I remember you by then.”
Wind billowed across the snow, catching up crystals that hurtled into the tombstones only to dash right off. The four of them stood shoulder to shoulder, hands dug into pockets and necks burrowed into collars. The snow rose, past their ankles and well up their shins, but none dared to move.

“The gravestone looks pretty good,” Jean offered. “Most that old don’t look nearly as good.” Ruth nodded somberly. “I make sure they take good care of it. Suppose that duty will fall to Edward soon.”

“Good luck,” Alan muttered. “It’ll be illegible before summer.” Ruth nodded. “John always loved this spot. The way the shadows snuck through in the evening.” Anna nodded. “He’s happy.”

Alan turned and marched toward the pines Ruth had indicated. They were old and splintery, branches shimmying to shake off the snow before they could snap and join the twigs and rustling copper needles on the ground. The snow had begun to fall in pellets, icy and miniscule, too cold to huddle together into flakes, but he couldn’t tell from here. He leaned against one of the trees and felt it take the burden of the wind as his shivering subsided for a moment. Weaving his way through the trees, he found the barrier of the graveyard, where the black iron wrought fence stood, grandiose and frosty where a few wooden posts would have done. Letting a gloved hand run along the fence, he trod carefully along the perimeter, just past where the humbler headstones and their accompanying corpses lay, little more than stumps in the snow where a well-wisher had brushed off the snow. A life made out here. And this was the reward. Even in death, struggling, fighting, just to keep breathing under the snow. Alan shook his head. God must be real. Nature alone couldn’t possibly have a sense of humor so sick. The snow was light and powdery. The kind of snow that was rare in New York. As rare as silence. Even the silence there was fraught, its nerves frayed, waiting for the burst or blast that would shatter it the way a bird sleeps, one eye open, muscles taught at the thought of a predator. He paused. To feel it. To hear it. On the street trucks grumbled past and a few hundred meters away his mother and sisters’ feet chawed in the snow. But the silence hung there just the same. It was relaxed. Undisturbed. He had forgotten how it felt. The hushed tumble of snow to the ground. Somehow quieter than silence. A shiver ran through him. He could have stopped it but it started just the same, creeping down his spine like a raindrop on a window pane before breaking into a sprint down the length of his arms and legs.

He had sworn he would never come back. And here he was. A hypocrite. But if there was ever a place to be one this was it. Everything here was too permanent. The mountains. The trees. The river. The smallness of life creeping through. Life was flighty here. It was too hard to forget how little it all meant here. And so life was shifty. Because the absence of life was too permanent for anything to last forever, or even just the beginning of that.

He shook his head. It wasn’t the heaven he had made it out to be when he was younger. Nor was it the hell he had convinced himself it was. It was a mystery. Things were too settled. The rivers ran for so long they stood still. It was a mystery. That was all it was. Life didn’t belong here. That was it. But neither did death. It was an odd thing, the wailing over death. He turned to look at his sisters, hunched in the cold. He stood a little straighter and felt the wind catch him in his chest like wind in a sail. He took two more steps, but he couldn’t bear the sound of his feet in the snow. And he could bear the cold of immotion a little while longer. So he straightened himself and stood, just out from under the lea of the pines where the snow showered down, unimpeded, an inundation too light to notice until you were flooded.
Anna heard Jean turn and pace away, careful not to follow Alan. She stood there, feeling the tensely wound energy that unraveled from Jean fade away. Ruth stood, short and resolute but frail beside her. Anna felt her but didn’t dare to look. Her hand darted up to wipe away the tears that were forming at the corners of her eyes. She sniffed just once. Then twice.

Ruth’s hand, small and smooth, tiny veins ridging along its surface, snaked its way into the crook of Anna’s arm. She pulled her tightly but gently and they shifted a little closer together, a single block dug deep and determinedly under the snow that was falling, heavier and heavier but still light enough.

Ruth took a few steps forward and stood, just to the left of the headstone where, beneath a thin coat of snow, the dirt had begun to be scraped away.

“Right here,” She said. “At his right hand. Where I deserve to be.”
Anna nodded, feeling her eyes grow as red and raw as her nose.
“I think I should be proud. I thought I would. But now I’m not sure.”
Ruth inhaled sharply as if to say something, but the words caught in the back of her throat and her chest settled back down.

“Forever’s a long time,” She mused. “You know that, don’t you, Anna?”
Anna nodded slowly. “I think I do. I think so.”
Ruth nodded. “Good. Good. Did you learn that from me?”
Anna shrugged. “Maybe. I think so.”
Ruth nodded again. “Good. Good. Everything feels like forever at the start. Maybe it’s the same way. Death.”

Anna shuffled her feet in the snow. Ruth cast her eyes downward, then back up, and her expression hardened, facing the wind and its full effects. She sniffed once, then twice.

“I might miss this. Stranger things have happened.”
Anna smiled, then regretted it, as her face’s numbness was stung into contortions.

Jean tiptoed through the snow, biting back the curses forming in the back of her throat as she felt the snow splash and powder up and down the length of her lower leg, cursing the wetness she knew would follow soon after. She wound her way down the road that sliced its way through the graveyard, undulating like a river, toward the little house she knew was nestled, free from any copses of trees and a healthy distance away from gravestones.

It was a neat little house, pinched into the snow, its plastic siding and internet cables an unwelcome reminder of modernity in the world of finality that encompassed the plot. The walkway to it was narrowly shoveled, and she wound her way to the door in wobbly steps that veered away from the sheer walls of snow on either side, feet falling clumsily before each other like a novice tightrope walker. She knocked twice hurriedly, then bustled into the office of the cemetery. The owner sat, balding head shiny and warm under the artificial light that tinnyly outshone what little natural light still flickered through the windows, small and high, embedded in each of the four walls. It had been over a decade since she had stumbled in, unsure of herself, confused by what she took to be a mausoleum lacking any sense of decorum.

The man huddled behind the desk was balding, shiny head ringed with muted brown hair, the collar of his black workman’s coat pulled tightly around his neck. Jolted alert by the noise, he rocketed up from behind his desk, where a mess of papers were scattered around an old desktop that whirred with effort.
“Hi!” He was overly friendly and as he looked to greet her, his eyes flitted about the shed. Jean grimaced, remembering exactly how it had happened all those years ago, the man still unchanged, still seemingly perpetually out of breath.

“Hi. Mr. Shay. We met a long time ago but we’ve been emailing. It’s Jean McCormick.”

“Oh! Ms. McCormick! Of course! Have a seat.” He gestured to the metal folding chair opposite him, and she sat down delicately, bracing against the cold seat.

“I hope all is well. We’ve been processing your paperwork as quickly as possible and are working to coordinate the funeral efforts, but as you can see, things are a bit of a mess around here. Converting records,” He added as an aside, with a knowing wink.

She nodded politely. “Absolutely. I was just in the area, so I thought it might be wise to stop by and see how things were going.”

“Of course.” He pulled the file from a desk underneath, and smiled softly. “My sons are making me put everything on a hard drive, but old habits die hard.”

Jean nodded. “They sure do.”

He glanced over the papers quickly. “Yes. This is for your mother? Ruth McCormick?”

Jean nodded silently.

“And she will be ending her life with medical assistance this coming Sunday?”

Jean nodded. He sighed, putting the folder down and crossing his hands before him.

“Ms. McCormick, we are trying to do as much as we can to ensure the grieving and enterrement process is as beautiful and as respectful as possible, but the path we had discussed is exceedingly difficult as a result of the cause of death.”

Jean frowned. “I don’t understand,”

“Ms. McCormick, I remember your father’s funeral. And my memory is rather poor. It was a beautiful ceremony.”

“I know,” She nodded. “I recall.” She could feel her throat rising.

“Of course. It was a privilege to be a part of the ceremony. And I understand that your mother has been a pillar of this community for more years than I can imagine. And she is a dedicated parishoner at St. Augustine’s.”

Jean nodded, growing impatient, dreading the answer she felt deep in her stomach.

“Due to the sensitive nature of her passing, several parties….refuse to take part in her funeral.”

“Who?” Jean heard her voice grow shrill and sharp and bit her lip.

“The priests at St Augustine’s have refused to preside over the mass. And the church itself will not host any part of the ceremony. That means no mass, no reception. We could host it at the funeral home we operate a little ways down this road, where we are still planning on having the wake. But the catering company we usually work with goes to St. Augustine’s as well, and they’ve refused to cater the event. So we will have to look around.”

Jean’s heartbeat pulsed in her ears. “They won’t serve us?”

He sighed again. “I’m afraid not, ma’am.”

“What company is this?”

He hesitated. “They’re owned by the Bianchi family, if that means anything to you.”

Jean swallowed her shriek of rage. “Any other news?” She spat harshly.

“No, ma’am. I don’t think so.” He paused. “Is there any chance you have a date by which you would like to have the ceremony?”
Jean stood swiftly, nearly knocking some papers from the desk. “I think you’ve given me more than enough to think about.”

He nodded. “I understand. And I am sorry.”

She stormed out without looking back. Snow swirled in her face, small and fast and icy and she felt her blood rise within her as her arms pumped as she strode back toward the SUV, parked, lonely and snowy, in the lot. To her left, Ruth and Anna stood, small dark figures in the misty white, poking out from the tombstones that dotted the field like a flock of birds. She paced furiously, feeling the snow fly up behind her. She wheeled around on the car, heart pounding and lungs pumping. Underfoot, the snow gave and her left knee buckled, and her body swang like a toppling domino, skidding out away from the trunk of the car. She collapsed as she felt two strong hands latch onto her arms and grip her.

“You alright?” Alan droned.

She righted herself, brushing snow from her coat. “Yeah. Yeah. I’m fine.”

He allowed himself a caring smile as he looked her up and down. “You’ve got to take care of yourself. Believe it or not, you’re not as good as you used to be.”

She bristled and continued brushing her jacket furiously. “Yeah. No kidding.”

Alan frowned. “What’s wrong?”

She shook her head. “Nothing. I’ll tell you later.”

He raised an eyebrow suspiciously. “Okay. I’ll go get Mom and Anna. Be careful.”

He paused and watched her, face still sullen. “Jean, do we need to get back home for anything?”

She looked up quizzically. “No. Of course not.”

The smile that danced across his lips was warm. She hadn’t seen it in thirty years. “Why don’t we go for some ice cream and coffee?”

She tilted her head. “Where?”

He guffawed. “Where do you think?”

She brushed him aside with a flick of her wrist and stood by the passenger door, watching the snow fall down from the pink sky, fast and steady as rain.
The microwave chirped on, oblivious to the hurried patter of Cassie’s slippered feet. She wrenched the door open, and inched the steaming cup of tea out, eyeing her precious cargo warily, shuffling back to the kitchen table, sweater sleeve wrapped around her hand to avoid any scalding splashes.

She and her middle daughter were alone in the house, but she didn’t need that to know who was thundering down the stairs. Colleen’s feet tumbled down the hardwood stairs like a drumroll, the same way they had her whole life, undeterred by countless stubbed toes and subsequent scoldings. Colleen swung around the bannister like an Indy Car, skidding to a stop on the linoleum, cheeks flushed and just barely panting. She flashed an irrepressible grin at Cassie. She couldn’t help but roll her eyes at the girl whose giddy youth was unsuppressed, even as she closed in on twenty-five.

“What’s up, Colleen?” She took a tentative sip and leafed through the catalogue on the table before her.

“Looking for Christmas gifts?” Colleen’s eyes lit up mischievously.
Cassie cast a withering glance her way. “Not even close.”
Colleen shrugged. “Alright, well. I look great in olive green.”
Cassie turned back, flipping another thin glossy page. “You get that from me.”
“Thanks,” Colleen rolled her eyes back.
“What do you want, girl? Must be important if you came thundering down the stairs like that.”
“You know how the conference with Professor Madden is coming up?”
“Yes,”
“And how Dad is driving out instead of using the plane tickets he bought? Which you’re still upset about?”
“I’m not sure I like where this is headed.”
“Well, I got all my work done and talked to Madden about it and I was hoping I could use one of the tickets to fly out.”
“And you got all your work done?”
“Yeah.”
“All of it?”
“Most. But it’s fine. I’ll have a whole flight to finish up.”
“Six, with returns and connections.”
“Even better.”
“And you know the flight leaves tonight, right?”
“That’s why I started packing.”
“So you’re asking me to drop my plans for the evening to drive you to the airport? On a Friday? At rush hour?”
“Dinner and watching an old Laura Dern movie don’t count as plans.”
“I was planning on Laurie Metcalfe tonight. But sure. Get your stuff into the car. We’ll be leaving in an hour.”
“Thanks, Mom.”
“Mhm.”
“I love you!” Colleen was gone just as quickly as she had come, and Cassie shook her head as the footsteps thundered up the stairs.
The kitchen timer went off, and Ben flicked the oven light on to peer at the fish. Looked fine. He grabbed the salad bowl resting on the kitchen counter and tiptoed to the dining room table, setting it down only to waltz back, snatching up the oven mitts and pulling the steaming fish out.

“John! Nina! Dinner!” Two pair of footsteps from opposite ends of the house began to troop towards him upstairs. He couldn’t help but roll his eyes at the teenaged lethargy of each step. “Fish is getting cold!” His call was greeted with twin mutterings.

The two filed in. John’s eyes were still full of sleep, and Nina’s were packed with boredom. A smile crept across his face as he portioned out the fish, sliding it onto each of the three plates.

“And how were your weeks?”

Nina shrugged. “It was fine, I guess.”

“No kidding,” Ben looked up as he passed her her plate. “Make sure you get some salad with that,”

“How about you, John?” He asked, turning to his eldest.

“It was fine,” John shrugged. “It was long.”

Ben laughed lightly. “I feel that. Anything exciting happen?”

John shrugged. “Not really.”

Nina stood abruptly. Ben raised an eyebrow. “Where are you going?”

She shrugged. “To get water.”

He nodded his consent, unimpressed.

John shuffled the food around on his plate.

“You alright?” Ben asked, peering in concern.

John shrugged. “I guess. Just a little tired. I guess I’m not really feeling asparagus right now.”

Ben nodded in agreement. “It’s not for everyone.”

John set his fork down. “When’s Mom coming home?”

Ben dabbed at his mouth with the napkin he picked up from his lap. “I’m not sure. She’s got a few lose ends to tie up out there.” He paused to look at his son, and his eyes softened. “I know it’s hard. It’s been pretty quiet around here.”

John smiled softly. “That’s not it. Are we going to go up for the funeral?”

Ben paused, mulling the thought in his head. Nina shuffled back in, glass firmly cupped in her hand.

“Yeah, Dad, are we gonna be going?”

Ben contemplated the mellow shadow cast on the ceiling by the simple chandelier. “I don’t think so.” He put the napkin back in his lap. “I think Mom needs some time alone with her family.”

Nina pouted. “She’s our family too,”

Ben nodded and picked off a flake of fish with his fork. “I know. I know she is. But things are complicated out there. Besides, you two have school to worry about. And it’s expensive to get out there.”

John bit his lip and stared down his father, unimpressed. “She’s still our grandmother.”

Ben nodded. “She is. But I have a feeling this isn’t really our place to be. Mom needs us, but not there and not now. Besides, I’m not sure you’d think you’d like Montana in the winter.”

Nina cocked her head to one side. “You’ve been out there?”

Ben nodded, chewing on another bite of fish. “We went out once for Christmas. This must’ve been your mom’s senior year of college. It was pretty soon after we met.”

John nodded, intrigued. “How soon after you met?”
Ben set his fork down and began to rise. “You know what this meal needs? White wine. You want a glass?”

John smirked. “Nice diversion.”

Ben sat back down. “Never mind, then.”

“I’d like a glass,” Nina protested.

“Not a chance,” Ben shook his head and cut off a tip of asparagus.

“So how did you like Grandma and Grandpa the first time you met them?” John’s unwavering gaze was best suited to a film noir.

Ben set his fork back down. “Jesus, what’s it going to take? A beer?” They shared a crooked smile. “They were both nice enough. Very intimidating.”

Smelling blood in the water, Nina circled. “Why were they intimidating?”

Ben sighed and threw his hands up. “Well, your grandfather was very fond of your mother. Very fond of her. And you’ve met your grandmother. She can be pretty severe when she wanted to.”

John frowned. “But she wasn’t fond of Mom?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You implied it. Lie by omission.” Nina jumped in.

“Their relationship isn’t….the warmest,” Ben admitted diplomatically.

“Is that why we haven’t seen her in ages?”

Ben raised his eyebrows in exasperation. “Am I being cross-examined right now?”

John shrugged. “Not unless you perjure yourself.”

Ben chuckled. “You’d have to ask your mother. It gets harder to travel when you get older.”

“They really have to ask your mother.” Ben shook his head.

Nina cried, exasperated. “Why isn’t Mom’s relationship with Grandma good?”

Ben sighed. “I don’t know. Things happen in families. They’re very different people.”

“They can’t be that different. She raised her.” Nina protested.

“Life’s got a funny way of working,” Ben conceded. “Things happen. Families get baggage. And they’ve had a lot of time to get their baggage.”

“Do you have any baggage with your parents?” John probed.

“Of course,” Ben paused. “But different baggage.”

“Not as bad,” John proposed.

Ben grimaced. “No.” He paused. “Not quite as bad.”
“Mom, you want coffee, right?” Alan placed a hand on the flat of her back.
“Coffee ice cream,” She corrected.
“Right.” He nodded.
“You’ve got to make sure they’ve got it right.” She whispered, nodding at the fluorescent green tee-shirt of the teen waiting on them. “Give anyone an apron and they think they’re a superhero.”
“Mom,” Jean cast her eyes skyward. “Just hurry up and order, please.”
“I said I wanted coffee ice cream. Alan was right.” She bit back.
“Memory hasn’t gone yet,” He nodded knowingly and tapped his temple.
The teen scribbled a note and scampered away.
Alan rose from kneeling beside Ruth and levered himself back into the cramped wood. It was old. Not in a charming or rustic way. The establishment was one of the few remaining things in the valley older than Ruth, and it looked the part. Aisles were narrow, surfaces shone with a perpetual stickiness, and wood was peeling and chipping everywhere. Jukeboxes had been replaced with pinball machines and arcade games, which were replaced with jukeboxes again. Sepia photographs and kitsch littered the walls and high shelves as a barebones staff still shuffled around, furiously scooping ice cream into glasses, brushing past faded soda taps and a glass counter with hordes of small candies from a time bygone. A smell of powdered sugar and cocoa hung through the shop.
Ruth drummed her fingers on the table. Jean looked up irritably from the menu their waiter had forgotten to take as she absentmindedly leafed through it. Anna propped her chin on her palms, elbows splayed on the table, her face a pouty blend of boredom and loneliness. Alan sighed and looked around.
“I have to say, I remember it being a bit bigger.”
Jean looked up, peeved. “Well, you were a bit bigger back then.”
Ruth sniffed haughtily. “They used to have a full staff. And their staff knew how to do their job.”
Jean rolled her eyes. “Well, I can’t imagine they get much business this time of year.”
Ruth shrugged. “This town has no respect.”
Jean returned to her menu in surrender. “I’m sure. And they have no idea how to change things up around here. I wouldn’t be surprised if their cola still has cocaine in it.”
Alan looked up, mystified. “Jean, did you just make a joke?”
Jean didn’t lift her eyes. “Depends. Did you just listen to something someone in this family had to say?”
Alan threw his hands up. “Easy, tiger,”
Anna sighed. “Why are we getting ice cream? It’s got to be twenty degrees outside.”
“Then you should have ordered some hot fudge sauce on yours,” Ruth bit back.
“She has a point,” Alan advised.
The waiter shuffled over contrite, but not yet sure for what, bearing a tray with four neat glass chalices. Laying them before the four, he departed silently, and they were left to eye each other, slowly picking up their long delicate spoons. Ruth stabbed at hers, and Alan and Anna both took bites reluctantly, while Jean put her menu down to eye it, while her hands clasped the edge of the table before her.
Alan nodded, surprised. “Better than I remember it.”
“Still pretty good,” Anna assented. Ruth took another bite.
“So what’s the matter, Jean?” Alan took another bite and examined the pained tautness of his elder sister’s face.
“Nothing,” She spat through clenched teeth. “Just funeral arrangements.”
Ruth scoffed. “You’ve still got a few days left before you need to worry about that.”
“That’s not funny, Mom,” Jean snapped. “And there’s a lot that needs to be worked out.”
Ruth shrugged. “Just put me by the altar for a weekday mass then throw me in the ground.
Seems pretty simple to me.”
“There you have it,” Alan shrugged.
“It’s not that simple,” She cried, exasperated. She paused. “Mom,”
“What?”
“Nothing. Never mind.”
“Sounds like someone needs some ice cream,” Alan muttered.
Anna took another bite glumly. “Can’t we just enjoy this?”
Jean’s phone lit up, buzzing high and angry like a wasp from the table where she had left it. She glanced at the caller ID.
“Apparently not. It’s Edward.” She hissed. She picked the phone up and passed it to Alan as if it were burning hot. “Here. I can’t do this.”
He glanced at it. “Well, how many drinks in do we think he is?” Glancing around the silent table, he rose and paced toward the door wryly, swiping right to answer.
“Hello? You’ve reached Jean’s phone.”
“Give the fucking phone to Mom,” Edward growled.
“How many drinks is that? Four? Five?”
“I said give the phone to Mom.”
“Six, then,”
“Fuck you, Alan.”
Alan glanced at the young family, a daughter barely walking, nose pressed up against the glass display of sweets, and swung the door open to step out onto the slick cobblestones.
“What do you want, Edward?”
“I want to talk to Mom. Put it on speaker, too. I’ve got some questions for all of you. And where the fuck are you, anyways?”
“We’re out of the house.”
“I can fucking tell.”
“How many calls did it take for you to figure that out?”
“Where are you?”
“I should ask you the same question. If you still know.”
“I’m attending to business.” He spat.
“I see.” Alan cast his eyes upward, searching for patience. “I have to say, it’s a bit chilly out here, so say your piece so I can get back inside and you can get back to blacking out.”
“I’ve got nothing to say to you,” Edward sneered. “Now give the phone to Ruth.”
“Have a lovely evening, Edward,” Alan drawled. “And say hi to whatever cowpokes you’re hanging around.”
His brother’s faint protestations reached his ears as he cut the phone dead and turned back inside, where two dishes of ice cream were melting.
Edward stared, livid, at the phone sitting in his numb hand, then turned back to the bar, full of warm light and warm bodies behind him. Turning quickly, he felt the cold begin to pinch at his face, but struggled to fight through the haze of alcohol. Taking two swinging strides, he felt his body begin to pitch about. His hand shot out to the post of the bar’s porch and he stopped to rest, still breathing heavy with whiskey and indignation.

Slowing his heart from beating in his ears, he slowly levered himself from the pole and plodded back into the bar in small, deliberate steps. He might be the oldest man in the bar. He couldn’t tell anymore, nor did he care. A few patrons who looked to be near his age huddled beneath the flatscreen on which two hockey teams Edward did not care to distinguish wheeled around the rink.

He felt the old wood floor ring beneath his feet as he tramped back to his spot on the bar, where empty bottles were littered around two drillers who, judging by the unimpressive softness of their beards, were young enough to be his sons. He nodded to both of them.

“How’d the phone call go, old man?” The first called, smirking to him.

He nodded slowly. “Oh, I reckon it went alright.”

“Just alright?” The other mocked.

He shrugged. “S’pose that’s how it always is with family. You two’ll learn soon enough.” He eyed the bottles leerily. He grabbed one up and spun it slightly, not noticing the bit that splashed onto his knuckles. Deeming it to be sufficiently full, pinched its neck and held it close to his hip, as if holstered. Then, fishing his wallet from his back pocket, he pulled out a few bills, and, waving them before the bartender, slid them across the top. Then he turned, took a swig from the bottle and turned to the door, nodding to his companions.

“Gentlemen, best of luck with your evenings.”

“Too old?” The first asked, disappointed.

“Fraid so,” He nodded.

He wheeled back towards the door, knees barely bending as he tottered toward the door, veering toward the coat rack before realizing his hat was still perched loosely atop his head. He reached up and nestled it down tight like a lid.

The cold air rushed into him and he swayed jauntily before dipping his chin and plowing ahead. The uneven ground below him rushed by blurrily and the shadows cast by the motel toward which he trucked sprung toward him, long and arcing. The snow’s crunch under his boots felt muted. He took another sip. Odd. He had hated snow and its silencing ability, hated the way fields and mountains and roads fell silent in the winter in a way they never were in the summer. Because of the suffocating blanket of snow that fell fast as rain and steady as the sun for months. And now here it was. He could barely feel it. That’s the way life went, he thought bitterly, and took another swig. That was justice. Finally. Justice. It felt good, but not as good as he hoped it would feel.

The warped steps of graying plywood creaked under his heavy steps. Fuck ‘em. All of them. He stopped, swaying, halfway up, as his evening caught up to him, ramming him at full tilt from behind. Righting himself, he set off again, feet clomping deliberately like a plow horse’s. He paused at the top and turned, squinting, to the right, only to be buffeted by a shower of daggerish pellets. He turned back to the left, then thought better of it. He turned back, snorted once, long and dry, and spat off the edge of the balcony and watched it disappear into the white ether beneath him. He leaned over the barrier. It groaned in tandem with his shoulder joints under the burden of his weight, and his clammy palms pressed on the weathered pine.
His knuckles tightened and whitened as a wave of nausea washed over him. He pitched forward, his chest hanging out over the sparse white below, that concealed clumps of dead fibers under its billows. His breathing grew shallow, then deep, and he swallowed back the pitching in his gut.

He righted himself and turned around, marching back to his room. The thin white door buckled as his shoulder drove into it and his left hand propped his weight on the door knob as he shoved the key in.

The door gave suddenly and he stumbled in, catching himself before he could tumble onto his bed. He stared at the comforter. It clung to the pitiful mattress, pooling in the middle. Its simple blue pattern was homey. Like the quilt he and Sarah had kept on their bed. It had been an engagement gift from Ruth. She said she had made it. But he had seen it up for auction at a church fundraiser. She had probably figured he wouldn’t have any reason to see it. They had kept it on that twin bed they shared, back when they were broke and okay with that. Back when life was in summer, before winter swallowed it all whole, clamping its jaws around months that felt like years. There had been a time when the sky felt like an invitation, not a taunt. When they could lie back at any hour of the day. Watch clouds sail across, joined only by birds. Sky still unsliced by airplanes that never dared venture into an expanse so vast. A sky that at night was full of stars that yawned out from the mountains’ teeth like sparkling needlepoints.

He dropped to the bed and felt its corner sag beneath his weight. It was time, he decided. He missed the stars. He heaved himself up, checked to make sure his coat was still on, and slumped out the door. His vision danced in and out of focus, and he shook himself against the door frame. He set off again. The stairs blurred beneath his feet and he rounded the platform, ricocheting off onto the pavement of the parking lot, ruptured beneath the ice that flowed over it, thick and brown. He veered to the left, camping out a spot, just between two pines, where he knew he would be able to see the stars. He waded into the bank of snow shoveled up at the border of the parking lot, not bothering to hike up his jeans. His legs moved awkwardly, then laboriously as he trekked through the snow that embraced his calves cruelly. The two pines swayed but he held his path nevertheless even as snow carved at his face.

Judging himself centered with the two pines standing sentry he relaxed, shoulders dropping in spite of the cold. He looked up, looking for a constellation to guide him to a past. He didn’t need much. Just someone who gave a shit. Just one. He was happy with a family that fancied themselves mountain nobles, caught up in the trappings of formality. Before that empty shell had crumpled beneath them and they had turned inward, turning their cravings on each other, setting them to dig their claws into him and pin him giddily. He searched for a map to a life relived. A life where he hadn’t wasted himself away on empty consolations for all of them. He gritted his teeth and screamed into the orangeish gray that billowed overhead.
Stephen frowned. The hotel room was empty. He unzipped his jacket and stepped back out into the hallway, sliding his keycard into his back pocket. He traced his steps back towards the lobby, where a few odd hotel workers still loitered beneath the local news in garish blues and oranges on the flat screen TVs hovering above fireplaces crackling cheerily. He paced toward the front desk, and felt his brow begin to knit. Cassie would be pissed if he lost Sean in Fargo. He stopped. A faint whirring came from his left.

Swiping the card from his pocket, he crept tentatively into the hotel’s gym. There, on the treadmill, Sean hurtled in place, legs pumping like pistons at full bore. Jaw clenched, his arms flew recklessly at his sides as his feet soared over the treads without abandon. He champed like a racehorse, eyes drilled into the mirror before him. Distracted by the motion, his eyes fluttered to the side, and Stephen saw a childish embarrassment flicker in them as he noticed his father and immediately flipped the treadmill down until he was at a walking pace.

“Oh, hey, Dad,” He stammered. “Sorry about that. I should’ve texted.”
“No worries,” Stephen dismissed him. “Can’t blame you. I’m surprised your legs haven’t fallen off from all our hard riding.”
Sean laughed. “We’re in a sedan, not riding with Geronimo.”
Stephen shrugged, only for a smile to blossom across his face as he held up the plastic bag at his side. “I got Chinese!”
Sean frowned. “Chinese in Fargo?”
“What did you think I would get? Fried Steve Buscemi?”
He shrugged. “Buffalo? Corn?”
Stephen laughed more openly this time. “Either way, it’s hot,”
Sean threw up his hands. “I’m not complaining. I’m just curious.” He stopped the treadmill and hopped off.
Stephen beckoned him out of the gym and to the left with a nod of his head. “Let’s go eat by a fireplace.”
Sean arched his eyebrows, impressed. “Cozy.”
Stephen gestured grandiosely. “Nothing but the best for us.” He offered him a water bottle.
“Your mother’ll kill me if I let you drink the tap water out here.”
Sean shook his head. “She’s one health scare away from keeping us indoors away from the chem trails.”
Stephen chuckled. “Don’t tell her I laughed at that.”
They found a seat at a fake mahogany table, and Stephen spread their meal before them. Picking up a fork, he nodded, intrigued, by Stephen, already elbow deep into the lo mein with a pair of chopsticks.
“No fork for you?”
Sean shrugged. “Got to get the authenticity somehow.”
“Alright, well,” Stephen said, spearing a piece of orange chicken. “I’ve been looking at the drive. We’ve got a hard twelve hours ahead of us tomorrow.”
“Haven’t we been saying that for three days now?”
“Well, this time we won’t sleep in. And there’s no traffic to worry about. And speed limits are just suggestions out here.”
“Pretty gutsy of you, Dad.”
“We’re living hard now, Sean.”
“Clearly. Pass a fortune cookie?”
“Funny kid,” Stephen grunted.

“Must’ve skipped a generation,” Sean shrugged unbothered. “Where’d you get the food?”

“Right around the corner,” Stephen gestured toward the lobby with his head. “Couple blocks away.”

“Jesus, Dad, it’s freezing outside.”

He shrugged. “It’s only getting worse. Plus, it’s good practice for when we get to Grandma.”

“Do you spend time outside there?”

“Always walked to school,” he nodded gravely. “Uphill both ways, too.”

Sean rolled his eyes.

“Better to stretch your legs now, anyways,” Stephen went on. “We might not be able to stop again before we get there.”

Sean leaned back in his seat and rubbed tiredly at his eyes. “Damn.”

Stephen nodded. “We’re cutting it close.”

Sean folded his arms and stared down his father. “Dad, do you think driving here was a mistake?”

Stephen shrugged. “Ask me when we get there. Are you regretting coming along?”

Sean’s poker face didn’t break. “I’ll let you know when I get my grades for the semester.”

Stephen chuckled. “Your mother’s gonna kill me,”

“Probably,” Sean nodded. “Are you worried?”

“About what? This trip?”

Sean nodded and leaned forward, picking at the orange chicken.

“Yeah, of course I am,” Stephen laughed. “Can’t say I’m looking forward to the drive back either.”


“What is?” Stephen asked, puzzled.

“All of it,” Sean shrugged. “It’s kind of surreal.”

Stephen nodded slowly. “Are you going to miss her?”

Sean paused. “I think so. I’m not sure when. I’m not really used to her being around. But I think I will.”

Stephen nodded. “I won’t really notice she’s gone. Except for when she doesn’t call. But there’ll be moments. Moments I wish she was there for.”

Sean pondered it a bit. “Do you miss your Dad?”

Stephen sighed, then stared at the fried rice before him. “Sort of.” He started to speak, then stopped suddenly. “I guess not. Certainly not every day. Do you?”

“I didn’t know him,” Sean shook his head. “Sometimes I wish I had, though. It’s a weird thing. Sometimes he just feels like he’s missing. I don’t know if that makes sense.”

“I think it does,” Stephen surmised. “Come on. Let’s go back to the room.”

They rose, and quickly swept the food still on the table into the trash can. Pacing down the empty hallway, the pair in heavy black jackets, gaunt and tired-eyed from hours in the car, the pair resembled mournful ghosts. Stephen swiped into the room and made immediately for the minifridge, propping it open to reveal a six-pack of beer. Twisting two loose from the plastic rings, he held one up, then tossed it to Sean, its slow looping arc landing in his hands that hung high by his surprised face.

“You know I’m the youngest kid, right, Dad?”
Stephen shrugged. “Only way to keep warm out here. And you’re in college now. I’m dumb, but not that dumb.”

Sean eyed his father warily. “Are you sure you’re feeling alright?”

Stephen split his can open and took a sip. Following his lead, Sean popped the tab on his and took a seat on the bed where he had dropped his duffel bag. Stephen took a seat adjacent to him. They took long sips in silence and the room’s darkness hung, shadows that lingered waiting for a sun whose rising felt like it would never come.
Ruth stared at the three of them, eyes barren and blank, as she lay in bed. Jean bent down and lifted the blankets one at a time, layering them on top of her. First the sheet, then a fleece blanket, a woolish blanket, and lastly a heavy comforter. They fell on her floppishly as Jean wrestled them straight.

“How are you feeling?”

Ruth licked her lips thoughtfully. “Okay, I guess.”

“Do you want someone to stay with you?” Alan cut in.

Ruth shook her head quickly. “No. I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?” Anna asked nervously.

“I said I’m fine,” Ruth snapped.

They turned and processed to the door in single file.

“Just try to not to be too late tomorrow morning,” Ruth called, tone contrite.

They filed out through and Alan closed the door softly, nodding to Ruth.

They milled into the kitchen and stood, looking a bit lost, until Alan gestured to the dinner table.

“Have a seat,” He invited. “Unless you’re dying to get back to the hotel.”

Jean shrugged. “Nothing to do here.”

“Nothing to do here, either,” Alan countered. “And the hotel doesn’t have free alcohol.” He slipped a bottle of bourbon out from a cabinet and held it out.

Anna nodded bashfully, and Jean shook her head. “Someone’s got to drive,” She reminded them.

“And you are so generous for that, dear sister,” Alan lavished. The freezer opened with a rush and the three ice cubes he dropped in each glass chimed like bells. The liquor trickled over them in a thin stream and Alan pinched the glasses carefully with his fingertips as he waltzed to the kitchen table, handing one to Anna and sitting down with a wink to Jean.

Anna took a sip from hers, then grimaced and put it down. “I can’t even remember the last time I had brown liquor,” Anna griped as she held her jaw tight, with a sliver open, lest her tongue touch the rest of her mouth. “It’s been thirty years since I used a chaser but I might have to start again.”

Alan smirked. “I can’t believe Mom didn’t have a nice bottle of white for you to crack into.”

Anna snorted into her glass and Jean rolled her eyes. Alan drained his glass and nodded to Anna. “Come on now, try to keep up.”

She took a wary sip and scowled.

Alan rolled his eyes. “I’ve got how many years on you? You’re not really going to be outdrunk by someone this close to social security checks, are you?”

Anna pouted. “Guess I didn’t get the alcoholic gene.”

Alan’s guffaw was hollow. “Guess not.” He snatched Anna’s glass from her and rounded around the counter to fill them both up once more. Anna paled at the sight of the replenished glass. Alan snickered. “Drink up. It’ll keep you warm.”

Jean crossed her arms.

Alan leaned back in his seat. “Jean, if you roll your eyes again, I think you’ll be in danger of your corneas cramping up.” A smile danced across his lips as Anna took another sip. “Well, now that
we’re sufficiently lubricated and Jean is up far enough past her bedtime, we need to talk.”
Jean frowned. “About what?”
Alan raised an eyebrow. “About Mom’s choice, of course.”
Anna drained her glass in one go.
Alan eyed her cheerfully. “Really? That bad?”
Anna shivered. “Yep.”
Jean sighed and crossed her legs. “I don’t like it.”
“There’s a surprise,” Alan raised his eyebrows and leaned further back in his seat.
“Spare me,” Jean snipped. “I think it’s short-sighted. And I don’t think it’s the proper way to end her life.”
“Ending her life surrounded by her allegedly-loved ones on her own terms in accordance with the laws and statutes of this fine state isn’t proper?”
“No,” Jean shrugged. “It’s not very dignified, cueing up an IV and bidding everyone farewell. And it’s not right.”
“How is it not right?” Anna cut in.
“Who is she to say?” Jean retorted sharply. “She has no right.”
“It’s her life!” Anna exclaimed.
“No. It’s not. And it’s selfish.”
“And why isn’t it her life, Jean?” Alan inquired, his voice still low. “Because she has a family?”
“Because she has a family. And loved ones. That she didn’t consult before making this decision. And that’s selfish. That’s ignoring the pain she’s causing every last one of us.”
“We’re adults, Jean.” Alan tempered. “We’ll live. No one’s going to live forever. And she wasn’t going to outlive any of us anyways.”
“You don’t know that, Alan.” Jean rose in her seat like a snake readying to strike. She rounded on Anna. “So you’re okay with this? With her shooting death into her veins like a junkie and leaving your son and daughter without a grandmother? And expecting us all to just move along?”
“It’s none of our business. It’s her choice. What she does is between her and her God.”
“Well, I think her God has made it pretty clear how He feels on the matter.”
“Jean, I’d hardly say that a couple of senile Italians thousands of miles away dictate God’s will on our mother’s life. For starters, they’ve never been in the mountains in the winter.”
“You and your Godless city are hardly the be-all-end-all on morality, Alan.” Jean spat.
Alan held up his hands in surrender. “A little understanding wouldn’t hurt them, is all.”
“A little understanding wouldn’t hurt her. She goes on with this harebrained scheme with no care for how we feel. It’s no way to end a life like hers.”
“I think it’s a fitting way to end her life,” Alan shrugged.
Furor flared in Jean’s eyes. “You have the nerve-”
Alan held up his hand. “Jean. You’re talking about a woman who spent years of her life doing nothing but what people asked of her. Her God. What people wanted. It didn’t really matter who. And sure, half the town thought she was a bitch. And that was a role she played. For them.”
Jean shifted in her seat, choking on words.
“Don’t you remember how lonely she was?”
“That wasn’t a role she was playing, Alan.” Jean frowned as if a bitter taste clung to her mouth.
“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Alan advised. “People are trapped here. They’re desperate for anything to break the cold.”
“I don’t know, Alan,” Anna reasoned. “That seems a bit dramatic. It was a small town, not a soap opera.”
“I’m not saying it was. I’m saying they needed a villain. So that’s what she was. For them. And now she’s tired of going on.”
“She’s not some puppet who’s tired of being trussed up,” Jean scorned.
“No. She’s not. But ever since Dad died, she’s been fed up with living for someone else. And this is how it all ends. She’s finally doing something for herself.”
“And who has she been living for? It’s been fifteen years since Dad died.” Jean scoffed. Alan shrugged. “Us? I don’t know. But spite can only carry you so far.”
Anna sagged. “I can’t blame her.”
Alan nodded mutedly and finished his drink.
“That’s a long life to live.” She noted. “I would be tired too.”
Jean sighed. “She’s not thinking it through.”
“She’s been thinking it through for almost two decades now, Jean.”
Jean shook her head frustratedly. “She wants to be like Dad. That’s what she wants. To go out. Some matriarch with a mass and respect.”
Alan shrugged. “At least half of that should be manageable.”
Jean looked up, flustered. “The church won’t hold the funeral.”
Alan slammed his glass on the table, then glanced worriedly over at Ruth’s silent room. “What?”
“Are you serious?” Anna sat up straight.
“I talked to the director at the cemetery today,” Jean admitted. “And the church refuses to take part. And some parishoners won’t even cater.”
“Is that a fucking joke?” Alan leaned forward disbelievingly.
Jean leaned onto the table, propping her forehead in her hands tiredly. “They can’t. They won’t. All because Mom won’t wait for nature to run its course.”
Anna rubbed her eyes. “Jesus,”
“When are you going to tell her?” Alan interrogated.
“I-I don’t know.” Jean sunk further into her hands. “I just don’t know. She’s just throwing it away.”
“Throwing what away?”
“I don’t know, Alan. Respect.”
“Respectability isn’t worth anything, Jean.”
“It is here, Alan. It is here.”
“You’re sure you’ll be alright home alone, Mom?” Colleen wheeled on her mother from the passenger seat as they eased into the airport’s drop off loop.

“I think I can survive a weekend on my own, dear. But I appreciate it.”

“Are you sure? We can get Sam to fly down for the weekend or something.”

“We’re visiting family, not playing a national game of musical chairs, darling.”


“For all you know, maybe I’ll appreciate the quiet.”

“It’s possible,” Colleen conceded. “But you won’t.”

“You’re right,” Cassie agreed mutely. “I won’t.” She shifted in her seat and cut the engine.

“And you’re sure you’re ready to go?”

Colleen nodded, preoccupied. “Mom, I should get going.”

“Phone’s fully charged? Enough warm clothes?”

“Mom, I’ll be fine.”

“And you’ve got your aunts’ and uncles’ phone numbers?”

Colleen nodded antsitly. “Mom, you should probably start moving.”

Cassie sighed, and restarted the car. “And you’re fine getting everything out of the trunk?”

“It’s a suitcase, Mom, not the Ark of the Covenant.”

“I know. Stay safe. Call me when you get to Minneapolis.”

Colleen nodded anxiously. “I know. I know.”

“And say hi to everyone for me. And don’t call me complaining about the cold. I warned you.”

Colleen smirked and rolled her eyes as she slid out of the car and trotted around to the car’s trunk, from which she heaved out the humble little suitcase they had been kicking around their family for years.

“I’ll be back before you know it, Mom.”

Cassie nodded, unimpressed. She frowned.

“Colleen?”

Colleen turned back one more time, exasperated. “What?”

“This snowstorm out Midwest sounds bad. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

Colleen peered, baffled. “What would I do, commandeer a plane? Besides, even if it does hit while I’m there I’m flying into Minnesota. Them cancelling for snow would be like if we shut down for having too much sweet tea.”

Cassie bit back a retort as Colleen turned and sauntered into the airport.
“You know, you’re not supposed to drink alcohol before using these,” Jean admonished as she shuffled into the sauna’s dry embrace, a coarse white towel pinned around her with the same arm that clutched a water bottle.

Alan cracked one eye open to glare at her witheringly. “That was over four hours ago. And if your choice of music on the ride home didn’t sober me up, then the treadmill just did.”

Jean glowered back at him. “You really are a McCormick.”

“Most of us chose alcohol as our vice. And somehow you chose not drinking alcohol as yours. Fascinating.”

Jean sat down across from him, the sauna’s oven humming away between them. “I didn’t take vacation days just to come here and be a nurse.”

“Actually, I’m fairly certain you did. And I can’t say I appreciate you lecturing me on the use of a sauna, seeing as it’ll take maybe five minutes before that water bottle of yours is hot enough to brew tea.”

Jean took a scowling swig. “Better than fainting.”

Alan shrugged and slumped lower against the wall. His head fell lower, relaxed, revealing a greasy halo of sweat stained into the wood above him. “So what brings you to the sauna, Jean?”

“Health benefits.” She shrugged.

“Not to warm up?” He smirked.

She shook her head. “I’m used to it.”

“I’m sure,” He nodded. “Good for you.” He ran a hand through the tendrils of dark soaked hair that swirled on his head and glassy beads of sweat tumbled to the ground. He hunched over, propping his elbows on his knees.

“Is that why you’re in here, Alan? Going soft back east?”

He leaned deeper towards his knees. “Something like that. Cold feels different when you’re old, I think.”

She chuckled. “Everything feels different when you’re old. Just wait till your memory starts to go.”

“Who said it hasn’t already?” He retorted wryly. “It’s a real shit show.”

“Getting old or coming back out here?”

“Both, probably,” He guessed. “This’ll be the last time I come back, I think.”

“You think Edward is going to outlive you?”

“I didn’t say that. Although it might be nice. He’s probably expecting us to dance on his grave anyways. It’d be a shame to let him down.”

Jean snorted.

“Are you planning on coming back after this?” Alan inquired, disbelievingly.

Jean shrugged. “I don’t know. If I do it’ll be between Memorial and Labor Day. Can’t imagine I’ll bear witness to Edward’s funeral.”

“Don’t bet on it,” Alan teased. “He eats like he’s got a vendetta towards his arteries.”

“I’ve got quite a head start on him,” Jean posited. “Besides,” She trailed off.

“Besides what?” Alan perked up.

“Nothing,” Jean shrugged it off. “I’m in a very stressful line of work.”

“And those ‘investments’ of his have added ten years to him. Thank God credit scores aren’t assigned to families. Smartest thing our father ever did was give it all to anyone but him.”

Jean nodded. “You’re probably right.”
“Morose but correct,” Alan agreed. “Something about this place in the winter.”
“Nobody ever dies in July,” Jean added bitterly. Alan laughed, cold and loud, almost like a cough.

Jean took a deep, rattling breath. “Little too dry in here, I think,” She noted. The pool water had vanished from her skin and her short hair tufted in feathers now. Sweat had begun to bead along her forehead, but her arms were still dry as leather, with hints of discoloration. Alan glistened across the dark room from her, but his eyes were trained on her, dark and deep as ever. His jaw was clenched tight and his back labored up and down like a caged animal in the heat. Jean stared back at him, and felt fear start to rise in her chest.

“Alan?”
The focus in his eyes broke and his gaze softened. “Yeah?”
“Do you think we could have done more for Mom?”
He sighed and sank even lower, till both palms could have easily been placed on the ground. “If we had, she would have fought us all the way.”
She crossed her arms. “I know. But that’s not what I asked.”
He nodded. “Maybe we could have. Maybe after Dad left. Maybe.”
“All her friends are dead, Alan.” She added.
“I can’t say I’m surprised. Sometimes I think the only she’s still alive is for bragging rights.”
Jean shook her head. “She needs a damn good excuse to do anything these days. Even die.”
“I thought for sure Anna coming out would do the trick.”
“I don’t know what the hell Stephen was thinking with that bullshit,” Jean remarked.
“What has Stephen got to do with it?”
“You can’t really think she chose to come out herself. Besides, someone had to have told her.
And I didn’t. And Ruth sure as hell didn’t.”
Alan nodded, considering. “I’d give our little choir boy a pass. Ignorance, if not stupidity.”
“That boy could throw a hand grenade and expect confetti to come out,” Jean concurred.
“And isn’t that what he did?” Alan pointed out.
“Well, so far it’s worked,” Jean replied. “Go figure.”
“I never believed in miracles, but I’m scratching my head.”
“Maybe it’s the pills. She’s been a little too mellow recently.”
“It’s unnerving,” Alan agreed. “You’re the medical professional.”
“It’s just-” Jean clenched her fists. “I don’t know.”
“Don’t know what?”
“Why she’s doing this.”
“What do you mean?”
“You know what I mean. Who is she? You remember how she was raising us. Then Anna and Stephen come along and she practically kicked all five of us out of the house as soon as she could. Then Dad dies, and she turns into that. And now she’s just some old woman. And I don’t know which one she is.”
Alan rubbed his stubbled chin. “I wish I could tell you.”
“How can someone change so much so many times?” Jean rose, almost in tears. “I can understand why she would when Dad died. Or now, when she’s about to. Or when she almost did with Anna. But how many fucking chances do you get to become yourself? What was real, Alan? Did we ever see who she was or was she always lying to us?”
“All the world’s a stage,” Alan agreed tiredly.
“And that’s all you have to say. Fucking ridiculous.”
“Maybe we’re not so different from her,” Alan suggested shamefully. “Maybe she was just performing all along. Maybe this is her way of saying she doesn’t know. Maybe we were putting on a performance too. I went far. Edward stayed. You went somewhere in between. But why? Did any of us ever really care?”

“Of course we did,” Jean scoffed. “She pushed me away. Not the other way.”
“And maybe we let her. Maybe we played the role of petulant children because it was easy. It was fitting. It felt right. It was the only way it could all end. This family. And maybe she changed because that’s what she needed to do to give us the ending we needed. The one we deserved. The one we chose.”

“Jesus,” Jean muttered.
“And nothing’s changed.” Alan added. “We’re all too old to change. So now she can exit stage left.”

“No,” Jean shook her head determinedly. “She made us. Not the other way around.”
“ Probably.” Alan nodded. “Hopefully.”
Saturday

The fake sweetness of the air that pumped out of the Auntie Anne’s to her left had long turned noxious, and her smoothie, long empty, was wasting away, its thin fuchsia film turning into a crust as Colleen slumped lower in the smooth black leather of the airport’s waiting area. The bustle of anxious flyers had long since ebbed as the dark of night had sunk in.

The airport more closely resembled a ghost town now, just a few businessmen slumped over in catnaps as even the officers and airline employees who crawled over the airport had slowed to a lethargic trudge. She was probably the only soul still awake. And she couldn’t blame them.

Her airplane was nestled outside close up against the window pane, the boarding dock still floundering out in the cold. Its cockpit glared her down like an animal in a zoo. Colleen shifted warily. She never could sleep when travelling. She could read in trains and had never been carsick a day in her life, or whatever other qualms others had about travelling. But she couldn’t sleep when travelling. It was too riveting. The journey had always wired her, the change of scenery sending her blood pumping through her electrified.

She was lucky now that TVs came free on flights now. She remembered the years, not so long ago, when her only option was to drag every book she owned to a few hundred miles from the Pacific. It took her a while longer to finish books now. She still wanted to punch a hole through a window pane when her flight got delayed due to an engine malfunction, though. She closed the book she had open in her lap, acknowledging the reality of it. That book wouldn’t be getting read until the sun was up. And in all likelihood, not even then. She stood and paced to the window. Nothing could go right, it seemed.

Dad and Sean were holed up in the Great Plains, when they should have been there now. She would have beaten them there. Maybe not, now. A trip they shouldn’t even have to make. She sighed. The swish of her rain jacket made her skin crawl, so she shrugged it off and folded it in her arms.

It’s always darkest before the dawn, is what her mother would tell her. It was a dumb phrase, she always told Cassie. How do you define dawn? The sun itself rising? To be true it had to include the dusky early hours that pulsed through the sky, the dull shadows of day she saw even now. And then of course it would be darkest before dawn. That was night. That was the point of night. How was it the dumbest expressions in the language were the ones people whispered to themselves in down moments? The few clouds left in the sky perched, marshmallows over a distant fire, basking in the glow on their underbellies as the sky, clear but smoky danced with swaths of hazy orange and shallow ocean blue. The moon still beamed clear and white, half sunk into the sky, a sharp silvery disk hilted in the expanse.

She looked across the plains of the airport, to the houses that hid warily in the treeline. Off, in one of the houses that would fold out beneath her soon enough like patchwork, her mother was sleeping. They were still close. It was an odd thought. Airports always felt different to her. Like some sort of limbo. A place all of their own, isolated. Little sleek islands of a rotating fleet of quick eats and golf carts buzzing their ways around.

Her eyes felt tired but her mind still hummed. Her legs buzzed with pent-up excitement. Maybe anger. It was hard to tell under the best of conditions. One trip, maybe ten years ago, probably more, they had been stranded in Denver. Some delay leaving the airport to soar over to the mountains. The airports were different out there. No longer hives of self-importance. Just a storage space for taxidermy and bolo ties and one last chance to sell tourists kitsch. You were more likely to spot a hunter still in camouflage than a businessman. They’d rushed off the plane, only to realize their connection had left some half hour earlier, some rattling narrow tube, compared to the behemoth that carried them over the Appalachians, unbothered by their grinding teeth and skittish suitcases that fishtailed across the tiled
floor. Weighed down by Sean, still chubby-cheeked and baby-teethed, they had struggled out of the airport, boarded the shuttle to the hotel the penitent airline had foisted on them, and collapsed into the room, immediately enveloping the space in the way only a young family can, covering and growing quickly enough to impress shaving cream.

That night she had laid in bed, listening to Sam’s breathing slow to a dozing pant as her blood pounded in her ears. She had risen from the under the shimmery duvet and crept to the bathroom for a drink of water. He had surprised her as she tred out, both of them still young enough for him to scoop her up in his arms like a baby. He had hushed her squeal and waltzed the two of them slowly toward the door, tutting softly as he wondered what it would take to get her to fall asleep.

They padded down the rich red carpet of the hallway, his left hand locked in her right, both their other hands clinging to a past evaporating away. Even the lights seemed asleep, shining blankly as they sank down the elevator and into the lobby that echoed with the night. They had paced around, peering at the TVs that rang with shows that were programmed for themselves with no hope of viewers.

Their bare feet slapped silently as they stumbled around the corner into the welcome table, their pajama pockets stuffed full of complimentary oatmeal raisin cookies as they crept back to a stairwell where they sat, tearing at the seams with half-asleep giggles as they gorged themselves on the purloined gifts they wrenched from their little brown bags like raccoons rummaging through refuse.

Colleen sighed and shrank back from the window. She was drifting too far from her bag and had no desire to test the alertness of the bleary-eyed agents that paced the concourses like ghosts whose caffeine was wearing thin.
Her eyes flickered open, thrown wide by the pulses of pain that glowed hot from low in her back. She drew in a gasp, then whistled it out slowly. She stayed that way for frozen seconds that stretched into minutes, watching her chest rise unevenly, till the pain stretched across her and squeezed her ribs shut. The light from the window was sullen and yellowish gray. All she could hear was the silence of snow and the baited cold of the air that sat upon her, fighting to gush down into her lungs like a broken dam. She caught her breath broken, dreading the cough she knew had to come.

Maybe that’s why she had chosen the pills, or the syringes, or however they would do it. Too long in loneliness. A body could only take so much before it cracked under the pressure, little hairlines that widened and grated up against each other with every passing day. The idea had come upon her slowly, a drop at a time, over days and weeks, then all at once, like a leaky faucet turned on.

They could have stopped her. Probably. Maybe. First in the years between deaths when she sat in her armchairs, waiting for phone calls and visits that never came from children she never wanted to see. Then in the phone calls that came as a duty. A protest, a demand for an explanation. A tear would have done the trick. She didn’t even have to hear it. She would have been able to tell. But she got none of that. Instead she got a muted silence of stupor. From each and every one of them. A sullen pout that made her want to drive her palm across each of their cheeks, but it was her fault too, she supposed. She had not done herself any favors. Or them.

It was her anger that had done her in. Her anger and their stupid milling about. Too many years of not enough life. She could have done more. Should have done more. For herself. For them. Maybe doing enough would have killed her sooner. Or maybe it would have given her the patience to wilt away as the diseases she barely held at bay now sapped her away. Her anger at the dullness of it all. She had chosen it, then had let it run its course. The lunches packed, the dinners made, the cars driven, the taxes paid, the floors swept. It was exhausting. By the time she had been freed from it all, left alone in her bed, that was all she had left in her.

There had been a time when she longed for loneliness. When she was swarmed with children and John swarmed her with the needs he insisted on shoving far away from himself. She thought it would bring her freedom. It hadn’t. She was never really alone. Just alone with herself. And what she had made of herself. And that wasn’t a way to live. She felt it now, pressing in. Lying, tensed in bed against the pain that lurked in her back, waiting for the door to open and some sign of life to burst in. Some sign of life that was alive. Not the blood that flickered weakly through her. That wasn’t good enough. Not the faint warmth that clung to her sheets. Real life.

It didn’t come. She knew it wouldn’t but she wanted it just the same. So she had made the right choice. Nothing was coming for her. So she would go find it.
Edward rolled over groggily in bed. Sarah always woke up as if she had never been asleep, eyes shooting open and hand already brushing him away. Ruth woke up lightly, delicately, and quickly. He wondered what that would be like. He woke up, lumbering and ugly, like a bear crawling out from its cave after a particularly long winter. He wasn’t sure what had woken him up. It was probably the headache that grew louder with every pound of pulse through the middle of his head. Vast swatches of white were coming down steadily outside, but somehow light still shone brilliantly in through the window, curtains undrawn from last night when he had thrown them open in one last parting glance for any stars that might have peeked out from their hiding behind the clouds. Instead now the yellowish gray light beat in, austere and sanitized. The morning that mixed with the beer still on his breath made a similarly strong push to wake him up. He rolled over and looked at the clock. Too damn early. But he was running late if he was aiming to make it home unscratched.

His feet hit the ground leadenly and a stream of swearing poured out of his mouth. Even the floor’s carpeting felt icy through his wool socks. He rose slowly, testing his legs. They wobbled like a newborn deer’s. He steadied himself and swallowed determinedly. Lumbering toward the door, he levered his feet into the boots by the door, biting back the profanity that bubbled up as he felt the melted snow littered all through the boots soak through to his bones. Tying them clumsily, he braced himself against the door knob and felt the flimy bronze handle creak under his weight. White paint was peeling. It was a shitty door anyways.

The cold hit him square on his jaw as he stepped out. He stared out across the town in surprise. Glendive had been swallowed whole by the snow while he slept. The footsteps he had blazed through the powder last night had smoothed over into little divots. Edward bent down and pinched a bit of the snow between his fingers. Still powdery. Not too wet. That was probably good. He sized up his truck. The tire chains were resting in his passenger seat. Not worth it. He wouldn’t slip on the mountain roads. But they’d slow him. No chance he’d make it back before nightfall. He licked the snow from his fingers. Little water couldn’t hurt him. He stomped down the stairs, feeling the snow collapse into an icy crust beneath his feet. It was a good feeling. Rounding over the lot, he barely ducked his head into the office to toss his keys to a half-asleep manager who looked to be dressed in a ZZ Top costume. He ducked back out and prowled a lap around the truck, running a forearm along it, sending snow scattering down onto his jeans or into his bed. He glanced around at the small fleet of cars with figures hunched over their tires. He shook his head and hopped into his cabin. Not from the area. But they were local so the chains wouldn’t make a difference. If he could just start rolling and not stop he had nothing to worry about.

The snow was still coming down thick and the snowflakes were joining together, falling in little clusters of ice. He felt the car groan and whirl through the soles of his feet and he muttered a fleeting prayer, then grinned as he felt the tires crunch into the gravel,

Heady with confidence, he spun the truck out of its spot, then threw it into drive and rolled, rumbling like a barrel over Niagara out of the lot and onto the highway. Homesteads and businesses peeked timidly out of the snow as he rolled by, nodding cheerily to every horse, cow, and dog waiting out the snow until the bobs of his head grew too wild and his hangover stung at the back of his neck. He’d be home just alright.

This was why everyone in the valley was so miserable. Wasn’t that people weren’t meant to live out here. They just weren’t meant to stay in one place out here. Holing out for the winter wasn’t a right way to live. Cold could put some life in you. His spirit soared ahead of the truck out ahead over the highway, flat and straight.
He needed this, he decided. Just every once in a while. To take off. He still had his duty to stay. Wasn’t sure where it came from. Not from John. Or from Ruth. But he owed it to them just the same. But after all that they couldn’t begrudge him an escape now and then. It was good for the soul. Duty and release. Tough line to walk. But he did it. Not that anyone ever noticed. It’d be nice if they did. But it wasn’t in their nature. Just like it wasn’t in his nature to be still. But here he was just the same.

Looking out it was hard to tell where the road ended and the fields began. The ditch to his right sloped gently but it was filling quick. Out ahead the snow blurred and melted together into a gray scape. Spots of snow flickered out of haze to dash against the windshield, one at a time so fast they reached a chorus of spitting whispers. One mile away looked as far as fifty feet ahead.
Sean awoke to a rustling sound. Lying in bed, eyes shifting in the dark for a moment, he bolted upright and glanced around as his senses came to him. He swiveled around in bed before spotting his father, hunched over the window carved into the far end of the cave of a hotel room, peering anxiously through a slit in the curtains.

“Jesus, Dad, I thought a raccoon had gotten into the room,” Sean breathed a sigh of relief.

“Worse,” Stephen shook his head. “It’s snowing.” He threw open the curtains and grayish light flooded the room, littered with the remains of their duffels picked clean to the bone.

“And we made a mess of the room too,” Sean noted. “Are you sure raccoons didn’t get in?”

“We just get a little sloppy when we’re tired,” Stephen muttered.

“I don’t know,” Sean pondered. “They’re pretty smart,”

“We’re going to have to get moving as quick as possible,” Stephen decided.

“Have you seen their paws? They’re like little hands.”

“Get your shower now. We’re going to have to rent a new car.”

“What?”

“We need four wheel drive.”

“Dad, we can’t just leave a car in South Dakota.”

“Nothing stopping us. I’ll pick it up on my way back.”

“On the way back?”

“Well, we’re not leaving the car on the wrong side of the Continental Divide.”

Sean heaved himself out of bed. “I guess,”

Stephen nodded. “I’ll start packing and getting ready to check out.”

“Is this real maple syrup?” Sean asked his father, pleasantly surprised, as he drizzled it over his french toast. Stephen grunted.

Sean looked around. The diner was full, but not packed, full of fifty-something-year-old bodies hiding under layers of leather, wool, and windbreakers. The lone strawberry garnish on his plate was the single splash of color in the diner, dazzling out surrounded by the dusty white of the tables and the warm browns of grease still sizzling from the griddle. Across the table, his father was turning pink under the layers he hadn’t bothered to take off, eyes trained across the street at the rental car franchise where their station wagon was parked as they waited out their next ride’s preparation. Stephen rested his chin in his left hand, prodding half-heartedly at the fried egg on his plate, dragging the prongs of his fork through the egg’s yolk that bled golden over his plate.

Sean sighed and grabbed the little silver dish in front of his plate and held it up for inspection. “Butter or whipped cream?” He dipped the tip of his fork into it as he held it out to his father, who shrugged his apathetic uncertainty.

He licked it and nodded. “Butter,” He returned to his breakfast.

Their waiter, a gangly high schooler whose hair seemed about as washed as the diner’s floor came over, a pot of coffee clenched in his fist.

“Anything else for you two gentlemen?” Sean tilted his head to make out the gravelly voice.

“No, no thanks,” He declined with a smile. Stephen barely glanced at him. He shuffled away.

Sean dragged the toast through, peered at the dripping mess, and shoveled it away.

Stephen straightened up. “Do you think that’s us?”

Sean hesitated, then turned to the rental, where they were easing a sedan out.

“I don’t think so. Didn’t they say it would be red?”
Stephen slumped back down. “Yeah, I guess.”
“You should try to rest up, Dad,”
“I’m fine,” He bristled. “Just a little tense.”
Sean nodded slowly, then picked up his napkin to dab at the sides of his mouth.
“I think that’s our ride, though,” He nodded out the window.

Fargo evaporated away like summer rain caught on pavement under the sun. Sean stared glumly out as Stephen shifted nervously beside him. The white of snow blurred quickly, posts of barbed wire blurring together. The car was warm. A little too warm. He could feel the four-wheel drive beneath him, spinning breathlessly. He didn’t like it. The engine ran too high. Too tense. Nearly as tense as Stephen next to him, shoulders slowly pinching up towards his neck. He looked down at his phone.
“Colleen’s flight left,” He called to his father next to him.
Stephen nodded. “That’s good. Hopefully we’ll be able to pick her up.”
“Maybe,” Sean agreed hesitantly.
The snowfall was gathering pace, coming down heavy now, and flakes were growing larger by the minute. Sean bent down, then tilted his head up to see the snow falling down. He had never seen anything like it before. Snow in North Carolina never felt like this, heavy and endless. It fell hurried, rushing to earth before it turned to rain, as it always did, a great tide of rainfall to wash it away always lurking behind the clouds. The snow here fell quickly, but only to make room for more of the stuff. It fell, never stopping, nor ever stopping to consider pausing, pouring over endlessly from the muted silvery expanse.

He sighed, and righted himself back into his seat. Stephen sat, jaw clenched, staring dead ahead at the expense of the road. Sean could feel his foot toying with the acceleration, the engine whining in protest. The best laid plans of mice and men.

He looked at the clock on the dashboard, then checked his phone. It was right. It felt later somehow. The sun was hidden behind the sky. It was to their backs anyways, he reminded himself. Somehow the snowy light carried an edge of twilight in it.

It scattered out over the snow, graying and sleepy, filling in the tiny wrinkles and ridges that creased the snow. It was a lonely land out here. Sean peered out to the north. No sign of life. He turned to his left. A car rumbled past, and Stephen barely blinked. No signs of life. A dark tip that could have been a farm poked above the horizon.

He had gone camping once back home. Just once. He couldn’t have been older than six, Sam just starting to hit her growth spurt, and the girlish vibrancy Colleen never outgrew was still acceptable. Stephen had taken them out, more at Cassie’s wishes than his own. The five of them under one wide arcing canvas roof stretched taut over poles they had fixed, then had been properly fixed by Stephen.

They had driven two and a half hours, the car practically shaking up with three pairs of young legs made to sit still far too long. Out into the mountains, or at least what qualified as mountains in the east. Green trees with broad leaves like ferns wrestled each other out and across the sky.

Sean didn’t know what had gotten him started. Maybe jealousy, or boredom. Or a need for adventure. But the third day out he had started walking. While the rest were around the campfire, or at the bathroom, or still unloading things from the car. Just turned to the woods and started walking.

At first it wasn’t too bad. Even at that age, the solemn cathedral of the forest brought a kind of solitude he appreciated, selecting a long crooked branch to prod at old logs, mushrooms, and the thin
stems of young trees that dared to begin their race upwards before the gatekeepers high overhead deemed them ready.

He turned back often, looking for someone following him, or maybe to see that they weren’t. The campsite slowly disappeared. He was glad. Then the trees turned harsh. The summer morning light that had filtered through at first, glowing yellow-green as it passed through the trees’ leaves turned harsh glaring white as it bounced and glittered off the leaves that darkened and hardened in the daylight, casting stark shadows on the ground.

The loneliness he found himself in sunk in slowly, trickling in with every heartbeat. The forest was at a constant slight slope downhill. He turned a few times, trying to cast his path back up the hill, but before he knew it he was back where he started, nose cast down into the valley. The tears came slowly at first, then all at once, until he sniffled them back, a thin dam still holding them back as he swiped at them with the back of his hand.

He nearly fell upon the road when he came upon it, a windy old thing that cut its way up the side of the mountain, the embankment coming out all of a sudden, a sheer two or three feet. He crawled down it slowly, clinging to roots in his tiny hamhanded fists. He sat there, arthritic stick by his side, sniffing, as the light grew whiter and whiter and the shadows grew darker. Down, around the bend, the hint of a roof, burnt brown, peeked out from above another embankment. Sean set his jaw resolutely. Too dangerous. Better to wait here. The road felt safer somehow. Safer than the building, and certainly safer than the forest. A car zoomed around the bend of the road. Sean wished it would stop for him, but told himself he was glad when it didn’t.

It felt like hours before they arrived. It was probably more like twenty minutes. The car came around the bend, as fast as Stephen would allow, and Cassie bounded out, scooping him up and wiping the tears away quickly, holding him tight to her chest. He never left her sight the rest of that week, still tightening every muscle in his little body every time they neared the forest.

He had thought that was the loneliest he could be. He realized now that was wrong. Even then, he had the trees, looming and austere though they were. This was true loneliness, blankness stretching out in every direction, broken only by ditches and thin zig-zagging lines of fences and hedges.

He had flown over this land often, and could remember how it felt from above, unfolding in a crude quiltwork, patches of brown and auburn spreading, baked safe and warm in the summer. Even from up there it looked big, a massive blanket over which the wisps of clouds hovered.

It felt plain and comforting from up there, a calm sea of land, or a smooth landing spot in case of disaster. Down below it felt the same. But it carried some danger. Just too much of the same. It had already embraced them. But now its embrace was growing smothering.
The snowflakes hung suspended in the air. “Like a snowglobe,” Alan noted to Jean beside him as the cacophony of gap-toothed children spinning about him like tops settled to a hum. “The world’s shittiest snowglobe.” He took a sip from the hotel’s branded paper coffee cup. “Coffee’s burnt,” He added.

She took a sip. “It’s a bit early for that kind of language, Alan,”

He shrugged at her, unimpressed. “That was meant to be a warning. Guess we really are a couple of addicts.”

“Two junkies washed up on the wrong side of the mountains for winter,”

“Jean, you amaze me every day. You really do have the soul of a poet.”

She snorted into her coffee. “And the stomach of a calf. Pass another half and half.”

“Are you trying to make ice cream? I have to tell you, it’s not going to work.”

She unloaded the little cup into her coffee, and stacked it in the pile of little shells that sat next to the newspaper, unfolded and unread before her. The thin red coffee stir traced circles around the edge, pinned by her finger. She looked old. Plain and simple. Her wrinkles had deepened. Maybe her hair had thinned. It was hard to tell. For so long she had looked the same way after the divorce. Like a snapshot was taken the day after the papers were finalized and she’d been frozen there. But she looked different now. The sunlight wasn’t kind to her. She had lost weight, but not in a good way. She was one of the handful in a 100 mile area who couldn’t afford to lose a few pounds, Alan mused. Emaciated. A gust shook him from his reverie and Anna tromped in, bringing with her a swirl of snow and panting. Shaking the snow from her jacket, she unbuttoned her front as the snow melted into her hair and brandished the brown paper bag she clutched in her right hand triumphantly.

“Look what I got!”

“What? Worried they won’t be authentic enough, Alan?” She grinned.

“No,” He leaned back and took another sip. “Just worried they’re from the same place Jean got fired from when she was seventeen. What was it you got fired for, Jean?”

“I quit.” She spat acidly.

“That’s right,” He grinned. “Being late.”

“I’m amazed they’re still open,” She shrugged. “Not very good bagels.”

“They must’ve figured out a better hiring process,” Alan speculated.

Anna set the bag down and her already flushed cheeks grew pinker. “I thought we might want to have a nice breakfast before we head out.”

Alan peeked inside the bag. “Did you bring a knife to cut the bagels with?”

She shook her head. Jean leaned forward to look inside as well.

“I don’t see any cream cheese.”

“I didn’t think to get any.”

“Didn’t they ask you if you wanted some?”

“I guess I didn’t hear.” She confessed sheepishly.

“Oh, good Lord.” Jean leaned back in her seat.

“Fuck it,” Alan shrugged and pulled out a cranberry walnut bagel to bite into its side. He nodded begrudgingly. “It’s bitter enough.”

“Being bitter enough for you is quite the accomplishment,” Jean nodded her admiration.

Alan turned his attention to Anna. “How are you, sister?”

Anna frowned, suspicious. “I’m alright, I guess,”
“You have to get home soon, right? How old are John and Nina now?”
“Nina’s in ninth and John’s a senior,” She allowed herself a smile.
Jean shook her head. “Too old,”
“And how old are yours, Jean?”
Jean looked up with a scowl.
Alan set down his bagel. “Jesus, Jean, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”
“It’s a good thing you never had kids, Alan,” Jean replied gently. “You probably would have traded them in for a software upgrade by now,” She smiled softly.
“Because I’m a robot? That’s just lazy, Jean. How long have you been sitting on that one? Did you come up with that one after the divorce? Or was it after—” Alan shifted in his seat to brush off the sting.
Anna rose abruptly. “I’m going to go change the tires.” She declared, turning and stomping out of the hotel.
“You think we did that?” Alan wondered innocently.
“After what?” Jean asked. “I’d hate to think you got bailed out of a good dig because we hurt our princess’s little ears.”
“I was going to say after Dad left you as much as me,” Alan shrugged. “Not my best, but still. You couldn’t even outearn the black sheep?”
“I did earn more than Edward,” She retorted.
“No,” He shook his head. “You earned the same as Edward. And I meant Dad’s black sheep. Not Mom’s. Or anyone with a functioning set of eyes and ears. And understanding of basic economics.”
“We all got the same?” She asked, incredulously.
“Not all of us,” He gestured out toward the parking lot with a tilt of his head. “All of the mortal children.”
“Well, of course I was never going to get as much as her!” Jean threw her hands up. “Not even fair.”
They stared out at the parking lot. Anna had fished the tire chains out of the car’s trunk and was squatting by the rear driver’s side tire fussing with the mess of metal lying before her.
“How long do you think she makes it before she gives up and asks for help?”
“Well,” Jean mused. “It’s a nice warm 20 degrees outside, and she’s got a phone with access to every one of the thousand how-to videos on the internet. So I’ll give her….ten minutes.”
“Naive,” Alan shook his head. “She’s coming in in tears after five.”
She waved the chains feebly around the tire in half-hearted attempts.
“What’s she doing out there?” Jean wondered irritably. “Is she flag dancing?”
“Landing an airplane, actually,” Alan muttered thoughtfully.
Anna tugged once more, then fell flat backwards into a sitting position.
Alan sighed. “I don’t suppose you remember how to chain tires, Jean?”
Jean shook her head. “I pay someone to do that shit for me when the need arises.”
Alan heaved a deep sigh. “Why is it always me?”
“God sent you to Earth to suffer, Alan,”
“Tell me about it.” He rose from his chair. “I really am this family’s guardian angel.”
“That explains a lot, actually,” Jean called to his back as he walked out and into the steady snow.
The light that filtered through the blinds seemed dirty somehow. Maggie rolled over in bed and her rumpled mess of a comforter followed her. She looked at the clock, and let the time sink in. It was Saturday. Probably. Yes. She rolled over again. The bed was too warm. She looked at the clock again. Might as well. Andrew would be waiting soon. He could afford to wait a little longer. She stood and slumped into the bathroom. She stared in the mirror, but avoided her face.

She had never figured out how she had inherited her father’s body but neither of her parent’s height. She looked healthy, her friends told her. Her mother was rail-thin, after all. Dangerously skinny. The night had not been gentle to her. Her hair was half-mussed like wet straw, only just beginning to settle into sleep when she woke, and her eyes were puffy. Sleep didn’t come easily anymore, not the way it had in college, and not the way it had in high school, when the nothingness of sleep was far preferable to the bothersome gray that sat about the house. She splashed some water on her face, then some more. It wasn’t cold enough. She dried herself off with the hand towel and stalked toward the kitchen, pausing to stare down the closet. She would figure that out soon enough.

Turning into her kitchen, she felt the hardwood change to linoleum underfoot and glanced at the phone facedown on the counter. Two texts from Andrew. She fired off a quick reply. She would be there soon enough. She popped a coffee pod from the cabinet into her machine, letting the machine run and splatter for a second before remembering to slide a mug beneath it. She paced in laps around the apartment’s common room while she waited. She would have to find a roommate soon enough, she supposed. But there was something about it like this, suspended in time. Between roommates, like it was trapped in amber. Even the dust motes froze in the air. There was always a carousel of roommates circling through. Some good, some bad. She didn’t think it was her fault. Most of them left the city afterwards. But she stayed on. It was nice. Her coffee was done. She took a sip and almost spat it out. She’d accidentally chosen hazelnut again. Damn.

She walked back into the bedroom and eyed her closet. She’d have to pick an outfit soon. Brunch with Andrew shouldn’t be too painful. He usually behaved himself. But there was no telling. She pulled out a muted crimson skirt. Thick material. Ended just above the knees. It would go well with the cream blouse. Seersucker. It didn’t get cold here. Never got wet. That was what she couldn’t stand about back home. Always wet. It seeped into your shoes clear through to your feet. Wrinkled you the wrong way and followed you around all day till you were ready to rip them off and just walk barefoot. A lot of things up there were like there.

It was in the fifties at worst outside, but it would be garish to wear sandals. Better to opt for wedges. No one could complain that way. Except maybe Andrew. He’d probably be wearing a workout shirt and shorts. If he remembered to clothe himself. Sometimes she wondered how he managed living alone too. It was hard on her, and she was capable of taking care of herself. Sometimes miracles moved slowly, she thought to herself. She took another sip of coffee and grimaced as it went down. She threw on a scarf for good measure, and strutted out the door towards the elevator, pausing to check for car keys and her phone. All good.

The elevator moved slow. It always did. It shuddered as it reached the ground floor, before its doors yawned open. That was new. She paced out, and nodded to the front desk operator. He was friendly enough. A little creepy, but at least he wasn’t a sourpuss like the last one. And he never asked questions. Not that she had anything to hide. But she liked to hide things just the same. It was her business and no one else’s.

She veered to the right and began to scan the parking garage. In a sea of sedans, she found her way to her car, glossy and black as tar. She took a seat and took a deep breath before sliding the key into
The car rumbled to life as she knew it would and hoped it wouldn’t. She backed out slowly but surely, head swiveling once to each side for the benefit of Colin a few hundred miles away.

Hopefully Andrew was staying at his usual hotel. Otherwise he was up shit’s creek. She turned right and clenched her jaw over the cobblestone. Great for bringing in stupid young couples looking for a view but a nightmare for anyone with a car or a brain.

She barely glanced at the highway as she merged onto it. There were hotels closer to her. Andrew knew that. And he knew that she knew that. But he kept booking this place anyway. No good reason. Pool was smaller than the others. Same cookiecutter rooms. Maybe it was just to needle her. It didn’t work. Or at least only a little. Cars flew past as she brought herself up to speed, only to veer back off the highway for his exit. What a waste for a mile and a half, tops. Maybe less.

Traffic was stop and go, and there were hardly any traffic. Drivers around here. She supposed every region complained about how bad their drivers were. It was funny to think about. Wondered where the good drivers must come from. You hear a lot about them. Maybe they’re not there. It was easy to be a bad driver. Not easy to be a good driver. Odd that drivers were measured against a standard of good if everyone was so bad.

Andrew was waiting under the hotel’s awning as she rolled up and he slid in.

“Took you sweet time, huh?”

“You can walk,” She checked her nails. “Good to see you, Andrew.”

He leaned over and gave her a sloppy kiss on the cheek. “Good to see you too. How’ve you been?”

She shrugged. “Been better, been worse.”

He nodded. “I hear that.”

She pulled quickly back onto the road.

“Same place as usual, Mags?”

“Yes.” He grunted and she cast a withering look his way. “If you don’t like it, you can make the reservation.”

“I like to be surprised,” He pouted.

“I’m sure.” She peered at the traffic that bottlenecked ahead and took a sharp right turn.

“Easy there,” He cautioned. She rolled her eyes.

“Looks busy,” Andrew commented as they rolled past the brunch spot carefully.

“That’s why I made a reservation, Andrew,” She sang back to him as she leaned forward to poach out a parking spot.

Turning suddenly, she slipped into a narrow spot. “Careful opening your door.”

“No kidding,” Andrew whistled. “I’m flattered by how skinny you think I am,” He sized up the car that loomed inches away from his window.

Wedging their way out carefully, they padded out of the parking garage and into the morning light. The trendy square glistened in the sunlight, the way it only did during the mild winter, clear and white, before the haziness of summer could spread thick and humid. Andrew held out his arm for her but she brushed it off.

“Jackass,” She muttered as he snickered. He held the door open and she rolled her eyes.

“Reservation for two under Jackson, please,” She lectured to the waitress by the front door.

Smiling politely, the girl who couldn’t be two years into college showed them to a table and held out the floppy laminated menus.
“Two coffees, please,” Maggie asked before the waitress could launch into an introduction. She nodded and hurried away.

“Someone’s not having a great morning,” Andrew mused.

“Someone’s eaten here more than enough because her brother is too obnoxious to tell her he doesn’t like it.”

“Never said I didn’t like it. Variety is the spice of life, is all.”

“I’m sure. I’m assuming you’re getting the french toast again.”

“Probably. Maybe I’ll get a mimosa too.”

“It won’t do anything for you.”

“Maybe I’m drinking it for the taste.”

“When have you ever had fruit for the taste? When have you ever had fruit?”

“Easy there, tiger.”

The buzz of the restaurant around them sank in.

“What are you getting?”

“Omelette, probably. I’m not sure.”

Their waitress slid two mugs of coffee before them nervously.

“Are you folks ready to order?”

Maggie turned and looked at her. It was one of those restaurants that seemed to have been on the up and up for the past five years. Clean lighting and light wood. Tea lights on each table even in broad daylight. Raw juices no one ever ordered. Food that was “responsibly sourced.” That line was hard to buy when the boxes of Bisquick could be seen lining the kitchen shelves from their seat. The waitress wore just a light dusting of makeup and nude lipstick with a burlap apron hanging from her waist.

“French toast, please.” Andrew grinned at her like he was thirty years younger.

She frowned at the menu. “I’ll have the farmhouse omelette, please.” She handed the menu back to the waitress, who bustled back away.

She turned her attention back to her brother. He hulked in the booth, his shoulders hanging up and over the back of bench.

“How was your flight down?” She threw out.

“It was alright,” He shrugged. “Not too long and I got some sleep in.”

“Good,”

“Have you talked to Dad recently?”

“Not really,” She shrugged.

“Hmm,” He nodded.

“How’s he doing?”

“He’s alright, he’s alright,” Andrew thought aloud. “You met Karen last time you were up, right?”

“Nope,” She shook her head. “He mentioned they had started talking online though. How is she?”

He shrugged. “She’s good for him. I think. It’s hard to tell at that age. He’s doing fine. He’s Dad.”

“Can’t argue with that,” She remarked wrily and took a sip of her coffee.

“Did you hear about Grandma?”

She nodded slowly. “I think so. When’s she doing it?”

“Tomorrow,” He confirmed with a solemn nod.
“And it’s legal up there?”
“Must be. Although if it wasn’t I can’t imagine that would stop her.”
Maggie laughed. “It’d take Mom out with a heart attack, though,”
“That’s true,” Andrew nodded. “You remember that time she caught me drinking?”
“You mean the time you threw up on the carpet and the house smelled like vodka for a week?”
“I think you and I have very different memories of that.”
“Only because you don’t remember it.”
“Well, either way, I hadn’t seen her that mad before. Still haven’t, I don’t think.”
“I have,” Maggie shrugged. “I was just worried I was going to have to take care of you blacked out and Mom with an aneurism.”
“Are you going to the funeral?” He shifted in the booth and knocked the table leg with his knee, so the coffee cups quivered.
“Maybe,” Maggie speculated. “Have they picked a date yet?”
Andrew shrugged. “Next week, probably. I’d have to call Mom. Probably a weekday. I think they want to have it in the cathedral.”
“Sounds about right,” Maggie thought. “I don’t think I’ve been back since Grandpa’s. Have you?”
Andrew paused and stirred a creamer into his coffee. “I don’t think so.” He took a sip and grimaced. “Is this soy?”
“Well,” Maggie assessed. “That’s what the creamer’s lid says.”
“Whatever,” Andrew took a swig. “Feels like it was just yesterday. How long was that?”
Maggie frowned. “Fourteen years? Sean was just barely out of diapers.”
“And Mom still had a perm.”
“Yeah. That too,” Maggie muttered darkly.
Their waitress bustled back over with two heaping plates that she lowered in front of them, then hurried away.
“That looks good,” Andrew offered.
“It has something green in it. Don’t patronize me.”
He shrugged and began to drown his french toast in syrup. “You’re not actually going back for the funeral, are you?”
Maggie paused. “No. But neither are you.”
“No. But as long as we’re being honest.”
“You don’t think Dad will go, do you?”
“He probably will. Alone.”
“That should be enough to have her rolling over before they put her in her grave.”
Andrew raised an eyebrow.
“Am I wrong?”
“Yeah, kind of,” He guffawed. “She didn’t give a shit. And Colin was the only one who actually wanted her to like him.”
“Yeah, I guess,” Maggie conceded. “How long do you think it’ll take him to put his foot in his mouth?”
“Five minutes, tops,” Andrew asserted. “It’s a talent of his.”
“What do you think it’ll be? Ed’s going broke? Anna’s issues?”
“Who could say. He’s as delicate as a grizzly bear with poison ivy.”
Maggie nodded. “Sure is. Sure is.”
Maggie chewed a bite of omelette thoughtfully. It was already getting cold. Not cold.

Lukewarm.
“When was the last time you talked to Mom?”
Maggie swallowed carefully, then dabbed the edges of her mouth with her napkin. “I don’t know. Is she really using you too, now?”
Andrew laughed quietly. “No, nothing like that. But you should talk to her. She’s got some stuff you’ll probably want to hear.”
“I’ve already heard all of it.”
“No. It’s probably not.”

Andrew paused to wipe the syrup from his fingers. “Not my place.”
“Why don’t you tell me then, if it’s so important?”
Andrew chuckled. “Guess my age is getting to me.”
“I don’t think that’s it.”
“Sure is. Sure is.”
The rapping on the door was gentle but firm. Had to be Jean. Ruth craned for the faint greeting, and rasped an invitation in.

The door creaked open slowly and the three of them crept in, carpet muffling their steps like deer in the forest. Two peeled off by the kitchen until only continued on toward her, timid but certain. The door swung open. Jean had meant for a gentle entrance but had overestimated the weight of the door, then flinched as it rammed into the drywall.

“Sorry, Mom,”
Ruth brushed her off with the back of her hand. “Good to finally hear something.”
Jean grunted like a ruffled bird. “Well, I’m here to take care of you now. So what can I do for you?”

Ruth folded her hands in her lap. “Nothing. I’m quite alright.”
“Mom,”
“I am.” Ruth nodded assuredly. “I don’t need anything.”
Jean folded her arms. “Are you hungry?”
Ruth shook her head determinedly.
“Thirsty, then?”
“No.”
“So there’s nothing for us to do?”
“No.”
“So if we’re free to leave if we want to?”
“Someone has to drive me to church this evening.”
“Got it.” Jean sucked her teeth. “Incredible.”
“What do you want me to say, Jean? Didn’t I tell you I loved you enough growing up?”
Jean sighed, and turned toward the door. “I want you to tell me what I can do for you.”
Ruth grimaced. “I’m fine. There’s nothing you can do for me.”
“Congratulations, Mom,”
“For what?” Ruth growled.
“For having kids just like you.” Jean turned and headed out the door. It slammed shut behind her.

Alan and Anna sat silently on the loveseat, legs pressed together as Jean paced back in. Anna rose quickly, but Jean stormed past them and to the coat rack, snatching the first formless black jacket she could see and throwing it on, opening the door ever so slightly and slipping out the crack, calling behind her.

“I’m going for a walk.”

Anna stayed up, wandering over to the bay window. The community was located on a plateau, a little rounded hilltop about halfway up the shallow side of the valley, small and rounded out by ages of glaciers. The bay window faced out to the south end of the valley, away from the city below. Snow was still falling heavily. Heavier than she had seen in a long time, but not the heaviest she had seen. The kind of snow that would make John grumble at dinner, then shuffle out to the garage to find the tires’ chains while Ruth warmed something sweet to chase his evening whiskey. Zucchini bread, maybe. Or a crumble, on the odd occasion she was able to find fruit in the grocery store this time of year. Much better than it used to be, she would remind them. It was near impossible to find fish on Fridays in the first few years after they were married. Had to befriend the outdoorsmen and their wives at a gas station some
miles out of town, whose freezers were packed full when the water was too cold but not cold enough for ice fishing.

The few snowstorms Anna had seen since she left had always felt casual, almost joking. You could still almost make the sun out behind the clouds. This snow was something different, a heavy white haze that blurred the line between the horizon and the ground. The morning TV she had had running while she got ready this morning had suggested another few inches were still coming their way. It would keep on well into the night. That’s how it was here, she thought. Weather was flighty, flitting across the broad borders of the state, till it got trapped by the knife’s-edged ridges of the valley, and got trapped. It wasn’t quite so severe in the summer, when the sun-baked earth beat away the clouds, but in the winter, what little warmth was left traveled back huddled together, getting lassoed into valleys for a few days before waltzing away, a false spring in the midst of a deep winter, bringing a week or so of thaws before another freeze, as sharp and severe as the last settled in, obstinate and churlish.

By the time she was twelve or thirteen, she could cope with the cold. She learned all the tricks she needed. Socks in bed. Two pairs to go outside. A cup of Earl Grey with her oatmeal in the morning. Blankets stashed under her bed. By the sofa. By her desk. Hats stuffed into pockets and purses. Gloves that stayed on for so long she almost forgot how it felt for her fingers to touch.

But it had taken her a while to learn. She would lie in bed for days, arms squeezed tights to her sides and ankles folded back into her legs, groaning laboriously and peering obsessively at the thermometer that hung from just outside her window. It would grow worse when warm snaps would descend, then disappear as quickly as they had come. She would wail and pout, begging John to take her in the car and chase the warmth wherever it had gone. Ruth would smack the back of her head and tell her to get moving. The warmth was gone, she said. Dissipated back into the cold. But Anna knew better. Knew that it had merely been chased away. That it was still out there.

John would sit her on his knee, and reassure her that it was just a scout for spring, making sure they were ready. That the warmth would return before she knew it. Then he would dry her tears and make a mug of hot cocoa into hers, emptying a few drops of amber liquid into his. It was for extra warmth, he would tell her.

She wondered how far she would have to travel to catch the warmth. It couldn’t be too far now. It was never too far, maybe roaming somewhere over the vast emptiness of Wyoming or the plains back east. But it could always be caught.

Behind her Alan shifted. She turned around. He crossed his legs, then uncrossed them.

“You alright, Alan?”

“Just a bit of cabin fever, I think,” He leapt up, and strode over to observe the bookshelf, loaded down with old tomes of Catholic thought and trinkets from decades of travel. He ran a finger over the books, their pages unevened and smoothed by age. “Ninety years and still nothing readable,” He shook his head.

Anna turned wearily to him. “Check the drawers underneath.”

He frowned, then squatted down and opened up the cabinets. Ancient board games, faded by decades, sat. He smiled. “How did you know they were there, Anna?”

Anna shrugged. “There wasn’t much to do after you moved out, I guess.”

Alan frowned. “I’m not that much older than you.”

Anna turned back to the windows.

“Would you be interested in a game of battleship, sister?” Alan peered at the games.
Anna grunted her decline.

“Your loss,” He muttered, as he wrested out a jigsaw puzzle from the stacks. “750 pieces. Not too bad.”

He gave it a testy shake, then walked back and left it by his seat, only to fish out a card table from the closet and pour it out.

“Old Faithful Geyser,” Alan read from the box lid. “You would think they would get tired of the Rockies after a while.”

He began to turn over pieces methodically, flicking them forcefully into the table. Anna stared out at the snow.

“You know, it’ll be falling for a few more hours still,” Alan advised. “You can look away.”

“Forgot what it looked like,” Anna replied absentmindedly.

“Well, you don’t have to look very long to get a general idea. Oh, corner piece.”

The door down the hallway creaked open. Slow, deliberate footsteps fell, heavy and uneven. Ruth braced herself against the doorframe as she turned to face them.

“Good morning,” She nodded to them. They nodded back, wordlessly.

“Did Jean head out?”

Alan nodded, already returning engrossed to his puzzle. “Left for a walk.”

“Good. That girl’s crazy was rubbing off on me.”

Anna turned from the window, making a few steps toward Ruth offering support before being waved off with an ornery hand. Ruth’s strides were short and choppy, falling heavily on her hips with each step in a near-limp. Flat-footed, her legs seemed to drag underneath her straight-legged linen pale blue pants. Her hand snaked out to grasp the back of her armchair as she rounded about it to take her seat. Her hand was papery and gaunt now, thin skin clinging to it like the skin on a chicken’s drumstick while veins weaved about beneath it, splotches of discoloration melding across the skin until they were barely discernible. She took a seat with a weighty finality and looked up at Anna as she sank lower. Her eyes were tired and bloodshot, sunken deep beneath dark rings. Their green was fading to a shallow blue.

“I’d like a whiskey, please,” She stated firmly.

Anna hesitated.

“If you think I’m planning on leaving a single damned drop for Edward, think again.” She growled. “On the rocks.”

“Jean’s not here. Shouldn’t be a problem.” Alan muttered, hunched over her puzzle.

Anna’s face broke as she resigned herself and turned toward the kitchen.

“No, no,” Ruth thought out loud. “Alan had better pour it. You never could pour drinks. It was the only thing your father couldn’t stand about you.”

Anna nodded, subdued, and had a seat on the loveseat across from Ruth again as Alan arose.

“What are you doing?” Ruth barked.

“Cooking you breakfast,” Alan sang back. “Can’t have you drinking on an empty stomach.

“I’m not going to eat it,” Ruth grunted.
“Stranger things have happened,” Alan brushed her off. Anna sighed. “Quit sighing, Anna. You sound like you’re auditioning for Gone with the Wind.” Ruth scowled. “Maybe I did miss this, after all,” Alan mused as he cracked two eggs into a glass bowl. Anna turned back to the window. Alan began yanking drawers open and shutting them just as rapidly, occasionally whipping out an implement. “Quit all the banging,” Ruth complained from her seat. “Wouldn’t have to if your organization made any kind of sense,” Alan replied. “Hasn’t stopped you from cooking there for the past week,” Ruth pouted. “I suppose my goodwill has finally run out,” Alan retorted. “So you’d been running on fumes for what? Forty years now?” “I don’t have to make you breakfast, mother.” “And I’d rather you didn’t,” Ruth took a sip of her whiskey. Alan turned back to the counter, rolling up his sleeves. “If you don’t get some food in your stomach that drink’ll hit so hard you’ll be the second biggest sadsack in this apartment.” “Fine.” Ruth spat. Anna opened her mouth to protest, then closed it and turned back to the bay window. “Mom, is there a storm this big every winter?” Ruth glared at the window. “How much has fallen?” Anna frowned. “I’m not sure. Probably about a foot and a half so far.” Ruth took another sip. “I’m not sure. They all blend together. Doesn’t really make a difference. Either way, it’s too much of the stuff. Size of the storm doesn’t really make a difference. It evens out by the end of the season. And it’s too damn much.” “It’s still important,” Alan cautioned. “Wouldn’t be much water to go around without it.” Ruth grunted. “Doesn’t make it less of a pain in the ass.” “Can’t argue with that,” Alan admitted, as he poured the egg, sizzling, into his frying pan. Ruth took another sip. “Jean told you all we’ll be going to church tonight?” Alan set down his spatula and leaned against the counter. “Must we, really?” “I trust you both still remember church?” Anna turned to Alan, still sinking into the counter, for support, but found none. “Why, Mom? Are you trying to collect rollover time for purgatory now?” Ruth laughed mirthlessly. “It’ll be a nice dry run for tomorrow, I suppose.” “Fine.” Alan sighed, and shoved the scrambled eggs onto a waiting plate lined with toast. Ruth straightened up in her seat a bit. “Good.” Alan toted the plate over to her. She wrinkled her nose at it. “I’m not eating that.” “You can’t do a single thing to humor me, can you?” “I guess not. Is that sourdough?” “Yes. Will you at least eat that?” “No. It’s too yeasty.”
“It’s bread. I’d be concerned if it weren’t yeasty. Unless that’s why you’re making us go to church tonight.”
Anna let out a small laugh.
“They use wafers here.” Ruth grumbled.
“Of course they do,” Alan conceded. “Well, I suppose someone had better be a member of the clean plate club here.” He sat down at the table and contemplated the dish briefly before digging his fork in heartily.
“How is it?” Anna humored him.
“Too hot,” He gasped, chewing with an open mouth before finally swallowing it. “But not bad. You’re missing out,” He called toward Ruth.
“I’m sure,”
He took another bite. Anna took a seat across from him.
“Are you alright?” She gazed at him, eyes steady with concern.
“Of course,” He scoffed. “I’m just a little tired. But I’m fine.”
“Okay,” Anna gave up. “Just tell me if I can do anything for you.”
He nodded. She stood up and wandered back to the window. Below, she could make a thin figure in black struggling through the snow. Jean’s legs kicked up high, flinging snow up, then sprawling out, leaving her nearly in splits and gasping for breath.
“Should someone help Jean?” Anna wondered aloud.
“Would you want to help Jean?” Alan asked.
“She’d probably bite off an EMT’s head.”
“Well, she wouldn’t need them,” Alan mimicked Jean’s voice. “She’s a nurse, you know.”
Ruth snickered and took a sip. Alan wiped the plate, now clean, with the crust of sourdough, then swallowed it, rising to deposit the plate in the sink.
Anna stepped away from the window, pacing around, taking a glance at the jigsaw puzzle slowly taking form, before depositing herself back in the loveseat.

Alan stood in the kitchen frowning for a moment, hand posited on his chin. Breathing deeply with a confused look on his face, he turned wordlessly and paced out of the apartment, hardly caring to close the apartment door behind him. Breaking into a trot, he hurtled down the hallways of the community, making a left toward where he was sure there was a bathroom.
Flinging the door open, he found a stall, and squatted, breathing heavily.
It came from deep beneath in him. He retched once, twice, three times, before it began. It came in waves. At first he tried to fight it back but he embraced his misery, throwing up until he had nothing left in his stomach, and even then kept spitting up. He flushed the toilet twice and knelt there, leaning on the toilet seat as his panting subsided, trying to spit out the acid from his mouth.
The air was moist. The vistas wound their way through the cliffs, down towards the ocean. They were strangely empty, especially for a Saturday. Nina bounced along the trail, steering around the carpets of dead needles that encircled the sparse pines. The coppery little blades could stick to her shoes and flick up, landing on her, or fall off slowly but surely, leaving a trail behind her. She didn’t want a trail.

It was unseasonably warm, but only slightly. Just warm enough to bother her on her run. The sky was a dull gray and the ocean’s faint rushing matched her own panting. She had led off too quickly, then slowed too much. She shook her head as she picked up her pace once more, matching her stride to her breathing. Two strides, one breath in. Two strides, one breath out. Her braid was too thick and thwacked against her back. She needed a haircut. But not too short, or else she wouldn’t be able to tie it back. She sighed, then regretted it. She couldn’t afford to waste the air.

She wished it were colder. Not too cold. Just enough to sting. This weather was thoroughly unimpressive. Just uncomfortable enough to be noticed. The path opened up and cut down the slope all the way to the edge of a bluff, high and misty. She cut down the trail, stride opening up with the downhill, springing forward from the balls of her feet.

She slowed, then stopped as she came to the edge of the bluff. Just so faintly, if she closed her eyes lightly and steadied her breathing, she could feel the fine spray of the ocean splatter against her cheeks. She breathed deeply, feeling the salt dry her lungs as the ocean spray and sweat mixed along her brow. She opened her eye and readjusted the headband that had begun to slide up her head, pulling it down tight over her forehead once again.

Her mother was about fifty degrees colder. She had checked in the newspaper that morning. How could Anna do it? She wore gloves when driving even here in the winter. On their rare ski trips, she stayed under blankets in the lodge as Ben, who had spent half of his childhood shirtless on beaches took them down the slopes. It was no wonder she hadn’t been back in over a dozen years. So long Nina could barely remember the last trip.

That trip had come in the dead of winter, too. Not that you could tell from here. Unless there was a mudslide. Just a few days. Even shorter notice than this trip. And a shorter trip too. When she got back she had had that look in her eyes. That look Nina didn’t know yet, but meant tears were coming. She didn’t see it often, even now.

She held it off, that first time. For a few hours. Sat through dinner. Put them to bed. It was a cool night, and Nina’s feet were cold. Hunched up in bed, she had burrowed deeper and deeper. Her throat grew drier and drier. First very slowly, then all at once. Digging deeper into bed, she had rationalized in her head, swallowed several times, trying to chase it away before resigning herself and scampering out. Tiptoeing toward the bathroom where, with any luck, the stool would be positioned just right for her to get a sip herself, she saw the downstairs light on around the bend in the stairs. Creeping down, she listened, hearing nothing. Then she heard deep breathing in a way she had only heard from herself and John, though he pretended not to. Then she heard the step creak under her foot. The breathing hesitated, and she wandered into sight. Her mother was seated at the kitchen table alone, head in her hands, face streaked with tears.

Relief broke across her mother’s face, then her own. She trotted over and hopped into her lap, nuzzling up tenderly. Her mother’s arms wrapped around her familiarly. But they had never shaken before. She felt her mother’s chest rise and fall unevenly against her ear. Her own tears surprised her but they came all the same. She did not cry because she was sad. She cried because it seemed like the right thing to do.
Nina turned away from the ocean, back to the ridgeline. She could feel the spray starting to dampen her legs as she set off again. She had forgotten what that face looked like. The face that forecast tears like a red sky in the morning. But she always remembered it when she saw it again. It was rare. Only ever when she and Ben fought, usually.

They fought strangely, Nina thought. Never in full-throated yells or hysterics, the way she and John fought when they were younger, or she and her friends fought now. In a whisper, always standing close together. Anna fighting to tame the highs and lows of her voices, and Ben’s voice flat and placid.

Two months ago she had been watching a movie. She had started it far too late but it was a Friday. Ben had stayed up with her, pretending not to doze off from the other end of the couch. But awake enough to catch John sneaking in. He had sent John to bed, and finished the movie with Nina as her mother laid asleep overhead.

That next day was a strange one. Disjointed, Nina thought. Like there were two separate households. Ben had been firm but fair at breakfast. Direct. But Anna had stood behind him, arms crossed. She refused to make eye contact with John. Only cast furtive glances at Nina.

She was slowing again. She snarled at herself and tucked her chin, digging her toes in further as she worked up a slight slope.

It had continued all evening, till John confided to Nina that he wished she would just yell at him. Or curse at him. Or hit him. Anything other than the stony silence. Like he didn’t exist.

He went to bed early that night. She stayed up and watched another movie with Ben. She wasn’t sure who it was supposed to make feel better. Ben had risen after fifteen minutes, then paced to the dim kitchen where he’d stood with Anna. They had fought, she thought. Whispered to each other again. She couldn’t make out the words. Anna pouted. Then Ben laughed. Nina had thought it odd—at first she thought it was her own tired mind’s confusion. But Ben didn’t laugh. Not the way Anna and Nina did, to humor others. There was no polite laughter. Only deserving laughter. But he had laughed three times, humorlessly. And as Nina craned her neck from a room over, she could just make out what he whispered to her mother.

“Remember, Anna. You’re raising John and Nina. Not yourself.” His voice was gravelly.

Nina had turned around abruptly at that. Then she caught a glimpse of Anna’s face. And she saw it again. She whipped back around, hoping to fool herself into unseeing it. But it was there.

Ben didn’t rejoin her. They filed upstairs, both defeated, leaving her alone below.

It was there when she followed them up an hour or so later. She paused at the sobs she heard coming from the bedroom to her right. Then she lowered her head and turned left.

She could feel her pace slow. She bit down and muttered a few curses, and her strides caught a spurt of speed. She was rounding back toward the neighborhood now. Less than a mile to go.

She didn’t know what it meant, what Ben had said. But she didn’t think she wanted to know.

Family was a funny thing, Nina thought. Even marriage. It was odd to her, that her father had made her mother cry. Or maybe it was normal. She hoped not. But maybe. It was strange. Because they loved each other. They really did. Nina knew that much. Had seen it every day of her life. But she was lucky not to see the other side. That she knew. It was strange, she decided. Strange that someone who loved you could cause you so much grief. Or maybe that you could love someone who caused you so much grief.
“Thought I wouldn’t make it,” Edward muttered to himself as he rounded about the edge of the community, his truck dashing against the snow banks on each side of the narrow road every few seconds. He’d made it through the worst of the snow by Bozeman, perhaps. Snow was still falling heavy here, but the road was visible at least.

Less than eight hours driving straight. Not too bad. Stephen would be here by now if he could drive like that. But that wasn’t his business. He’d stopped for a few smokes, to be sure. Cracked a window here and there. But the upholstery would dry out. Worst part was most of the trip was in silence. But that was better than the static he was getting. Real shame the truck didn’t get satellite. But that was throwing money away.

He ran a hand over his face as he backed the truck into a nook. He could feel the ruddiness in his face, and he sniffed, short and proud. Not bad at all. Climbing out, his legs buckled, then locked, as he reminded them of his full weight. Stretching fully, his back opened up and he yawned ferociously. Driving wasn’t too bad of a hangover cure, he supposed. Though he wagered he would clean out Ruth’s apartment by the time he made it up.

Checking for his keys, he stepped from the drafty garage into the cloistered warmth of the community, feeling the lush carpeting dense with melted snow under his boots. He tapped his foot impatiently as he waited for the elevator. In a rush, and for what? To go from sitting still in his truck for hours to sitting still in her apartment, he noted ruefully. Just a whole lot of sitting. But this time he could eat while he sat.

Two retirees filed out of the elevator, giving him politely tight-lipped smiles from under their thinning silvery perms. He tipped his baseball cap to them. Left the cowboy hat in the truck. This wasn’t the place. The inside of the elevator was plastered with posters for outings. Movie theaters, malls. Dinners out. Trips Ruth had never taken.

The elevator came to a halt. The doors slid open. He adjusted his cap and stopped out into the hallway, checking both ways before setting out towards the room. The halls were too warm, and he had already begun to sweat under the heavy layers. Suppose they had to be. The hallways were too narrow. They seemed to close in on him. Made him feel light-headed. The ceiling was low, and he lurched forward awkwardly as though his steps weren’t as long as he expected them to be.

The community didn’t feel quite like a graveyard. Not that dark. But there was something unsettling about it all. The numbered rooms, with names posted neatly beside. It was too warm. Far too warm. And too cramped. He’d have to remind Sarah that he would never be moving somewhere here. Better to die alone and free. Without some single mom from a trailer park in scrubs bustling in on him in the bath. That wouldn’t do. No one wanted to get that old.

He was here. Right at the end of the hall. It had been the apartment they were told was free. Somehow he suspected she had pulled some strings. A corner apartment. Far end of the hallway. Far from other doors. It was too perfect for her.

Nothing perfect was real.

He always forgot how light doors were here. He supposed they needed to be. Couldn’t have a whole load of seniors getting stuck out of their doors every day. The door swung back and struck the frame and he stepped in, mumbling an apology. Looking about the apartment, it was sunken deep in a lethargic sort of stupor. Anna sat nearest to the window, grayish light filtering through her hair, legs pulled up tightly underneath herself as she wedged herself into the love seat. Alan sat sleepily, staring at a jigsaw puzzle, the very edges of which were beginning to coalesce on the card table he leaned over from his seat in an armchair. Ruth sat in her proper arm chair, bony hands gripping the edges, chin tilted
slightly up in the little light allowed through the window, savoring the warmth. She slept soundly unperturbed by the door, her chest rising and falling steadily as if she were a dozen years younger. Alan and Anna looked at him owlishly, blinking curiously.

Taken aback, he took a few steps into the room and nodded courteously to his brother and sister. “Afternoon,” he noted. They nodded back.

“Where’s Jean?” he frowned.

“Still out,” Anna replied, gesturing broadly with one hand at the window behind her.

“Alright,” Edward noted, sliding off his jacket to hang it from the coat rack. “Pretty quiet around here, huh?”

Anna nodded. “I guess everyone’s tired.”

“Sure, sure,” Edward stepped warily into the center of the room, eyeing the three around him. He pulled his cap from his head, beginning to run his fingers along its brim. “How’s the puzzle coming along, Alan?”

“Slowly,” Alan shrugged, looking away to stare at Edward wide-eyed. “But I suppose it’s not too bad.”

“Harder than your court cases? You going to challenge this one in the Supreme Court?”

“Different kind of hard,” Alan frowned, more confused than angry. “Different kind of hard. Do you see any green that I’m missing?”

Edward peered down at the puzzle, then shook his head. “Boy, you all seem pretty mellow.” He squatted low. Picking up one blot of conjoined pieces, he peered at it, pinched between his thick fingers. “You know, Alan, I’m not sure these pieces go together.” Picking them apart, he set them back on the table one at a time.

“Edward, please,” Anna cautioned plaintively from the love seat.

He righted himself and threw his hands up in surrender. “Alright, then,”

Alan continued to placidly run his fingers over the puzzle pieces.

Shaking his head in bewilderment, Edward stepped into the kitchen. “Don’t suppose there’s anything worth eating left in the house?” Opening the cabinets, he began to answer his own question. “Guess not,” he muttered to himself. “Something worth drinking left,” he noted as he made his way to the bottom cabinet, nimbly plucking out the handle there, snagging a crystal glass from the upper cabinet and pouring himself a drink. Anna stared at him numbly.

Taking a sip, he let out an appreciative sigh. He set it down on the counter and began a second look around the kitchen, checking cabinets with a more accepting eye this time.

He heard the click of the door opening, though it didn’t slam against drywall this time. Jean stepped timidly into the apartment. She assessed the apartment cautiously, then took a few more steps in, peeling off gloves and a jacket floured liberally with snow. “Hello, Edward,” she nodded his way. He returned her gesture.

“How are you, Jean?”

“I’m alright.” She sniffed. “Where have you been?”

He yawned and stretched his arms wide. “Been back east. I had some business to attend to out there.”

She nodded, mind far away. “Good, good. That’s quite a drive.”

“Not too bad when it’s just me. I can go a while. Sarah stayed home to take care of bingo. Or a bake sale. Something of that nature. I can’t keep them straight. Something with the church.” He puffed his chest proudly like a bird in heat.
“Hmm,” Jean grunted, peeling off another layer of jackets and slipping out of her boots. “Has Mom said anything?”

“No,” Ruth replied. The children all jumped. Her eyes were just barely open, enough to see but not enough for them to notice.

“How long have you been awake, Mom?” Anna asked, shaken.

Ruth shrugged. “I don’t know. But I’m warm. Nothing to complain about.”

“And your back feels fine?” Jean asked, bustling toward her.

Ruth brushed her back. “I feel fine. Now, don’t forget,” Ruth rose shakily, glaring at the children as they all started to help her. “We’ve got church this evening. I’ll be in my room if anyone needs me.” She walked slowly, wobbling slightly, back to her room, ignoring the cane they had left by her seat.

She braced herself against the frame of her bedroom door, levering herself around the corner and leaving her children behind her, still stunned. She closed the door behind her firmly, leaning heavily on the door knob. Taking a seat on her bed, she slipped out her contact book from a stack of books on her bedside table and began to leaf through it, thumbing through pages as she fumbled for her bedside receiver, keeping her eyes fixed on the book.

She stopped to fix her sleeves, pulling them back over her wrist. Her hands had first begun to show their age in her sixties, swelling and twisting with arthritis. She had been too proud to admit it, denying perms and thick glasses, slipping on black leather decades-old driving gloves before leaving the house, refusing to look down at her hands as they withered. She had realized, after two years, while at mass with Jean and her family. Back when John used to take both of them travelling, loading their suitcases into their station wagon, throwing back his neck in cartoonish grimaces to hide the real pangs in his back. Next to Andrew during the Lord’s Prayer, he had begun to play with her hands, running his fingers over the bones that prodded out.

It was a foolish vanity. Not that her life had any shortage of those. But it was a quick one to root out, she had thought to herself, tucking the gloves back into her purse, never pulling them out again.

Her wrists, however, she had never grown accustomed to. The fading of her hands had taken a great deal of patience. But something about the small wrinkles, more like creases, that now lined her wrists, and the liver spots that populated them was unforgiveable. So she just ignored them.

She found the number. She knew it, she was sure. But today was the sort of day when her memory was not what it used to be. And she was not in the mood for a misdial today, left stumbling for words to a stranger thousands of miles away. There was no room for error as her hours ticked away. She began to dial, and felt the receiver tremble in her hands. It would have shaken even if she hadn’t been nervous.
Cassie glanced out the window. It was the sort of southeastern day when there was no telling what the temperature was simply from a glance. It was in the fifties, she guessed, glancing at the newspaper she had retrieved from the driveway that morning. She would find out soon enough. Time was nearing for a run. Maybe just a walk. Hard to tell with weather like this. It could carry her mood any way it pleased.

She looked down at her tea. It was growing lukewarm. Frowning, she rose, shifting the mess of paperwork off of her lap and onto the table, rising and padding over to the kitchen sink. Her feet were growing sweaty under her slippers, so she kicked them off.

The bills weren’t paying themselves. Disappointing. At least she could hope. She rose to stretch her legs, feeling her knees buckle in as she released an appreciative gasp. She glanced at her mug. The tea bag sat in the inky remains at the dark bottom of the glass. She frowned. She was running low on tea bags. She hefted the mug in her hand. It was a good one. Sam had bought it for Mother’s Day a few years back. Thick and ceramic. Its rings felt good in her hand.

She shuffled over to the sink, letting it run over her finger until it grew hot. She dipped the mug under, filling it to near the brim. Flipping the sink off, she padded to the microwave, slipping the mug in. She had a two minutes or so till it cooled off enough for her. She could turn on the radio. Wouldn’t help her productivity. But it would be nice to hear someone else’s voice. She heard the buzz of a faraway truck. She fixed her brow. The mail, then.

She peered out of the door. The ground was sodden, the streets’ asphalt still splotchy with rainwater. She didn’t remember the rain. Perhaps it would be a troubling sign if she were a few years older or lived somewhere a bit dry. Stephen would have something to say about it, she was sure. She crept out to the mailbox. Not too cold. But then again, it was never too cold here. She wrapped her cardigan around her a little tighter and picked up her pace. Getting to the mailbox, she threw it open. Nothing good. Just bills. A catalogue or two. She trooped back in.

She glanced at her watch. Colleen should be in Minneapolis by now. She frowned. She had checked a half hour or so back. She shouldn’t check again so soon. She would, but she shouldn’t. She sat down and stared at the billing open before. She scowled and clicked out of it. A few clicks told her that Colleen’s flight was taxiing on the tarmac. That girl would probably be close to kicking an emergency exit open. She never could sit still.

Sean could manage. He’d have to. He was plowing through South Dakota by now, given the text she’d gotten from Stephen that morning. Poor boys. Stephen could sit through anything, she knew. Not that he should. Sean was a little too young for that kind of stunt. Or maybe Stephen was too old. Either way, she would’ve been no help. She used to get bored playing Oregon Trail, so driving cross-country was out of the question. Then again, she had loved Don Quixote when she’d read it in high school. Maybe she could manage if she really wanted to. She sighed and shifted in her seat.

She reached for her mug for a sip of tea, only to realize it wasn’t there. She arose with a groan and slouched over to the microwave. The vapor dancing up from the surface had dwindled to a thin stream. She sighed and wrapped her hands around the mug, setting the mail she was still clutching on the counter. It was warm enough. That would do. She shuffled back to the kitchen table, meandering through the kitchen.

Dinners were hard alone. They should be easier. She couldn’t eat enough to make a full meal, nor did she have the appetite. Maybe she would order something in. Something clean. Maybe a salad. Or a soup. She stopped by the landline, where a green blinking caught her eye. One missed call.
She glanced at the receiver. The area code was out west. Her eyes blanked. She hadn’t recognized it at first. Stephen always picked it up before she could look at it. She mashed the return call button with her thumb, muttering at herself.

The other line clicked open almost immediately.
“Hello, Cassie?” Her voice was gravelly, but it lacked the snarl she had come to expect from her mother in law.
“Hi, Ruth,” Cassie stammered. “Sorry I missed your call. I was out getting the mail.”
“Oh,” Ruth chortled. “It’s no trouble at all.”
Cassie frowned into the receiver. Ruth sounded apologetic. Almost sweet. Certainly gentler than Cassie had ever heard her.
“Thanks for getting right back to me,” Ruth added. “I was just calling because I was going through my phone book and I realized I don’t have Stephen’s cell phone number. Unbelievable, I know. Would you be able to give it to me?”
 “Of course!” Cassie rattled the number off her head automatically, then paused. “Was that too fast?”
“No, no, dear, I got it all.” Ruth read it back to her. “And if I got it wrong, the worst case scenario is someone back east is in for an unpleasant surprise.”
Cassie laughed along uncertainly.
“How are you, dear?” Ruth asked.
“Oh-” Cassie was flummoxed. “I’m alright. Just a little lonely. I’m sure I’m much warmer than you are.”
“I don’t doubt it,” Ruth laughed. “Sorry I’ve stolen your family away from you.”
“It’s alright. They were getting cabin fever back here anyways.”
“I doubt that. Not around you.” Ruth assured her softly.
Cassie blushed. “How are you?” She grimaced at the ham handed question.
“And all the kids are there?”
“All of them. Except for Stephen, of course. But I expect he’ll be here sooner rather than later. And no one’s bitten anyone’s head off. Yet.” She chuckled. “You’re not too lonely out there, are you? I’ll have to talk to Stephen about that.”
“Oh, no, nothing like that,” Cassie laughed, shifting her weight between her feet. “You two need your time together.”
“And how’s Sam?”
“She’s alright. She’s hunkering in for winter. But she’s alright.”
“Poor girl.” Cassie could feel her shaking her head through the phone. “If there’s one thing you and Stephen did wrong, it was that you didn’t prepare those kids for a proper winter.” She laughed.
“That boyfriend of her hasn’t proposed, has he?”
“God, no,” Cassie replied before she could stop herself. “I hope not.”
Ruth guffawed. “Good. He has a funny kind of look in his eye in all the photos Stephen sends me.”
Cassie smiled softly. “He’s not too bad. But Sam’s smart. We’ll be alright.”
“I hope so,” Ruth noted. “Be sure to send my love to that girl. I should get going. I want to catch Stephen before it’s too late.”
Cassie could feel something new in her voice. Something she had never heard before. Something childish. Anticipation. “Yes! Of course. I’ll let you get to that.” “Goodbye, Cassie,” Ruth’s voice was so soft it was nearly a whisper. “I love you.” “I love you too,” Cassie managed to falter before the line clicked dead.
The snow was falling, as heavy as ever, rumbling underneath the car. It had been a few hours since their last stop, and a few minutes since Sean had checked his phone, watching them inch ever further west across the vast plain. He shifted his weight in his seat, feeling his legs begin to cramp. Damn. He glanced over. Stephen had his left elbow resting against the window. It must be freezing. Maybe that was the point. His eyes looked tired. His hair was grayer than Sean remembered.

Stephen’s phone sprang to life from the cupholder where it was stashed, buzzing violently and shaking the two of them from their trance. Stephen frowned at it.

“If it’s work I can’t talk.”

Sean nodded. “I’m not a rookie, Dad.” he frowned. Didn’t recognize the area code. Odd.

“Hello?” He answered tentatively. “Oh, hi, Grandma. It’s good to hear from you, too.”

He nearly dropped the phone as Stephen veered across the highway’s rumble strips and onto the shoulder, jolting to a halt before they launched off into the ditch. His hand jutted out to underneath Sean’s chin.

“Yeah, sorry about that.” Sean fumbled. “He’s right here.” He passed the phone to his father and sat back in his seat, jolted awake.

“Hi, Mom,” Stephen’s voice shook.

“Hello, Stephen,” Ruth’s voice soothed. “How are you?”

“I’m okay,” He stammered. “I’m almost to you. I promise.” His voice broke. “I promise.”

Sean blanched. Wrapping his jacket tightly around him, he threw the car door open and stumbled out, slamming the door shut behind him as he felt his own tears well up in his throat.

Stephen barely noticed the cold air that washed over him.

“It’s okay, Stephen,” Ruth assured him, static cutting blending with the tearful croaking of her voice. “I know you’re trying.”

“I’m so sorry, Mom. I should’ve just flown. But I just couldn’t sit and wait for you to-”

“It’s okay, honey. I’m sorry for doing this to you.”

“No!” The tears that had welled in his eyes began to course down his cheeks, uncertainly at first, then racing down the streams left behind by their predecessors. “No. No. I understand. You had to.”

“I didn’t have to. It’s selfish.” Ruth’s voice broke and she began to gasp as the tears came wearily. “But I had to. It’s just so hard.”

“I know, Mom. I know.” Stephen sniffed twice, wiping at his nose with the back of his sleeve. “I just have to see you.”

“You will, baby. You will. I know you will. Hearing your voice is enough.”

“No it’s not. It’s not.” He sobbed. “I can’t tell you everything I have to-”

“You don’t have to, Stephen.” Ruth wiped at her tears as her chest heaved with loneliness. “I already know.”

Stephen’s sobs calmed to odd intervals. “I’m sorry I can’t be there. I’m sorry I couldn’t be there more.”

“Me too, Stephen.” Ruth whispered. “Me too.”

Stephen’s chest heaved, and Ruth clutched her hand close to her chest. “Where are you, Stephen?”

“Almost to Billings,” Stephen said resolutely. “I’ll be there soon.”

Ruth’s spirits dropped. “I know you will, baby. I know you will.”

Stephen sniffed again. “I don’t care. I will.”

“I know. Just drive safe.”
“I will.”
“I’ll let you get back to driving. I have to let you get back to driving.”
“I know you do.” Stephen’s chin fell into his chest. “I know you do.”
“Be safe, Stephen. I love you.”
“I love you too.” They held their phones in silence, resolute against the distance between them, before Ruth clicked her phone slow and sad. Stephen held the silent box to his ear a moment, then clutched it to his heart until his breathing steadied.

Stephen staggered out of the station wagon, his vision beginning to blur with tears. It was bitterly cold. His father’s muffled voice still floated through the snow, so he stumbled forward a few more steps. The snow was beginning to seep into his shoes. It was an odd thing, hearing someone cry for the first time. Sean bent over, placing his hands on his knees and staring at the snow underfoot as his heart evened out. The wind blew down his back unforgivingly.

His ears were the first part that went numb. He tried to keep a bit of dignity, but his arms reluctantly crossed over his chest, and his shoulders slowly hunched up, even as he straightened them out every few seconds. He clenched his teeth to hold back the chattering of his teeth.

Here everything felt still, like he were trapped in a snowglobe. Snow fell all around, each flake identical to the last. He looked up. The sky looked just like the earth. It was a frightening proposition, not knowing which way was up and which was down. He almost felt the sky rush up towards him, but he steadied his head. He inhaled deeply, held it a second, then blew it out slowly, watching the steam spiral up slowly. This was a bad place to be. He didn’t belong here. He knew it. His father knew it. It seemed like nature itself knew it. But it was better to be here than to be back home. Too much life there.

It was funny, Sean mused. Funny that life and death were so black and white. It couldn’t possibly be right that they were so different. There was no life around him. Not as far as the eye could see. But here he was just the same. There was life everywhere. Maybe too much of it. But it brought death with it.

The truck roared past him, shaking him from his reverie. The cold sank in deeper now, to his bones. He allowed himself one shiver, quickly, then found he couldn’t stop.

He heard the car door slam behind him. He didn’t dare to turn around him. His father’s footsteps sounded distant and uncertain in the snow. The day’s light had turned ghoulish with the creeping coming of evening.

His father’s arm slid around his shoulder. It felt right there.
“Sorry about that. It’s all over now.”
“We have to keep going.”
“We do.”
“I’m sorry, Dad.”
“You have nothing to be sorry for.”
“Someone should be sorry.”
“Maybe. But that’s not for you.”
“There’s no one else around here to do it.”
Stephen laughed bleakly. “Let’s get going. I’m getting cold just looking at you.”
They turned and marched back to the car, small and defeated against the vast white.
Alan shifted impatiently as Jean sucked her teeth, watching him help Ruth into the front passenger seat of the SUV.

“You know, you could help,” Alan noted irritably, hefting Ruth’s cane in his left hand as she pressed into the flat of his right palm, struggling to lift both legs in.

“Just be careful,” Jean advised.

“Hadn’t crossed my mind. How silly.”

“You all can go to hell,” Ruth muttered. “I’m not deaf yet.”

“I trust you’ll be keeping our places free down there while you’re waiting,” Alan offered.

“Do we have to? On our way to church?” Anna protested from the driver’s seat.

“Jean started it,” Alan shrugged.

“For Christ’s sake,” Edward muttered, wedging himself into the middle seat of the vehicle.

“I’m not the one wearing a baseball hat to church,” Alan nodded to Edward’s head.

“Holy water’ll probably start boiling soon as you walk in, but enjoy that high horse of yours,” Edward growled.

“Take that stupid thing off, Edward,” Ruth ordered from the front seat.

“Did you just use an idiom, Edward?” Alan asked, astounded. “You blow me away.”

“Are we ready to leave?” Anna chimed in impatiently from the front as Alan and Jean turned and mounted into the vehicle.

Judging the chorus of silence in response, Anna turned on the car, adding two cranks to the heating dial before throwing the parking break and shifting into reverse. As she eased out from between two sedans, she peeled toward the garage’s exit and skirted the snowbanks that lined the driveway. Ruth grabbed her arm suddenly.

“Take us the long way,” She commanded. “You know the one.”

Anna nodded, unsure. “Okay, Mom.”

“And turn off four-wheel drive. You don’t need it.”

“Wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Edward muttered from the backseat.

“How many trucks have you totaled, Edward?” Alan inquired from his right.

“Jean’s elbows are digging into me,” He complained, ignoring his older brother’s goading.

“What do you want her to do? Move? She’s ninety percent elbow,” Alan scoffed. Jean rolled her eyes silently and turned to stare mournfully out of the window.

Anna stopped herself from making a left instinctually, opting instead for a right turn. The road was narrow, only two lanes, the yellow line beneath only barely visible through the snow. Rumbling past the community, the road wound itself around the outskirts of the valley, where homesteads were adapted into modern townhomes and trendy businesses, sleek and tall against the gray sky. The road rolled lightly over the hills, soft undulations hinting at the stark slopes of the mountains they rose into. Open yards alternated with barbed wire as they wound themselves down, running along the edge of the bowl as they drifted toward the squat buildings below.

Ruth turned to her right, staring down into the bowl, her hands crossed neatly over her purse in her lap. It was an odd thought. To look out on where you’ve spent your life for the last time. She squinted. The thin rim of pines obscured most of the valley, the neat rows of streets cutting across the rising waves of earth only bursting through as they dashed past odd copses of barren aspens or spots of dead pines, rusty patches of needles letting through glimpses. Her eyes narrowed. A restaurant here, a school there. A grocery store or two. She pursed her lips. She knew each building. Knew them well.
But she furrowed her brow and tried to come up with a memory for any of them. Nothing. Just a dull image burnished in her mind.

A life lived all the same.

She readjusted her hands on her purse and faced forward. The cathedral’s spire rose above a few pines, a ridge or two beyond their car as it rounded over another outcropping.
Colleen trotted through the boarding hallway, feeling the cold press in as she slipped past the gap between the plane and the extension. Her backpack thumped against her, but she bustled on. Breaking into the openness of the airport terminal, she slowed, then stopped. The airport was nothing special, but still lovely. Soaring glass windows that opened onto the plains of Minnesota, now dark. Snow swirled down unending.

Averting her eyes from the hulking birds that sat nestled in the thickening snow outside, she checked the departing flights. Not a chance of anything tonight. She trudged over to the airline’s desk reluctantly. The attendant there looked as tired as her.

“Missed flight?” He asked. She nodded.

“We’ll take care of you,” He assured her warily as he took her ticket and began to type.

“We’ll get you a meal voucher, for sure. And a hotel for the night. It looks like your next flight will depart tomorrow around 2:15. Should get you there by 4:15. Is that alright?”

She nodded, impressed.

He gave her a small smile. “Long day?”

“Not as long as yours, I bet.”

He grinned. “It’s not a competition. But probably not.”

He printed out her papers and handed them to her. “All the good food is in terminal A. It’s a hike but it’s worth it. Trust me. There’s already about six inches of fresh snow outside so change into other shoes if you have them. We’ll keep your suitcase here.”

“How cold is it outside?”

He frowned at her. “You from Charlotte?”

She nodded. “Lived there my whole life.”

“Then you don’t want to know. Trust me.”

She smiled. “Yikes.”

“At least you’ll get a story out of it,” He offered.

“If I survive it,” She rolled her eyes. “Have a good one.”

He smiled and nodded to her as he turned his eyes back to his computer.

She paced the length of terminal A. Nothing good. Or at least nothing she could bring herself to eat. She wasn’t particularly hungry. She had devoured whatever measly snacks they had set before her on the plane and now her stomach churned with restlessness. Peanuts were pretty filling, she supposed. But even then. She looked down at the slip for the hotel she’d been given.

Checking the shuttles hung above the door, she found her way to the right door and ducked outside.

An airport worker stood to her left smoking a cigarette coolly, barely moving beneath his layers to cast a look her way. Snowplows blared past, rumbling over the snow, headlights flooding the area. No sign of the shuttle.

The cold hit slowly, then all at once. Shifting her weight between her legs, she began to utter out a steady stream of oaths. The worker smirked as he looked at her.

“First time in the area?”

“How could you tell?” She rolled her eyes.

“Don’t worry,” He assured her. “You’ll see them coming from inside.”

She nodded her thanks, bolting back inside to the warmth of luggage carousels and overworked bureaucrats.
The church was dark, the waning light filtering through the stained glass casting austere shadows across the twin rows of pews of dark polished wood. Warm but faint candles ringed the stony church, fighting in vain to stave off the dark. Drafts of cold air buffeted down about them slowly as they processed in, a single morose line. Dipping their fingertips in the tiny yellowing ivory dish of holy water, they made the sign of the cross. Ruth led the way, her cane finding its familiar path across the uneven slate stones of the floor. The mass had already begun, faint glories ringing toward them from the altar. Ruth turned, driving her cane into the floor to cast a dark glare at Anna in the back of the line.

“I drove the speed limit,” She muttered defensively into Edward’s back. He grunted. Ruth paused, her left arm grabbing the cane’s top. She took two more steps, then her right arm snaked out to grab the seat back of the pew she had occupied for decades. It was on the right wing of the church, three rows from the back. When they were much younger, each child in turn had taken their turn venturing further up the church, to where the priest could be clearly seen and his rites were mystical and intimate. And each time, Ruth’s hand had caught their shoulder, firm and discreet like a shepherd’s crook, ushering them into the same pew. Just once Stephen had managed to slip into the left pew just adjacent to theirs. Ruth had pursed her lips and followed silently. The next week she had led them in, clutching Stephen’s hand tight as she pulled him to the right.

The tabernacle glinted faintly from that distance, and the ringing of the organ echoed harshly, overwhelming the reedy voices raised in adoration ahead. Ruth sat down heavily, leaning her cane to her right, immediately hefting out the hymnal, flipping through pages purposefully to run a single bulging finger over the readings.

Jean followed suit, crossing her legs and staring unblinking ahead. The acolytes circled the priest, their thin white robes pinkish against the red underneath.

The priest rose, clearing his throat to call out. “May the Lord be with you.”

“And also with-” Alan and Anna were cut off with sharp elbows to the ribs.

“And with your spirit,” Ruth muttered, raising her hands shakily to mirror the priest’s.

They sat as the priest indicated, pulling jackets tightly against the cold that still emanated from the entrance behind them. Edward’s mind wandered and his gaze rose to scan steadily and slowly across the stained glass that lined the high ceilings, a habit he had never broken from the days of Latin mass when he was still too young for Ruth to drag him to his altar boy duties.

Anna’s head grew heavy from the air, cold and sharp but laden with wafts of incense. She began to sway. Men of great self-import, the seams of their tweed jackets near popping took their turns swaggering up to the lectern. Their words washed over her, fumbled biblical lectures numbing her ears. Some things never changed. The air here was dark, unlike her church back home, where, if you craned your ears just right, you could hear the ocean washing up along the shore a few hundred meters away.

The deacon rose in his time, a miniscule man, wiry hair jutting out electrically as he trilled his way through a gospel to which Anna could not bring herself to listen.

She shook herself alert as the priest braced himself, then levered his way to his feet from his solid oaken chair behind the altar. His hands weighed heavily on the armrests. She could almost hear the wood groan. He was a massive man, hair thinning and pulled across his brilliant scalp but still a dark brown. Even his steps carried gravitas, thudding across the stone floor around the altar. He nodded to the deacon as he trod, even and slow, to the lectern. He paused, raising the stand that propped up the Bible. The deacon had left it so that hovered near his hips. He closed the book and let his fingertips rest lightly. He cleared his throat quietly, picking a bit of lint from the sleeve of his brilliant purple robe.
“Brothers and sisters,” He mused, casting his eyes up to the eaves of the church, still lost in thought. “This week’s readings are a real privilege. Luke talks to us about something important. Luke talks to us about John the Baptist, that first true zealot and evangelist before the Lord. And it’s a reading about which theologians have not hesitated to write entire books. Papers, essays, novels. You name it. But there’s something important. John was sent to make straight the way for the Lord. That much is clear. But what if there’s nothing for him to make straight?”

Jean shifted uncomfortably. Anna bent out to peer curiously at her.

The priest cleared his throat once more, voice slowly rising in his chest.

“And that’s what we see in today’s second reading, brothers and sisters. Peter tells us so much. It’s so clear. So clear. ‘The Lord does not His promise’. He knows what he’s doing. And the vanity of man! The vanity of man. To guess at his purpose. Not to guess at his purpose. That’s not what it is. It’s undermining it. Satan’s whispering to give us the nerve-the arrogance!-to second-guess the Lord’s intentions. The Lord’s plans! Be careful, Christians. Who among us has not heard his whispering. In the voting booth. At work. At the bank. In this very church.” He cleared his throat again and gazed out across the pews. “At the doctor’s office.”

Jean rose abruptly. Tucking her chin deeply towards her chest, she shuffled across the pew, genuflecting hurriedly before turning and pacing out of the church.

“And it’s so like us, isn’t it? The self-righteousness of it all. To wear Christ across our brow. To use our own sanctity as the cudgel with which we beat all those around us. We are all the hypocrites Jesus warned us about, brothers and sisters. The Pharisees are among us. Among these very pews.”

He stood in silence, fiery gaze transfixing the church. Anna’s head dropped and she sighed so faintly only Edward beside her could hear. She rose unsteadily, legs quivering slightly, and tiptoed across Alan’s legs, hurriedly following her sister out of the church.

Alan slid in to fill the gap beside Edward, who tightened up next to his mother. Three jaws tightened in unison.

“We can spend our whole lives the ‘right’ way. But that makes no difference. So many of us-so many of us, brothers and sisters, think this sanctity is in our words. In the guilty prayers we memorize and whisper to ourselves. But none of that matters. Because all that is is a lie. And the Lord sees our true intentions. He sees clear through our ashes and burlap. And he sees what’s in our heart. And what is in our heart is a false idol. And that false idol is ourselves. This notion that we know what is best for us. That we have worked our lives. We’ve toiled and slaved and we’ve earned our status. That the Lord is our equal. Not our Father. Our equal. It’s sick, brothers and sisters. To demean our Father.”

Edward felt Alan’s fists tighten beside him. He bit his lip and placed a hand on Alan’s knee. Alan looked over, the suspicious rage of a caged animal in his eyes. Edward nodded in surrender. Alan slumped. He cast one glance at their mother, then rose and walked from the church, defeated.

“Nothing excuses us, brothers and sisters. From our duty to the Lord. You can spend a lifetime. Evangelizing. Preaching the Gospel. Doing the Lord’s work. But if you aren’t awake at midnight, trimming your wicks, awaiting our bridegroom, then you have no place in Christ. That’s what Peter warns us about. ‘The day of the Lord will come like a thief’, beloved. Like a thief. And the pretension of man. To cut short our time waiting. If we are not ready at every Lord that the Lord has prepared for us, we are the false idols Abram smashed. Those Israelites, worshipping a golden calf before the Lord who freed us from Egypt. We are the false prophets Elijah beheaded. The demons Jesus Christ cast out. So be ready, beloved. Be ready at all hours.”
Edward fixed his grimace and rose reluctantly. Before he turned to stride out, he cast one long look at Ruth. She sat, hands clutching the head of her cane in her lap. Her back was hunched but her neck was righted as she gazed up at the ceiling, where the stained glass rose in glorious towers now dulled with darkness. The candles burned, yellow and soft. The tears that rolled down her face gleamed in their light. The tears of a heart too tired to repent.
Billings appeared suddenly, little humps of farmsteads and houses that grew and clustered under the snow until the burst forth, two or three stories high, brick rising up above the snow drifts. The sun long set, street lamps welcomed them dimly, oases of light in the white darkness. The snow had stopped, but clouds still danced overhead, cottony wisps. Already a strong wind from the west blew breathlessly across the plains, rolling down from the mountains and buffeting the car.

Sean slumped in the seat, eyes long weary and hands clutching tightly to the wheel, flinching as the car plowed on in the wind, jaw tightening with every swerve. The red light appeared unblinking and deep, as jarring as a risen sun lurking behind blinds. Sean made a right and the street lights vanished again.

Stephen looked over at him suspiciously. Sean nodded ahead. “Subway. I’m hungry.”

“Subway?” Stephen asked incredulously.

Sean shrugged. “I didn’t want to wait through the light. Is that what you wanted to hear?”

Stephen turned back. “You think a 12-inch is going to be enough?”

“Definitely not,” Sean speculated.

The Subway was empty, the smell of fresh bread long stale.

Stephen fidgeted anxiously as the sandwiches sat in the toaster. Sean smiled at him blissfully. “I’m just so happy to see something green again. Did you ever eat vegetables growing up?”

Stephen smiled back at him. “Only at Easter and between Memorial Day and Labor Day.”

The sandwiches were gone before their seats could warm up, curt thanks to the employees soon replaced by crinkling paper and crunching bread.

Sean sat unsatisfied, drumming his fingers as his father finished up.

“Are we getting a room here?”

“It’s another four hours and there aren’t many other cities to stop at on the way. Probably.”

Sean glowered. “We could make it.”

“Not safely. Not on those roads. Not in our state.”

“I’m fine to drive.”

“Not for much longer. You need to stretch your legs.”

“I guess.” Sean sat back, resigned. “This hotel had better have a pool.”

“It won’t.”

“I know, but still.”

Stephen smiled at his youngest. It had been a long time since he had last seen him this unable to sit still. “Come on. You’ve got your jacket?”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s go.”

“Where?”

“You’ll see.”

Stephen sat in the driver’s seat, waiting for his son to stretch one last time before warily sliding in beside him. He pulled back out onto the highway, driving away from the stoplight only to get back onto the highway.

“Dad, this is the way we came in.”

“I know.”

They wove their way back out of town, till barbed wire ran next to them thin and threatening. Finding a turnoff, Stephen pulled off of the empty highway. Turning off the engine and cutting the lights, he sat there in anticipation.
“Dad, what are you doing?”
“Just wait.”
“Wait for what?”
“Just a couple more seconds now.”
Sean crossed his arms, his breath already beginning to spout from his mouth as the cold flowed into the car like water.
“Okay, we can go now.” Stephen rolled out of the car as if he were thirty years younger, and Sean followed apprehensively.

The stretch they had chosen was long abandoned, a stretch of gravel passing back to a few cabins that dotted the plateau above them. Stephen trotted a few steps away from the car and turned his head up to look at the sky. Sean followed his lead. The stars appeared, just the brightest at first, blueish diamonds that burned small and bright, then clusters of dimmer stars sprouting out from the clear blackish blue on which the broad brushstrokes of slate gray clouds danced. Their breaths rose, matching plumes of fine mist up towards the stars that appeared, at first spinning and blinking like hallucinations, then steadying and embedding themselves high above. They continued to pop out, undeterred by the light of earth till they seemed to outnumber the navy background they populated. Stephen reached out to wrap his arm around Sean and they stood, two twin figures alone under stars too numerous to comprehend.
Jean glared at Edward as he flicked out a pack of cigarettes.
“What? I was going to do it outside,” He defended.
She shook her head. “It’s so dirty. Isn’t Sarah getting on you about those?”
He shrugged. “Won’t see her until after I shower then,”
“Guess it is too late for you to start using mouthwash,” Alan muttered.
Edward rolled his eyes and held the pack out in offering to Alan as he tucked one of the thin white tubes between his teeth.
Alan sighed. “It’s been a while. I suppose so.”
Anna shook her head in disgust.
“Leave the self-righteousness back there,” Alan scoffed, nodding toward the nave of the church through the doors behind them where mass plowed on, the organ still quaking the floorboards beneath their feet.
“They’re so bad for you,” Anna pleaded.
“It’s a bit late to start telling this family to lose the self-destructive behaviors,” Edward advised.
Alan cautioned. “We’d best step out or else Jean’ll have a conniption.”
“Not sure why,” Alan remarked drily. “I’m personally not feeling particularly charitable toward the institution at the moment.”
“Well, you never did have her spiritual clarity.”
“I can’t argue with you there,” He sighed. They stepped out together as Edward fished the lighter from his pocket.
Jean sank deeper into the bench next to Anna, glancing uninterested at the church pamphlet left on the sepia table beside her in the dim light of the foyer. The cold sank in deeper but they sat still, digging into themselves. Anna slid over so that their legs brushed up against each other and their elbows wedged tightly together. Jean’s head slumped into her chest as her feet spiraled into the floor, feeling the organ’s throaty rumbles.
The organ faded and rose with Jean’s chin until it finally cut abruptly and creaking pews jerked the sisters alert. They rose as the churchgoers filed past, gray hair shuffling past. Finally, Ruth tottered out and looked at them, eyes weighed down with weariness.
“Where are they?” Her voice was too laden with fatigue to be angry.
“Right outside,” Jean assured her, holding out her arm. Anna wrenched the massive wooden door open, and they stepped out, greeted by a burst of icy wind. Ruth’s two sons stood huddled under a pine a few dozen feet away, sucking at the nubs left of their cigarettes. Leaning on Jean, Ruth walked in small measured steps over to them. Sizing them both up and sniffing the air, she shook her head.
“You never could learn.”
Alan dropped his cigarette and snuffed it out underfoot, following his mother and sisters as they trooped back toward the parking lot. “We’re the ones who never learned,” He remarked, glancing back at the church’s spires that rose, austere and magisterial, behind them.
The air of the car was heavy with silence born from their bones, a stupor that sank in as the car cut its way across the valley’s walls in the darkness of evening, a hint of dusk still hanging in the air.
“I’m staying with you tonight,” Jean remarked offhandedly from the backseat, gazing at the rounded peaks of the foothills.
“Yes,” Ruth nodded from the front seat.
The halls of the home bore the same silence, like the streets of the boom towns miles southward, long stripped of their gold. The door’s key clicked into place, and the three younger McCormicks milled
sullenly in the hall as Ruth hobbled in, Jean supporting her side and flicking the lights on. She turned back and nodded. They all returned her nod and turned, processing back down the hall.

Ruth stood, leaning heavily on her cane. The foyer’s light gleamed off of the living room, long shadows darting toward the windows. She sighed, then limped toward her armchair.

“I think I would like to sit here a while before bed,” She noted to Jean. “Don’t turn the lights on.”

Jean nodded wordlessly.

“Come have a seat with me, Jean,” Ruth beckoned as she lowered herself cautiously into the seat. “Please.”

Jean sat gratefully across from her in the loveseat.

“Mom,”

Ruth held up a hand. Her chest rose, slow and heavy. She lowered her hand and her eyelids fell a bit closer together. “What is it, Jean?”

“They won’t give you last rites. Or a service. The church. I’m sorry. I should’ve told—”

Ruth held up her hand. “Well, they weren’t particularly softspoken about it tonight, were they?”

“I’m sorry, Mom.”

Ruth brushed the comment away with the back of her hand. “I don’t suppose I have any right to be surprised, do I? And maybe he’s right.”

“He’s not right, Mom. He’s a reactionary self-righteous prick who—”

Ruth laughed softly. Her eyes drooped closed. “Don’t speak ill of the clergy, dear. Not even when they deserve it. I figured this might happen. Maybe I was daring them to do something.”

“But what should we do?”

Ruth shrugged as much as her shoulders would allow. “I don’t know. But you’ll figure something out. I’m not afraid.”

Jean leaned forward, hands clutching her head and elbows digging into her legs just above her knees.

“I know, dear.” Ruth smiled. “I know.”

Jean raised her head to look at her mother. In the faint light, Ruth’s eyes were sealed shut but a contented smile graced her tightly pursed lips.

“Jean?”

“What, Mom? Do you need your pills?”

“No, no. Nothing like that. How long have you known?”

“Known about the church? A day.”

“No, no, not that. About you.”

“What about me?”

“Jean,”

“About two months.”

“Ovarian?”

“Breast.”

“Will you be joining me soon?”

“My condition will start deteriorating soon. Weeks, not months.”

Ruth sighed so softly Jean could barely hear it above the muted panting of the heaters.

“I’m sorry, Jean.”
“I’m a nurse, Mom. A nurse. For over forty years, now. And I couldn’t detect my own tumor until it was too late.”
“Couldn’t, or wouldn’t?”
“I-I don’t know. I don’t know. Maybe I did want it. Does that make me bad?”
“Of course not.”
“Maybe I wanted it. To feel like I was suffering. To let everyone know what they did to me. Maybe not. Maybe I was just a little blind. But I don’t know.”
Ruth grunted faintly. “It doesn’t really matter. And you’ve lived a life to be proud of, dear. And I’m glad you have to bury me. Not the other way around.”
“I don’t want anyone to have to bury me.”
“I know. I know, dear. For years I was outliving your father to save him the heartbreak.”
“And then?”
“And then I was outliving him to spite him.”
Jean’s lips twisted, so subtly it was invisible in the darkness of the apartment.
“Do you want to beat it?”
“I won’t.”
“You might.”
“I’ve read enough charts in my life to know I won’t.”
“You’ve been surprising enough in your life.”
“No, I haven’t.”
“No,” Ruth laughed. “No, I suppose you haven’t.”
They both sighed, leaning deeper into the cushions as their breathing began to slow in tandem.
“Jean?”
“Yes?”
“I think I’d like to go to bed now. Might as well get one last night in it. And I would like my pills, please.”
Jean levered herself up from the love seat. “I can do that.”
The sun woke Jean, but she didn’t want to admit it. Sharper than she expected and clear as water. She laid in bed a moment, considering getting up to close the blinds. Don’t know how she left them open. She decided against it. It would be admitting defeat. Besides, she had been burned too many times in the winter to be surprised by the icy wood that awaited her feet. She considered rolling over, but she was too far removed from her teenaged years for that. And the pounding of her heart against the mattress always thudded through her chest. She laid there, eyes half closed, faking sleep for no one’s sake before she heard the coughs from one room over and remembered why she was there.

She roused herself quickly, throwing a graying college sweatshirt from the Reagan years on over the thin tank top she had slipped on before wrapping herself in the comforter. She slipped on the wool socks she had left on her bedside table before stepping down. An old trick she had learned from Colin in those first few years. No such comforts in the McCormick household. Not for her, at least. Harden her up.

She shuffled over to peek in at her mother. Ruth laid perfectly still, papery hands crossed above the blankets resting on her chest. Her eyelids rested gently shut as her chin tilted gently up at the ceiling, her body scarcely showing underneath the blankets layered down like bedrock. Ready for viewing, Jean mused.

“Good morning, Jean.”

Jean stepped back startled.

“How are you feeling, Mom?”

Ruth’s eyes opened, smooth and practiced, and she propped herself up on her elbows, gouging her neck into the wall of pillows built brick by brick against the bed’s backboard.

“Ready,” She mused. “I feel ready.”

Jean smiled reluctantly. “What can I get you?”

“Some coffee, dear. Coffee for both of us. I know how you get.”

Jean nodded ruefully, already feeling a headache begin to swell back by her spine.

“Two coffees for both our sakes. You got it.”

“And come back quickly, please. You can figure out my machine?”

“No coffee machine I couldn’t, Mom.”

She shuffled into the kitchen, head heavy and eyes numb with fatigue. She stared at the machine a moment, then threw herself into motion, fetching the grounds from the freezer, a deep, cold brown sand. As the machine hissed back to life, she trooped back to the bedroom.

“Anything else, Mom?”

Ruth patted the bed beside her. “Come sit with me. And nothing about my morning breath.”

“I’ll try.” Jean lowered herself unsteadily.

Ruth turned to stare out the window, peering at the crystals of ice that drifted, flashes of rainbow, that still shimmered in the air.

“Are you happy, Jean?”

“What do you mean, Mom?”

“You’re the only one here who knows what’s happening to me. Really knows. So are you happy? Was it worth it?”

Jean paused, joining her mother in staring at the mountain face that greeted them before turning away to cast her eyes around the room. “I don’t know. All I’ve been able to think about are the mistakes
I’ve made. The ways I could have done better. But I think that’s natural. And I don’t think it’s fair to myself. Remembering the things I wish I could change without remembering why I couldn’t. It’s easier to regret. Maybe not wrong. But easier.”

Ruth nodded. “You’re right. Sometimes I think John got it right. Nice and quick. Heart attack before he could think about it too much.”

Jean nodded. “We couldn’t think about it either.”

Ruth leaned further back. “That certainly didn’t hurt either. Certainly didn’t.” She tugged the blankets up tighter, till they reached her neck. “Did we do alright, Jean?”

Jean paused. “I think so.”

“We could have done better. There’s no doubt about that. But did we do enough?”

“I think so. But maybe I wouldn’t know. Maybe you should ask my family. I don’t think you’d get the response you’d want from them.”

“I don’t want to be happy. Happiness doesn’t do me any good now. I just want the truth.”

“It would be the truth as much as what I’m telling you now. Just a harsher one.”

“Sometimes we need both.”

“I can’t imagine you doing any better. But I was never the most imaginative.”

Ruth chuckled. “I suppose Edward could write me a novel on all the ways I did him wrong.”

“And Anna would burst into tears before she finished page one.”

Ruth’s laughter grew heartier, than gave way, turning hoarse till she sounded like a dog’s barking.

“You know, I gave up smoking when I was pregnant with you. Knew it was the right thing to do. Not the easiest. And not expected back then. But I did it anyways. And when you were born John decided to quit with me. We had two celebratory cigarettes to finish off his pack after we left the hospital with you and that was it. We were done. Cold turkey.”

“And how did that go?” Jean giggled.

“Within a week we were sneaking out to smoke our own in secret. Me on the back porch and he on the front porch. Kept going for a month or so until we realized we had left you alone. Then that was it. And we started taking shifts with you when the jitters got too bad. Or just when we wanted one.

Jean laughed in earnest this time, shaking the creaky bed frame. “I remember the two of you throwing me back and forth like a hot potato before I started school.”

“By the time Edward came along, we were juggling well enough to work for Mr. Barnum.”

Jean let loose one more laugh, then rose, hearing the coffee machine’s beeping from the kitchen.

“A dash of cream, Mom?”

“Just a hint,” She nodded.

Jean’s steps came alive as she gripped the mugs’ handles tightly while she tiptoed back to her mother, careful not to spill a drop. Her knuckles burned against the searing blue ceramic cup walls. She deposited the two mugs on the bedside table, retaking her place perched on a bed corner.

Ruth lifted her mug carefully, arm shaking ever so slightly, blowing gently along the edge of the cup before taking a tentative sip and set it down, nodding her appreciation.

“Just right. Thank you.”

“Mom?”

“Yes?” She picked the mug back up for another sip.

“How does it feel? Dying?”

Ruth brushed her free hand along the cup, seeking some of the warmth melting off of it.

“I’ll be sure to let you know.” She chuckled into the lip of the cup, then paused.
“I don’t know. You deserve a better answer than that. But I really couldn’t tell you. It’s a relief, I suppose. Knowing you’re done with it all. It is relaxing, to be sure. Everyone who talks behind your back needs to be quiet now. They’ll probably louden back up within a week or so. But by then it won’t be my problem.”

Jean laughed softly, lifting her mug up, never taking her eyes off of Ruth.

“That does sound nice.”
The morning sun, having long sharpened from its glorious gold, glared off of the road. Sean turned to look out the side window, gratefully relaxing his eyes.

“Should’ve packed sunglasses,” Stephen remarked cheerily from beside him, humming lightly as he piloted the station wagon along the winding highway that tread an ever-steepening path into the mountains.

Sean grunted.

“Sun’s still bright in the winter,” Stephen shook his head. “Sad to see you’re not learning enough in college.”

Sean groaned again and shifted, tucking his head as if to go to sleep.

“You know, you could just flip down the sun visor,” Stephen suggested.

“It’s the glare, Dad,” Sean moaned, rolling back to face forward. “If I go blind will you stop bugging me?”

“Could you hold off on the angst? We only have three hours left to go,” Stephen smiled, nodding to the highway mileage sign they flew past. “And we’re making great pace.”

“I remember when I used to think a four hour drive was a long time,” Sean noted sadly. “That was back when I could still feel my ass.”

Stephen chuckled. “I’m assuming that means you’re a no for the drive back with me.”

“I have finals. But maybe Colleen will go with you.”

“I think I could bring a dog and have to take fewer breaks to let them out.”

Sean snickered. “You could take a different route home. Little change of pace.”

“Lot of corn either way,” Stephen shrugged.

“Do you think you’ll drive back right away?”

Stephen frowned. “Got a couple more vacation days I’ll never use otherwise.”

“And here I thought we could go somewhere warm over break.”

Stephen laughed. “Nothing wrong with the sauna at the gym. And I think I’ll need some time to recover. Some stability sounds nice now. Just a break. A day not in a car sounds like a fantasy now.”

Sean sighed. “Yeah. I’d kill for a stationary seat at a library right now. And some vegetables.”

“You’re being dramatic. Little coastal elite.”

“I’ve decided to lean into it. Soon as I get back I’ll be reading the latest New Yorker over an arugula salad.”

“I blame your mother for that.”

“For what? My taste for the finer things in life? Or the fact that I’m upset that I’m still feeling heartburn from Indiana? I can’t imagine she’ll be terribly upset.”

Stephen sighed. “You just need to spend a summer working on a farm out here.”

Sean snorted. “As if you ever did.”

“That’s not the point.”

Sean’s hand darted out and latched on to Stephen’s arm. He nodded at a blot quickly coming into focus far out ahead of them. “What is that?”

“Looks like a car.”

“Yeah, I know that. But next to the car.”

As they neared, the haze of distance dissipated and the minute figure wrapped tightly in a too-thin coat waving both arms frantically came into appearance.

Sean looked gravely over at his father. “We have to stop, don’t we?”
Stephen wordlessly glided the car onto the shoulder, eyes trained on the lane line. He cut the engine and they both sat there motionlessly, bracing themselves against the cold as the woman began to trot towards them. They sighed in tandem, steeling themselves with one last breath before rolling out, slamming the doors behind them.

The woman appraised them, casting a glance over the pair of them, poorly shaven and rumpled, and let out a sigh of relief.

“Thank you for stopping,” She extended a grateful hand. “Joy Garcia. Can’t tell you how many trucks drove straight past me.”

Stephen shook his head and grasped her hand warmly. “Stephen McCormick. This is my son, Sean. What seems to be the trouble?”

She grimaced. “I’m headed to Spokane and my car broke down. I’ve got spotty reception and can’t get a hold of my insurance.”

“Triple A?”

She nodded.

“That might be for the best,” He remarked ruefully. “But we’ll wait with you. I’m assuming you’ll need one of our phones?”

“That would be appreciated. And thank you again.”

“No trouble at all. You know what the trouble is?”

“Clutch is fried, probably. It’s an old one.”

“Manual?”

She nodded, and smiled tiredly at the impressed nods from Stephen. “My dad said it would impress people.”

“Could only ever get two of my kids to learn.”

“You say that like I wasn’t one of them,” Sean interjected. “She had better use your phone. I forgot to charge mine last night.”

“How did I get stuck with the only bad Millennial?” He dug in his pocket searching for his own.

“I’m not even a Millennial,” Sean grumbled. Joy laughed, airy and warm in spite of the sharp gusts blowing in from the northwest.

Stephen grimaced as the wind buffeted him. “We’ll be in our car. You’re more than welcome to join us for company. I trust you won’t bolt with my phone.”

“Now that you mention it,” Joy joked, ripping off a glove to punch in the phone number. “I’ll see you in there.” The McCormicks nodded, and shuffled back off.

“She seems nice,” Sean remarked.

“It’s a relief,” Stephen agreed. “I figured someone broke down on the side of a road in Montana would be a psycho.”

“And you stopped anyway?”

Stephen shrugged. “It would make for a good story. Assuming we survived.”

“That does make me feel better.” Sean slammed his door shut. They huddled together, watching Joy pace the length between their fender and her rear, jaw moving furiously as she stuttered into the phone from cold.

“She seems nice,” Stephen remarked.

“Yeah,” Sean remarked airily. He shifted his textbook back into his lap and stared at it blankly.

“Probably about your age, right?”

“Time and place, Dad.”
Joy nodded a few times, turning back to face them, smiling cautiously at them. Hanging up, she paced to the back seat and opened it, sliding in.

“You folks from North Carolina?”
The two nodded.
“What are you doing all the way out here?”
They froze and looked at each other.
“....Family reunion,” Stephen eventually offered.
“Weird time for a reunion,” Joy shrugged.
“We’re big skiers,” Sean assured her.
“Where are you headed, then?”
“Helena.”
“You’re going skiing in Helena?”
Sean looked at his father for help, clearly lost. “Cross-country?”
“Sure,” Joy shrugged.
“Where are you coming from, Joy?” Stephen asked quickly.
“Laramie.”
Stephen whistled softly. “Cowboy?”
She nodded. Stephen winked at Sean.
“So why are you off to Spokane? Friends at Gonzaga?”
“Surprise my fiance.”
Sean winked back at Stephen.
“Joy, did the tow truck company say when they would be here?” Sean broke the silence.
“Not sure.”
“What’s the deal?”
“Turns out the middle of nowhere, Montana only has one tow truck. And it’s an hour away in Billings. At least, it was. Before it had to go tow another car out east.”
Stephen shook his head. “That’s the part of living here I didn’t miss.”
“That’s the part?” Sean repeated incredulously. “How often did you break down?”
“Can’t say I missed the winters,” Stephen admitted. “Though there is something to be said for real snow. And I broke down more than you might expect.”
Sean guffawed disbelievingly and Joy giggled from the back seat.
“You have to remember, everything I got was hand-me-down. By the time I got a truck it had had Edward and Jean tearing up the clutch for more than a decade before me.”
The two nodded begrudgingly.
“You two aren’t in a rush to get to Helena, are you?” Joy asked, concerned.
“No,” Stephen reassured her. “We’ve got all the time in the world.”
Ruth had begun to doze off and Jean found herself fixed to the corner of the bed, a pool of sunlight collecting atop of her, warming her through her bones as she reveled in it, used dishes left for when the shadows returned. The front door swinging open jolted them from their reverie as Edward announced his presence with a thunderous clearing of his throat.

“Jesus,” Ruth muttered. Jean nearly fell off the bed, catching herself and righting herself, brushing herself off in a search for some dignity.

“Morning, Mom,” Edward stomped in, boots still on, planting a kiss on Ruth’s forehead. “Sarah had us stop to get flowers on our way over. I’ll just leave ‘em on the counter.”

“I’ll be gone in six hours. You just bought yourself flowers.” Ruth remarked dismissively. “Besides, lilies are no good this time of year.”

Edward strolled back to the kitchen, feigning ignorance. Sarah tramped in in her turn, wearing a grimace meant as a smile before tiptoeing over to give Ruth a stiff hug. “Hey there, Ruth. Hope you’re doin’ alright.”

Ruth smiled, her face as contrived as her daughter-in-law’s. “Thank you, dear. Make yourself comfortable, please,” She gestured back toward the living room. “I’ll be out sooner than not.”

Sarah smiled and did a little half-bow as she righted herself from stooping far too close to Ruth.

“Sure thing. Let me know if you need anything.”

Ruth nodded, tired.

The front door swung open once more, gently this time, and the ragged breath of Anna and Alan greeted the apartment.

“Still not used to the cold out there?” Edward thundered from the couch.

Alan sniffed. “Just a little nip in the air is all.” They scuffed the snow from their shoes and started to the bedroom as Ruth sighed and turned to Jean.

“Why did I have so many?”

Jean smiled and shrugged. “I don’t know. But you couldn’t believe I had two.”

“Well,” Ruth muttered defensively. “That was because the house, not the kids.”

Jean rolled her eyes.

“Was I wrong?” Ruth shrugged, then turned back to the door to greet Alan and Anna wearily.

“Hello, kids.”

“Hi, Mom,” They chorused back. Alan stepped forward first, lightly kissing Ruth’s brow, grasping her thin shoulder firmly. “Good morning. We both brought magazines. Figured some silence was the best gift we could give you today.”

Ruth smirked. “Thank you, dear. You were right.”

Anna stepped forward reluctantly. “Ben and the kids called last night. Just wanted to let you know they love you.”

Ruth bowed her head. “Thank you.” She reached out and clutched Anna’s hand with both of hers, smooth and still a touch cold in spite of the blankets. “Thank you.” Anna nodded. They both turned and headed back to the living room.

Jean rose from beside her. “Any breakfast?”

Ruth frowned and shook her head. “I should. But I can’t manage. Not today.”

“Nervous?”

“Something like that.”

Jean nodded.

Ruth leaned deeper into her cushions. “Have you ever been nervous to feel so relieved?”
Jean smiled. “I think so. Or at least I will soon enough.”

Ruth nodded, then rocked forward, swinging her legs out from underneath the blankets sighing as she slouched and reached for her cane. Jean shot forward, snatching it from the wall to hand it to her. Ruth nodded her appreciation and gouged it into the floor, growling like an animal freed from a cage as she fell onto her two feet. She nodded off Jean’s rushed held, and set off for the living room, clawing her cane ahead of her like a three-legged beast.

She rounded the corner slowly, hand slipping out once to fumble at the slick edge of the wall. She paused as she entered the room, appraising warily each of her children while she rested, Jean resting tensed over her shoulder.

She tottered forward a few more steps, turning back to snort at Jean’s pantomimed dance behind her, following every sway and jolt with a trained eye.

“I can still walk, Jean.”

She leaned into her chair, then dropped down, slow then fast, as though teetering along the edge of a cliff. “ Barely, but still.” She noted ruefully.

The room relaxed and sank further into their seats. Alan and Anna sat on the love seat, Alan sprawling across and about Anna’s tightly crossed body. Edward stood poised by the bay window, gazing out at the mountain that loomed there, punching through jagged, gray snow punching through the snow’s capping. Sarah leaned over the kitchen counter, her attempts at compassionate gazes coming across leering. Jean took a seat on the seat hewn from wood beside Ruth’s recliner.

Ruth looked over at her, a hint of scorn in her eyes. “Have a real seat, Jean. There was enough self-flagellation yesterday.”

Jean nodded wordlessly and took a seat in the recliner across from Ruth, Edward lurking past her shoulder.

He sighed and turned to look at Ruth. “Beautiful day out. I’ll miss this view.”

Ruth nodded. “It is a good one.”

“Day after snow. The best kind of day.”

Anna scowled. “Right as it starts to get dirty? No thanks.”

“Maybe you’re misremembering snow, sister.”

Anna rolled her eyes. “I remember snow plenty, thanks. There was no shortage of it for most of my life.”

“Most?” Alan chuckled drily beside her. “You might want to crunch the numbers on that.”

Anna scowled and wriggled deeper into the sofa.

Edward chuckled from the window. “Or maybe she’s just remembering that time she snuck out and got snowed in.”

Anna spluttered in protest but Ruth nodded her agreement.

“She thought we wouldn’t hear her climbing into her window from the porch.”

Edward snorted. “I’d forgotten about that. Sarah, dear, would you get me a glass of water?”

Sarah snickered from the kitchen. “Sure thing, dear.”

Alan leaned back. “Awfully high horse there, Edward. Especially for someone who left his liquor hidden in the Christmas decorations after Thanksgiving.”

Edward glowered. “Dad was early getting them down that year.”

Ruth snickered. “John was never mad about Edward hiding it in the house. He was the only who never noticed when John drank some of it.”
“Make it a whiskey, Sarah.” Edward shifted from the window, folding his arms tightly across his chest.

“Make it two, please,” Alan called, laughing light and high as a flute. “Actually, I’ll come pour them myself.”

“It’s not even noon,” Anna whined.

“Well,” Ruth reasoned. “There’ll be an extra bed here tonight if they’re not straight to drive.”

Jean stood abruptly. “I have to go to the bathroom.”

“Nothing’s stopping you, sister dear,” Edward gestured grandiosely toward the half-bathroom by the front door.

Alan waltzed around the kitchen counter, two glass tumblers pinched between his fingers, twisting his torso to allow Jean past, a smile dancing across his face.

“Now tell me,” Edward drawled, nodding to Alan as he snatched his glass and took a sip. “Of course Jean was too much of a prude to ever have any fun under your noses. But Alan? You must have caught him up to something.”

“Never caught him,” Jean shrugged. “He was smarter than the two of you. John could never find anything. Drove him damn near crazy. We knew Jean always left the house to attend to her business and Stephen never tried anything,”

“There’s a damn surprise,” Edward rolled his eyes.

“But Alan always seemed to be up to something. But we could never nail him.”

Alan grinned. “Can’t believe none of you ever thought to check the road salt in the shed.”

The room groaned. “I mean, come on. We always used the road salt in the garage and I did all the shoveling anyways. And we wouldn’t be wheeling it out in the summer.”

“Is it tired? Always being one step ahead?” Anna joked.

“Exhausting,” Alan mused. “You couldn’t fathom it.”

“Well, didn’t it get hot in the summer?”

“Of course it did,” Alan chuckled. “I was seventeen. My palate wasn’t particularly refined.”

Ruth smirked. “Still hasn’t too much.”

Alan sat up straighter. “I beg your pardon. I would say if anything the apple hasn’t fallen far from the tree.”

Ruth sniffed airily. “That’s a bit generous. I’d chalk it up to a strong wind.”

“Must’ve been one hell of a wind,” Edward pitched in.

“I’ll say,” Alan agreed. “And my choice certainly holds up against the rest of my generation.”

“Not saying much,” Ruth shrugged. “Worked all my life to teach you how to pour a drink but forgot to teach you what drink to pour.”

“I have to say, Mother,” Alan shook his head. “I expected you to be bitter as they dug your grave, but even I wasn’t expecting it to be this bad.”
The van jostled over the icy ruts of road that wound around the airport, flat and plain. Colleen felt her teeth grind tighter as winds slapped up against the van’s broad sides.

“You alright back there, ma’am?” The van’s driver turned around to call back to his lone passenger.

She smiled through her gritted teeth. “Just a little tense.”

“I can imagine why. Twin Cities this time of year are a lot to ask of anyone.”

“Don’t have to tell me,” Colleen muttered, disbelieving. She had huddled under the shower’s weak stream for thirty minutes that morning, willing the gooseflesh from her arms as her jaws flirted with chattering teeth.

He laughed from the front seat. “First came here with two sweatshirts and a pair of earmuffs. You learn fast, though. Not so bad after that first winter.”

“One day is fine for me,” She replied.

“Suit yourself,” He chuckled. “You travel safe.” Pulling up, he hopped out, running around to first yank her suitcase from the van’s trunk, then pull open her door. Colleen grimaced as the cold air washed over her.

“Start jogging. It’ll warm you up.” He grinned and ushered her out.

“Thanks,” She called, her trot already opening up, her suitcase rattling along behind her. “Have a good one!”

His reply was cut off by the airport’s doors sliding shut behind her. Her pursed lips never broke once as she checked her luggage, nodding curtly as she strode away while her suitcase trundled away on treads. Forgoing the coffee shops and last stop bodegas that would usually pull her away from her mission, Colleen paced headlong through the airport, jaw ever-tightening even as her flight waited hours away.

She came to an abrupt halt as she rounded a corner, nearly running into the snaking security line. Her knees buckled in exasperation as she withheld a groan. Finding her place in line, her right leg continued to thrum in pent-up frustration even as the line rested immobile.

She began to drum her fingers against her rain jacket, interrupting her quickly developing rhythm to pull out her phone, glancing quickly at her screen. Nothing. Go figure.

She returned to waiting, glaring at the rows of dividers that hinted at a long wait. Midday on a wintry Sunday was certainly an odd time to fly through the Twin Cities. Most of the airport was full of exactly who she had expected to populate a Minnesota airport. Folks whose skin was seemingly bleached with road salt and wrapped in flannel, all either rail-thin or carrying heft around their middle. She sighed and began to shift her weight from foot to foot, her knees flexing to match her rhythm.

“Everything alright?” The girl in front of her turned around, suppressing a giggle. Colleen sighed at herself. “Sorry.”

The girl smiled kindly. “No worries. Where are you off to?” She was perhaps two years older than Colleen, but maybe younger than her. Her sienna brown hair was straight as a doll’s, its silky sheen still evident even as it poked through the back of the baseball cap pulled tightly over her head. She was a few inches shorter, with surprisingly tan skin given both the season and her strikingly blue eyes.

Colleen thought, surprised by human contact from someone who hadn’t been present for her birth, something she hadn’t had in nearly a week. “Montana.”

“Huh.” The girl nodded. “Skiing?”

“Family.”

“No kidding. You excited?”
“Cold, mostly,”
The girl threw her head back laughing. “Can’t blame you. Where are you coming from?”
“Charlotte. Got caught here by the snowstorm yesterday.”
“Don’t get me started,” The girl rolled her eyes. “It’s Minnesota! How did they get surprised by some snow?”
“Isn’t that the question?” Colleen replied, giggling. “You’d think they would have learned by now. Where are you headed?”
“Iowa City from Vancouver,” The girl explained. “I’m Gwen, by the way,” She held out her hand.
“Colleen,” Colleen replied, shaking her hand warmly. “Why Iowa City?”
“Fiance,” She replied, holding up her hand to flaunt the modest ring atop it, rolling her eyes.
“He’s a grad student there. Go Hawkeyes, I guess.”
Colleen grinned. “You don’t seem too excited about it.”
“Go figure, right?” Gwen threw both hands up. “Something about the heartland just doesn’t get me going.”
“Then why isn’t he visiting you? Is Vancouver too boring?”
Gwen cackled. “Oh yeah, Iowa City really runs laps around British Columbia for outings. He’s drowning with finals coming up so I thought he could use a visit. Besides, I have to bully him into planning some things for the wedding.”
“Have you picked a date yet?”
Gwen frowned. “Not yet. Whenever chapels are cheapest.”
It was Colleen’s turn to guffaw. The line continued to trickle forward glacially. “So what are you doing in Vancouver?”
“Rotations. And getting ready to move to Iowa City.”
“No!”
“Yeah,” She shrugged. “It’s fine. I mean, it’s not, but my degree works better in Hawkeye State than his agricultural science doctorate works on the Pacific coast.”
“Guess that makes sense. Are you ready to move?”
“I’d better be. I guess so. As ready as I’ll ever be. Are you excited to be in Montana?”
Colleen paused to think about it. “I guess so. It’s been a while. Never been in the winter, either.”
“You’re in for a treat, then,” Gwen smirked.
“That’s what my dad said,” Colleen replied ruefully.
“Is he not with you?”
“He drove out with my brother.”
“Why did he drive?”
“No clue.”
“Sounds brutal.”
“I think it was. I mean, I can’t imagine it wouldn’t be. And especially if his only company was my brother.”
“Older or younger?”
“Younger.”
“Doesn’t he have school?”
“Skipping.”
“You guys must be crazy about your family,”
“Or just crazy,” Colleen shrugged. “Probably just crazy.”
Gwen laughed and began to pull everything out from her pockets and dropping them into a tray, holding it out to offer it to Colleen, who took it gratefully.
“Have you at least picked a season for the wedding?”
Gwen shifted hesitantly. “Honestly, not really. It’s tough.”
“With the distance?”
“Yeah. I mean, other things. But the distance doesn’t help.”
“What other things? Sorry to pry.” Colleen caught herself.
“Oh, no worries. I just need to talk through it with someone. I don’t know. It’s a lot. Moving to Iowa. But there’s not really another option. And he loves Iowa. And I love him. So I’ll probably love Iowa. What is that? Transitive? But I don’t know. I just don’t know. And I hate to say it out loud, but I just don’t know if he’s worth it. And I don’t want to commit just to learn he’s not. And not find out until I’m surrounded by corn.”
“Soy, too,” Colleen offered.
Gwen burst out in laughter. “That too. Don’t forget pigs, either. And at least now my vote will matter.”
Colleen returned the laughter. “Marriage is a lot.”
“You seeing anyone?”
“God, no,” Colleen explained. “Trust me, that’s in no one’s best interest.”
“Huh,” Gwen pondered. “You sound like someone who knows what they’re talking about.”
“Ha!” Colleen exclaimed. “Not even a little bit. My sister, though.”
“She’s married.”
“No. She’s just the type who doesn’t know how not to be in a committed relationship. She’s like a riddle to me. But she’s been with a guy since junior year of high school. Not the same guy. But she’s been single for maybe a total of three months since then.”
“I never got those people,” Gwen noted. “Although, honestly, I’m one of those people.”
Colleen shook her head. “Damn shame.” She stepped through the metal detector, nodding to the TSA agent. Gwen followed her suit. “Matter of fact, I was worried her boyfriend was going to propose.”
“Did he?” Gwen grimaced.
“I’m not sure,” Colleen thought. “I should text her.”
“I would think you should’ve heard by now.”
“I should’ve. But not with Sam. That girl’s a vault.”
Gwen laughed. “I think the world needs more people like Sam.”
“Probably,” Colleen acknowledged.
“Matter of fact,” Gwen noted. “Sounds like the world needs more people like all of your family.”
“I don’t know about that. Terminal A?”
Gwen glanced at her ticket. “E,” She frowned. “Good luck.” She wrapped Colleen in a hug.
Colleen tensed, then wrapped her arms around her newfound companion.
“You too, Gwen. And have some corn on the cob for me.”
Gwen laughed into Colleen’s shoulder then released, bending down to pick up her carry-on, and set off toward her gate as Midwesterners swarmed past, politely rattling off toward God knows where.
Ruth’s hands gripped the sides of the armchair as she rose unsteadily. Jean started from the couch, shaking her daze off.

“Mom, what are you doing?”
“I’m just going to bed. I’m fine.”
“No, you’re not. Just let me-”
“Let her go, Jean.” Alan waved her off. “It’s barely twenty feet. I’ll get started on lunch. Do you want anything, Mom?”
“Whatever the rest of you are having. In my room, please.”
He nodded and ran a hand, warm and weathered smooth, over her back. “Please don’t fall. Jean will never let me forget it.”

“Might save you some money on doctor bills this evening.”
He laughed darkly. “I’ll have it ready for you in fifteen or so.”
“Thank you, Alan.”
She wandered into her room wearily. The blinds were drawn, but some light still filtered through, casting the room in a pallid grayish glow. She leaned her cane against her bedside table and flipped back the bed’s blankets, sliding in one leg at a time, painstakingly slow. Once settled, she leaned forward, chest slumping in on itself as she fumbled around to position her pillows properly. She heard the creak of floorboards as Jean rose to come check, then Edward’s rumbling warning.

“Stay, Jean.”
“I’m not a dog, Edward.”
“Then why are you treating her like one?”
Jean’s footsteps froze.
“Don’t be ridiculous, Edward.”
“She’s old, Jean. Not stupid. If she falls she can still yell. And I have a feeling we’ll be able to hear if she needs anything.”
“Because she’s always been great about asking for what she needs.”
“And even if we tried to help her, do you really think she would let us?” Alan chimed in from the kitchen. “Do you think she’ll want her bread toasted?”
“She’ll want whatever you don’t make.”
“Fair enough.”

She crossed her hands. She had learned a long time ago that eavesdropping was her greatest tool. Dinners spent in the kitchen while John’s coworkers circled about over gin. Meetings at church, at school, where she vanished so as to not miss a word.

The day she had told them about the disease seemed to be a lifetime ago. She had lived more than one of them. But it had only been a few years. Slow years. Long ones. Like sand through a too-thin hourglass. Jean had somehow managed to round them up for another trip. Most of them, at least. Another evening spent up at the cabin when even the sun doesn’t want to set. When the stream happily runs in place and the smoke tastes like mesquite and a beer’s price matters.

She had gotten the scan earlier that week. The doctor had cleared his throat uncomfortably as she crossed her arms across from him in his office, glaring him down behind shades tightly pulled, even in the summer. She had stepped inside, unable to bear being tired around Jean, who had begun her standard routine of floundering around in exhaustion as soon as they had pulled the potato salad from the fridge.

The cabin was musty, but its damp coolness felt comforting to her somehow. The floorboards were still a few years away from rotting. She had promised herself not to worry about it but found herself
peering at them in the half-light just the same. In the distance, she could just barely make out the sounds of Stephen’s children splashing in the creek. They were too old for such foolishness but she appreciated it just the same.

She cringed as one of Edward’s yawns that sounded more like a roar rung out from the copse of trees around the fire pit where they had formed a ring.

“I have to say, I’m glad we did this, Jean. It had been a while since I’d been up here.”

“Thanks, Edward,” Jean sounded apologetic. That tone of a martyr of hers that Ruth couldn’t stand.

“Can’t imagine we’ll get many more times up here.”

“Why not?” Stephen wondered, curiously.

“Well, Mom’s getting up there. And I don’t know what’ll happen to it afterwards.”

“Well, I don’t think the will’s changed since Dad died,” Jean muttered darkly. “So it’ll probably go to Anna.”

Edward laughed uproariously.

“She’d take good care of it,” Cassie offered. Stephen was always too kind to tell her not to meddle in McCormick business.

“She’ll take good care in selling it off for fracking, maybe,” Edward guffawed. “But Mom’s got to die before that happens.”

“I don’t think she’ll ever die,” Sarah opined.

Stephen laughed softly. “If we’re lucky, you’ll be right.”

“I reckon she may have a point,” Edward added. “Maybe that’s the price she paid when she sold her soul to the devil to have her little baby fifth and last.”

Even Jean laughed along.

“She has been hanging in there,” Stephen agreed.

“That’s a mild way to put it,” Jean chimed in. “She hasn’t exactly been a role model in living a healthy lifestyle. Something must’ve kept her going this long.”

“That’s true,” Stephen concurred.

“Nothing could take her out now,” Sarah repeated herself.

“Just herself or the Angel of Death,” Edward posited. “We’ll have to keep our eyes open at Passover next year.” He chuckled.

Ruth wanted to rush out and tell them right there. Nose turned high and watch their faces drop. But she couldn’t. Because there was a chance they wouldn’t care.

Alan bustled into her room, a tray bearing two slices of toast sitting opposite of a bowl of tomato bisque.

“If you don’t want it, I’ll eat it. But if you don’t eat or drink anything Jean might have an aneurysm. Do you need a water?”

Ruth thought a moment, then shook her head. “Come eat with me, Alan.”

He set down the tray and paused, then nodded his head. “Sure thing, Mom.” Tiptoeing back out into the living room, he returned a moment later with his own bowl of soup and a sandwich spilling lettuce from its seams. He pulled the wicker chair from the far corner of the room and sat next to her, knees tucking up past his hips as he took his spoon, making sure Ruth had taken her first bite before beginning to eat.

“You’ll be going back to New York soon?”

He blew on his soup to cool it. “Fly out in a week. I’ll be here for the funeral.”
“Sounds like it’ll be quite a drag,” Ruth advised. “Flying out through Salt Lake?”
“Denver,” He corrected.
“You could stay, you know.”
Alan looked up from his soup for a moment, smiling to himself at the thought, then seeing the honesty in Ruth’s eyes. “You know I couldn’t, Mom.”
“You could. They still respect you around here.”
“They don’t, Mom. The ones who still remember me couldn’t care less.”
“Does anybody care in New York?”
Alan paused. “No. But the nightlife is better. It’s harder to be lonely somewhere so crowded.”
“Harder. But not impossible.”
“I never said it was.”
“It might be nice here. Especially in the summer.”
“Trade one McCormick stuck with Edward for another? Not sure that’s such a great plan.”
“You could live with Jean.”
“Why on earth would she come back?”
“I don’t know.” Ruth shrugged, sipping warily from her soup. “But she would think she had to if you did.”
Alan laughed. “So that’s the plan. Keep us all close to the grave. Want to be sure you never run out of flowers?”
Ruth smiled. “Something like that. I just don’t like the thought of you alone.”
“I’ve made it this far,” Alan shrugged. “And so have you.”
“That doesn’t mean you should have to.”
“That’s true,” He agreed. “But it’s what I know now.”
Ruth set down her spoon for a moment to collect her thoughts. She inhaled sharply, as if to speak, then exhaled it again.
“Alan?”
“Yes?”
“Do you have someone? Someone for you?”
Alan paused and frowned, then set down his bowl. “No.”
Ruth slumped. “Was there? Was there ever anyone?” She cooed.
He set his bowl on the side table. “There was. A long time ago.”
“In law school?”
He nodded.
“Did we ever meet him?”
“You met them,” He agreed. “At graduation.”
She nodded and smiled faintly. “I remember. You seemed so happy together.”
“We were.” A smile crept to Alan’s lips, then died there. “But I couldn’t do it.”
Ruth bowed her head. “Because of us? Your father and I?”
Alan crossed his arms, then uncrossed them. “Yes.”
Ruth took Alan’s hand in hers, his coarse and muscular hand dwarfing her gnarled knuckles. “Do you know what happened to them?”
Alan shrugged, and slipped his hand from hers. “No. I haven’t seen him since graduation. 1981 was a long time ago.” He paused to draw a rattling breath. “I’ve lost track of a lot of friends from then.”
Ruth let her hand fall to her bed, laying limply a few inches away from his. “Did you ever think about finding someone new?”

Alan sniffed once, then laughed. “No. I thought about it. But I learned to be alone. And I could never unlearn it.”

Ruth slumped deeper into her bed. “I’m sorry, Alan. We didn’t want what was best for you. We weren’t ready.”


Ruth’s gaze softened toward her comforter. “Maybe it’ll die with you.”

Alan laughed gently, almost silently. “Maybe. It won’t. But it might.”

“It won’t,” Ruth agreed. “But it might.”
The tow truck’s driver stood, legs spread far too wide in the snow, nodding knowingly as he chatted with Joy outside. Joy turned back to give a nervous smile to Stephen and Sean.

“That smile’s for you, you know,” Stephen commented, munching on the remains of a box of Cheez-Its leftover from Illinois.

“You can kiss that ‘World’s Best Dad’ mug goodbye,” Sean threatened.
“I don’t need it on a mug,” Stephen shrugged.
“Are we going to be able to make it on time?”
“Probably.” Stephen pondered.
“Probably?”
“Yes.”
“You seem confident,” Sean muttered worriedly.
“Road’ll clear out ahead.” Stephen asserted.
“Will it?”
“Not with that attitude.”
“That’s the problem. My attitude.”
“You said it, not me.”
“Should we call ahead?”
“With which of our two dead phones?”
“We could ask to borrow one.”
“Not worth the hassle.”
“If you say so.” Sean turned back to face forward. Joy trotted up alongside the car, still smiling worriedly.

“Hey guys! I know it’s a lot to ask, but—”
“Tow truck got snowed in?” Stephen cut her off.
She grimaced. “Lucky guess. Any chance you could help?”
They looked at each other wearily.
“Well,” Stephen shrugged. “Glad to see this extra muscle I brought along will be good for something.”
“This extra muscle happens to be an excellent conversationalist, Dad,” Sean cut in as they slid out of the car.

“Sorry, fellas,” The tow truck’s driver called out with a chuckle. “Preciate it.”
“No problem,” They chorused back, taking their places at the rear of the truck between the cable that ran back to the sedan.

The engine began to rev. Sean felt it course through his hands, shaking his bones. He dug his heels in, hands digging in just above the wheel. The snow was slick and the truck caught for a moment, perfectly still, wheels spinning furiously through. Then snow began to flick up behind them and they caught traction, rolling slowly at first, the all of a sudden jolting forward. They ran alongside the car a few paces before unlatching and trotting out to the sides.

Stephen grinned at his son. “Not a bad workout, huh?”
“I could do without it.” Sean shrugged.
Joy ran up to them, greeting first Sean, then Stephen, in tight hugs.
“Thank you so much!”
Caught off-guard, Sean loosened, then returned the hug.
“Sorry,” She whispered. “I’m just cold.”
“Can’t blame you,” Sean smiled.  
“And you’re good to get back to Billings with just him?” Stephen’s brow furrowed.  
“Yeah,” Joy brushed the concern aside with bravado. “It’s no problem. And I’ll figure out somewhere to stay. No problem at all.”  
“Alright then. Travel safe.”  
“You too!” She replied with a grin. “Enjoy your family reunion!”  
“Seems unlikely,” Stephen grinned. “And go Cowboys!”  
“Go Cowboys!” She replied.  
Before she had hopped into the side of the pickup truck, Stephen had already pulled back onto the highway, the speedometer rising steadily toward 80.  
“No stops till we get there,” He instructed his son. “And I left your number in her glove compartment.”
Ruth stirred reluctantly, feeling the warmth of the blankets evaporate away as she shifted out of bed. Down the hall, she could just make out the steady breathing of her children, all fast asleep. She smirked to herself. Almost felt sixty years younger. She wrapped her hands around her cane beside her bed and rowed herself from bed, grasping her cane like an oar.

She glanced at the clock. Almost time. Almost. She sighed deeply, then caught herself. They deserved to sleep a while longer. Her hips protested as she began to march toward the door, but eventually they righted themselves and her legs limped forward with purpose as she clawed at the ground with her cane. Reaching the coatrack, she propped the cane against the wall and selected her black woolen decades-old peacoat. It felt oddly heavy, its hem slapping up against the back of her legs with only a thin layer of linen between them. She pulled it as tightly around her shoulders as her strength would allow.

She heard something shift in the kitchen behind her and turned, surprised. Sarah stared back at her, wide eyed. Ruth frowned and turned to survey the living room. Edward was sprawled across the couch, breaths occasionally rattling through his nose. Anna was burrowed into the armchair opposite hers, knees wrapped into her chest. Alan sat reclined in Ruth’s armchair, hands clasped across his chest, slumbering serenely. She turned back to Sarah.

“Where’s Jean?”

Sarah shrugged. “Went out for a walk, I think.”

Ruth shook her head. “Stupid. And weak, the rest of them.” She nodded toward her children. “At least one of them made one right decision.” She smiled at Sarah, who returned it. She slipped on a pair of burnished leather loafers. “I’ll be right back.” Ruth pulled the door open as narrowly as she could manage and stepped out into the hallway, pulling it shut silently behind her.

She breathed a sigh of relief and set off down the hallway, her strides strengthening as she went, her cane wobbling slightly in the plush red carpet of the hallway. She glanced at the paintings that lined the walls. Nameless still lifes of rivers, peaks, and valleys that dotted the Rocky mountains by nameless authors in gaudy frames painted gold. She had thought they were tacky when she had moved in. They still were. But she didn’t mind them. One last glimpse of nature in a warren of apartments to wait for death. She wound past the elevator, past the rooms full of the Greatest Generation, sleeping off flavorless lunches. She turned, ramming open a nondescript white door with her shoulder and bracing herself to set off down the flight of stairs. One last challenge.

She stepped down them, warily at first, leading with her shoulder and her cane trailing behind her like a crampon. Side-stepping down, her foot wobbled, then steadied, and she began to find her rhythm, her grasp on the rail loosening. Rounding the corner, she stumbled, her knuckles whitening as she managed to catch herself. She righted herself and breathed slow and deep, feeling her heart race in her chest. It slowed and she commenced her journey once more, steps deliberate and flat-footed on the stairs. She reached the bottom of the flight and rested there a moment, shoulder slumping down on the cane she could use once more.

Recovered, she heaved the door open with two hands, catching its corner with her cane in time to slip through before it closed back up. A rush of warm air greeted her as she stumbled back into the main hallway. An orderly cast a strange glance her way, then righted his shoulders and continued ahead, wrinkly scrubs crinkling as he paced around, shoving a cart ringed with blood-pressure cuffs and little orange cylinders full of pills that rattled slightly.
She limped down the hallway, feet dragging slightly but skating along just the same. Rounding a corner, she burst out into the lobby. The attendant at the front desk looked up and grinned at her out of habit, lipstick thrown even more askew as she realized who was before her.

“Ms. McCormick! Can I help you?”

Ruth raised her hand and brushed her off. “I’m quite alright, Ms. Karlsson.” She cast a discerning eye about the lobby before noticing the pair huddled back against the fireplace, foregoing the plush armchairs that ringed the merry gas flame to squat atop the stone mantel. She walked over, palm jammed into her cane as she fought to right her chest.

Arriving before them, she switched her cane to her left hand and stuck out her right hand.

“Doctor Morgan!” She proclaimed.

He smiled at her and grasped her hand warmly. He was a soft little thing, not a day over thirty, a baby face gleaming, round and gentle at her from beneath his light brown hair, little feathery strands breaking forth from the thick coat of gel that pulled them to his right. His blue eyes glimmered as he greeted her.

“Mrs. McCormick! How are you?”

“I’m well, thank you. And this is?” She nodded to the man who accompanied him, likewise built with just a few more inches over his compatriot, and a hint of muscle beneath his bulk, face floured with a thin layer of black stubble whose color seemed to leech into his complexion.

“This is my assistant, Joshua.”

Andrew held out his hand and smiled tensely at Ruth.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Andrew.”

“Any company with you today, Mrs. McCormick?”

“Please, call me Ruth. I have a few up in my room. If you’d believe it they fell asleep.”

The doctor laughed, warm and rich. “Shall we, then?” He held out his arm in an offer of support. She grasped his forearm gratefully and nodded. “Right this way. I trust you signed in?”

“We did, indeed.” Doctor Morgan smiled at her. Andrew followed silently a few paces behind them.

“And how are you today, Doctor?”

“Please,” He smiled. “Call me Caleb. It’s been alright. We had a long drive to clock in from Kalispell this morning.”

She nodded obligingly. “A house call.”

He nodded, gracefully melancholy. “It’s a hard line of work. Josh can tell you.”

Josh nodded silently when Ruth turned around, the same tight-lipped smile creasing his mouth. Ruth pivoted as they reached the elevator and she nodded to the button. He pushed it, then stepped back to assess the gaudy golden doors.

“Joshua, I believe I left some of the paperwork back in the car. Would you run back and get it for me?” Caleb adjusted his arm so that Ruth’s hand nestled into the crook of his elbow. “Sorry, ma’am.”

“It’s no trouble,” The two of them chorused. Joshua turned sharply and paced back toward the exit.

“Apartment 218,” Ruth called to his back. He nodded without turning around.

She turned back to the doctor. “Is he alright?”

Caleb shrugged. “Oh, he’s just a bit tired. He’s a quiet fellow, too. He’s not terribly fond of this line of work. I can’t imagine that helps. But he’s an awfully hard worker and he can drive for hours straight. We work well together.”
Ruth nodded her head. “All sorts of folks seem to have opinions. I can only imagine what it must be like for you.”
Caleb laughed. “I consider it an honor. But some folks do seem to feel awfully strong about it. Usually the ones who don’t have to make that decision. But just the same.”
Ruth chuckled. “I can’t argue with that.”
Caleb shook his head. “After all my time in this line, I’m rooting for something fast. Maybe a nice heart attack. Good and fast when I’m seventy or so.”
“I remember seventy.” Ruth reminisced, her eyes shimmering with laughter. “That is a good time.”
Caleb nodded solemnly. “I have a steak a week just to try to keep on pace.”
The elevator rang its arrival and the doors slid apart in stop-gap jerks. They stepped in tentatively.
“I must say, those doors don’t inspire confidence.”
“They have to free up space somehow,” Ruth shrugged drily.
Caleb shook his head, laughing. “I’m used to gallows humor, but I must say you take the cake.”
“Well, thank you, young man.”
She leaned heavily on her cane, her chest dropping lower.
“Are you alright, Ms. McCormick?”
She righted herself. “Oh, I’m quite alright, thank you. Now, tell me. Are you from here?”
Caleb beamed proudly. “Born and raised just outside Gardiner.”
“Parents worked at the park?”
He nodded firmly. “Just my mother. Spent so much time there I call the geyser Uncle Faithful.”
Ruth smirked. “Good.”
“Good?”
“That means you have a reason for being here other than flunking your MCATs.”
Caleb chuckled. “No, ma’am. Undergraduate in Missoula then off to Seattle for med school.”
She nodded, impressed. “My youngest is a pediatrician. Ended up out east somehow. Guess he traded the blizzards for humidity.”
Caleb shook his head. “Sounds like a raw deal.”
She shook her head. “You have no idea. I could only visit them between Halloween and Saint Patrick’s Day.”
Caleb nodded ruefully. “Something to be said for staying close to home.”
“Your folks are still in Gardiner?”
He shook his head. “They moved to Bozeman a few years back. Just easier living there. And my mom’s in a home now.”
Ruth tutted. “I’m sorry to hear that, Doctor.”
The elevator doors slid open and they stepped out. Ruth nodded to the right and they set off.
“Oh, it’s quite alright. Her Alzheimer’s had been getting worse for a while, so after my father passed away we got her somewhere a little safer.”
Ruth nodded. “It got some of my friends. It’s a hard thing to watch.”
Caleb nodded sadly. “It can be. But she doesn’t get mad at me for this line of work anymore.”
He smiled warmly but his eyes remained downcast.
“Did your father approve?”
“He was a farmer,” Caleb shrugged. “He was skeptical. But he understood.”
Ruth nodded. “No time for that sort of thought.”
“Exactly,” Caleb agreed. “Too busy worrying about potatoes to care about what prescriptions I was writing.”
“Right here.” Ruth announced, coming to a stop before her door. “Try not to judge my children too harshly. I did the best I could.”
He pulled the door open and stepped aside, allowing her in. She began to wrap her cane on the floor as she trod into the living room, winding her way between her children, asleep.
“Wake up,” She growled. “It’s time.”
The wind sliced through her jacket, so Jean pulled the collar a little higher and soldiered on, picking her way across the sidewalk cratered with tightly packed snow. The wind buffeted at her side, gusting up the side of the mountain from the valley as she wound along the sidewalk that bisected the ridge upon which her mother’s community rested. Looking to her left, the valley below gleamed white with snow, asphalt scars cutting through where the great hunks of metal that lumbered through the valley had plowed through. To her right, the mountain sloped up tired and hunched over, coming to a weak peak some few hundred meters higher. She jammed her hands into her pocket and slipped her chin, long numbed, under the lip of her coat. She pumped her legs on headlong, her feet aching with each step but knowing the sting that would overtake her legs if she stopped to be far worse. She felt out the cold lump of her phone in her pocket and pulled it out from habit, glancing at its screen. She glanced down the length of the valley where dusk eked out a few more minutes of light. She looked back down. It was almost time to head in. Then she frowned. There, below the hour, was her voicemail notification.

She swiped the phone open and tapped at the screen with a finger too fat from cold to hit it just right. She ducked behind a lightpost in shelter from the wind and held the phone to her ear.

“Hey, Jean. It’s me, Colin. ‘Course, you know that.” He was sucking his teeth again. She hated that. “I just got off the phone with Maggie. Call me when you have time. But don’t worry about it. It’s nothing urgent. I know this is a-” She cut the voicemail off and pressed to call him. It rang twice before he picked up.

“Hey! Jean! How are you? This isn’t a great time-”
“’I’ll be quick.’ Jean hissed. “What did she say?”
“Jean, I don’t-”
“What did she say, Colin?”
“You should probably be with your family-”
“What did she say, Colin?” She rasped into the phone.
He sighed. “She said she doesn’t want to hear from you anymore.”
“Is that what she actually said?”
He paused and groaned ever so lightly.
“Tell me all of it, Colin.” She snarled.
“She said she was happy you finally had something actually worth using to guilt-trip her. And that she thinks you’re using me as a Trojan Horse for your emotional manipulation.”
Jean spluttered helplessly.
“Listen, Jean, I’ll try to talk to her. Maybe in person. I just think this is a tough time for all of us so we should try to-”
“It’s fine.” Jean spat. “It’s fine. I don’t care. I’ll see you when I see you.”
He sighed. “I’m sorry, Jean. Please don’t do anything-”

The line rang silent as she hung up. She gripped the phone tightly and turned to face out across the valley, winding her arm up before relaxing it to her side. She sighed and turned back to the community. Her hand vibrated once more in her hand. She glanced down at it. She didn’t recognize the area code, so she declined and turned it off.

“Go to hell,” She muttered, to no one in particular. She looked back out across the valley. Something rose in her throat but she wasn’t quite sure what. It felt like tears. But not quite. Then her shoulders dropped and she began to trudge back in.
The door swung open.

“Ah! Jean! There you are!” Edward exclaimed. “You’ll be happy to know you’re not the last one here.”

She cast a withering glare his way but he was too busy eyeing up Sarah in the kitchen.

“Mom’s insistent we wait for Stephen,” He explained. “Also, there’s some paperwork you need to sign.”

She glanced at the doctor. Looked like he was still an undergraduate. She nodded curtly his way. The nurse stepped up to her and handed her a clipboard with papers. They treated each other to the same tight-lipped smile. She signed without reading. She looked up at her siblings. Anna huddled on the couch again. Jean bit the side of her cheek to keep her eyes from rolling back. Anna’s mascara was already running and she clung tightly to the Kleenex. Alan stood behind her, arms crossed tightly. He always had a hell of a poker face. Edward leaned against the counter from the living room’s side, mimicking Alan’s pose. Idiot.

Sarah prowled across the kitchen. Jackal. She turned back to the doctor. He squirmed under his gaze. Unbelievable. She expected doctors to be unable to deliver bad news, but she didn’t expect it from one whose job was helping old folks overdose.

“What is it, Doctor?” She barked.

He shifted, then grimaced. “My assistant are more than happy to help out with this kind of procedure, but-

“Spit it out, kindly,” She snarled.

“We’ve got to be back in Bozeman tonight. Normally it wouldn’t be a problem, but we’ve got an appointment in Glendive tomorrow, so we need to leave soon, and I’m afraid.....” He trailed off.

“It’s now or never, Mom,” Jean pivoted to her. “We can wait for Stephen and cancel the appointment, or we can go ahead without him.”

“We’re waiting for Stephen.” Ruth commanded, jaw firm.

“When can you next be here?” Jean spun back to the doctor.

He thought, his face contorted in discomfort. “Thursday. At the soonest. And that’s a maybe.

Definitely a week from tomorrow.”

“There’s your choice, Mom. Either four of us or none of us.”

“I want you all here.”

“That’s not happening,” Jean shrugged. “We have lives. Far from here. Do you think your favorite son is going to be able to take another week off from the hospital? Do you think I can take off another week? Alan will probably get disbarred if he’s away for that long, especially if they hear he’s out west in a valley where half the population has their very own manifesto.”

Ruth shrank into her armchair, pulling her blanket tight to her chin. Tears beaded in her eyes. “I want Stephen here.”

“Then you can wait for him to get here. And at this rate that won’t be until Tuesday. Then you can have your nice little cup of coffee with him and send him back home on a plane.”

“She might be right, Mom,” Edward cut in. “It might be better while you’ve got most of us here.”

She frowned and turned to glance behind her. “What do you two think?”

Anna sniffled. “I don’t know. It’s just L.” She dissolved in tears.

Alan shrugged. “I quit trial law years back. I have no desire to get back into it now,” He nodded toward Ruth. “A prosecution that believes what they’re saying are the hardest to beat.”

Jean glared at him. “Do you really want to do this, Mom? Is this really what you want?”
She crouched back in her seat, staring back defensively like a caged animal. She stared clear past Jean, her gaze bearing down on Sarah in the kitchen.

“Yes. This is what I want.” She pulled her blanket down, folding it onto her chest and sitting up straighter. “I’m ready, Doctor.”

He nodded once, curtly. “Okay.” He emptied a small vial into a glass of water that rested on a side table, its ring of condensation seeping into a coaster older than the Eisenhower Administration. “As I said before, Ruth. I just need you to drink this. You should fall asleep relatively quickly. It might be a bit bitter. Just try to get it all done.” He turned to her children. “I’ll keep checking her pulse every few minutes after she’s fallen asleep. It should take a half hour or so, max. Joshua and I can step out if you’d like a few moments together.”

“That won’t be necessary, Doctor.” Ruth announced from the armchair, reaching out. He handed it to her hesitantly. She took it in both hands and turned to look at her children.

“Come out from behind me,” She called to Alan and Anna. “I want to get one last look at you.” They nodded obligingly and crept back in front of her where they stood, all in a row meekly. She looked at them, one at a time, long and hard. Then she nodded. “I love you.” She dictated.

“And I’m proud of you.”

She nodded once more, steeling herself, and lifted the glass up. She took a sip.

“How does it taste, Mom?” Edward inquired.

She frowned. “I’ve had worse. You want some?” She offered it out to him, then tipped it back, drinking it all in one steady effort. A thin trickle dribbled down her cheek.

She set it back down with a sigh, wiping the excess from her cheek. She turned to the doctor beside her. “And you said I’ll fall asleep soon?”

He nodded silently.

She turned back to them.

Anna rushed back to the loveseat, a sob escaping her mouth as she plunged face forward into a pillow.

Jean swallowed back a wave of nausea and turned wordlessly. “Get me when it’s over,” She muttered to Alan as she raced past them to the balcony. As soon as she swung the door open she wished she had added another layer to the jacket she had never taken off.
Ruth yawned and stretched like an old cat. She blinked twice and turned to the window, where the sun’s last paltry gasps shot out over the mountains’ shadows. Her head shot to the left as Edward shifted.

He shrugged and proceeded toward the kitchen. “Guess it’s not working yet.”

She frowned at him. On the couch Anna choked back her sobs, white knuckles gripping wads of tissues tightly.

“How are you, dear?” Ruth whispered.

He whipped his head up to look at her. Her eyes were still closed. He couldn’t remember the last time she had smiled for this long. He sighed.

“I’m tired,” He shrugged.

“So am I, dear. So am I.” She ran her thumb back and forth between his hands. She yawned.

“This is exhausting.”

Alan burst out in nervous laughter. “It sure is.”

“Neithert do I, dear. Neither do I.” She nestled deeper into her armchair.

She yawned again. He yawned back.

He ran the pad of his thumb over her ring fingernail.

“I love you, Mom.” He whispered. She didn’t respond.

He squeezed her hand. Her hand rested, limp and small, between his.
God damn it.
She was here one moment and then she was gone.
God damn it.
She was just there, leaning back, whispering to Alan. Then he stood up and coughed. And the doctor bent down and checked. Still there. But she was as good as gone. He sat back down. And those two damned doctors kept circling her like vultures. God damn it.
Jean took off as soon as she swallowed it. She always was weak. But at least she was smart.
Anna was weak and stupid. Sitting there on the loveseat blubbingering. No idea how John let that happen.
Edward unpropped himself from the wall. Legs felt tight. Took two steps. Looked toward the kitchen. Sarah squirmed there. He nodded to her. She nodded back and took off. Clip-clopping off in those damn too-high heels. She didn’t belong here.
He turned back. The vultures were still there perched over her, bending down. Nothing yet.
As if her heart was sending its beats to his. It thumped against his ribcage. He cleared his throat. Took another two steps. Cleared it again. Alan glared at him. He could go to hell. His legs gave way under him. Just a bit. He locked them up. Couldn’t drive that far anymore. Not sure how Stephen was doing it. He wasn’t, is what it was. Five years younger and he would be here by now. Damn shame.
Edward cleared his throat a third time. Dry as sand. He opened his throat to speak but it caught in his chest. He fumbled about on the counter from the living room. No glasses. One back near Ruth. Empty. No good. But not because it was empty. He stumbled around the counter, hands groping for a glass. Rattled one out of a cabinet. He filled it shakily. Took a long draught. Then another. Looked back at Ruth. The doctor bent down once more.
It’s over. That’s all he said. It’s over. Go to hell.
It’s over.
God damn it.
She couldn’t look up. She couldn’t. The air shifted about her. Anna pulled her knees tighter to her chest. The tears subsided. She heard the patio door slide open, then shut. She braced herself, then shivered, tight and spasmic, as the cold washed over her. It washed down her throat and new tears sprung up.

She should have done more. Ruth too. But you couldn’t blame a dead woman. What a horrible thought. It flowed about the room. Life. And death. All up in the air. In and out. She could feel it but she couldn’t see it. So she didn’t bother to look. All up there. Trickling out slowly like sand in an hourglass. Horrible thought.

Shifting all around. Coming and going. Going most of all. Horrible thoughts.
The patio door slid shut behind her. Jean clenched her jaw against the cold, then felt it droop wearily, then tighten again from the cold. She really did it. She really did it.

It didn’t feel right, still somehow. It was so final. But it was coming for her just the same. Maybe Ruth was right to do it this way. On her own terms. As independent as she wanted. Jean could remember Ruth the way she would have. A little rosier. A little warmer. A little softer around the edges. But the same woman she had been. The woman that hid underneath for so many years. She reared up every once in a while. But stayed hidden until he left. Until he was gone. Silly to say it that way. Till he was dead. And now she was dead.

Ruth wanted her to stay here. She never said it but she knew. They both knew. Maybe she should. Maybe the cold would finish her off a bit faster. Hard to say if the cold finished her off. It didn’t matter much now. She beat it. She cheated. That’s what it was. A lifetime of playing by the rules. Rapping knuckles when they didn’t. Disapproving glances. The straight and narrow. The only path left open for them. All just to cheat at the end. Maybe it was worth it. Probably not. But maybe. Ruth should know by now. They would both know soon enough. Hard to say who would be the next to join them. Edward or Alan, probably.

She was gone. They would all be gone soon, too. Scattered into the wind that sliced down on her face now. Stephen was still gone. Somewhere out there. Probably beyond where she could see, even if it were light out. Maybe closer. Probably not.

She wrapped her hands around the rail. She needed something to hold. Immediately regretted it as her palms stung with cold. The little lights below twinkled, but there was no warmth in them, so there was no use in them. She glanced back over her shoulder. The light from within was golden. She laid there still. The two doctors hovered above her. At least they knew what they were doing. They all prowled around her like ghosts caught in a wind. A doldrum. She could just barely make out her reflection in the glass of the door. She had always been skinny. But now it was painful.

She turned back around. The wind gouged at her. Tiny flecks of snow shot through it. She blinked hard. She couldn’t afford to cry. The tears might freeze.
Colleen set the phone down. Nothing again. She expected it from Dad, but not from Sean. They were surprising her recently, though. She sighed. The luggage carousel began to turn, bricks of blue and black and brown and gray trundling along. She glanced along them. Nothing. She always managed to be last. She sighed and tried to smile. She glanced around her. Her plane had barely finished deboarding and she had already spotted three bolo ties. It really was different out here.

Behind her, past the car rentals, wedged between a taxidermied elk and bear, a coffee shop’s neon sign blinked its openness blearily. She considered. It was pretty late. But this was a new time zone. She wasn’t sure what that meant, but it seemed important. She glanced at her phone again. Still nothing.

She could call her mother. She looked at her phone. Too late. It wouldn’t make a difference. The airport’s doors slid open and shut, and her teeth chattered as the remnants of the cold limped their way to her. She had learned her lesson back in Minnesota. She hoped everyone was okay. She checked the time on a departing flights list. Seemed unlikely anything would come of this. Maybe she could learn to ski while she was out here.

Her suitcase appeared, finally. One gray lump in a forest of muted bricks. She hauled it off and staggered away. She sighed and trooped toward the exit, scanning for a familiar face. The cold grew more intense, slipping up her sleeve and down her neck, slippery and quick. She gritted her teeth. She stepped outside. A line of cowboys leaned against the wall, sucking the warmth from cigarettes. Either cowboys or grown men playing very convincing dress up. Either way, the secondhand smoke wasn’t doing much to keep her warm.

She scanned the waiting line of cars. She didn’t recognize any of them. Not that she would. She flipped her suitcase over and took a seat atop it, propping her chin in her hand, driving her elbow into her knee. No one was coming for her. But they might.
The valley had teased them, the mountains spreading ever so slightly to allow them a peek as they entered, the sun dropping precipitously as the road curved along into the divot carved out of the earth. Sean glanced over at his father in the dim twilight. Stephen’s hands dug into the steering wheel and his jaw was clenched tight enough to snap.

Sean inhaled deeply, then let it out, shaky and almost whistling. He rubbed his thighs with the palms of his hands and shifted to look dead ahead, where his father’s eyes hadn’t shifted from for half an hour.

“Sean?”
Sean snapped to his left, shocked awake by the noise.

“Yeah?”

“Is your phone still dead?”
Sean paused quizzically. Then he pulled out his phone and glanced at the glassy black screen.

“Yeah, Dad. It’s still dead.” He practically whispered.

Sean nodded gently. “We can do it. We’re almost there.”

“That’s right,” Stephen agreed.

The mountains were fading fast, quickly receding into the behemoths that lurked each day before the sunlight shot back, illuminating every blemish of the ancient stone. Cars shot by again. Sean squinted at the opposite lane, watching the headlights twinkle like strings of Christmas lights in his blurred vision. He clenched his toes, numbing with cold. He reached out and turned the heat up. Almost immediately, Stephen’s arm swung out to reset the heating.

“Cold feet keep me alert,” He explained, his eyes still not deviating from the horizon. Sean nodded his agreement meekly.

“What time is it?” Stephen hissed.
Sean looked at his father confused, then down at the dashboard clock, then back up at his father, whose eyes still hadn’t moved from the road ahead.

“It—it’s 5:45, Dad.”

“Mountain Standard Time?”

“Yeah, Dad.”

Stephen nodded, thinking. “She’s dead.”

“What? No. We don’t know that.”
He began to shake his head, pensively at first, then frenetically. “She’s dead. She’s dead. Oh, my God. She’s dead. And I missed it.”

Sean’s arm shot out to pin himself against the door as the station wagon veered off of the highway and onto the shoulder. He didn’t dare ask his father the meaning of it all. The car lurched to a stop and the driver side door flew open. Stephen stumbled out a few steps, staggering forward, the headlights before him blurring, before collapsing to the ground with a wail.

With the sound of the scream, Sean leapt from the car and raced to his father’s side.

“She’s dead,” He muttered. “She’s dead. She’s fucking dead. Just like that.”

Sean pulled his hoodie tighter about him, then knelt. He reached out, placing the flat of his palm against the flat of Stephen’s back as he hunched over in the icy asphalt. He slid his hand down around his shoulder and grasped his near shoulder with his second hand, pulling his father into his chest. Stephen’s sobs reverberated through Sean’s ribs.
He slid his hand up to grasp Stephen’s cheek the way his mother used to do when he cried. He pulled his hand back, feeling something wet, stopping to stare disbelieving at his father’s tear, pure and clear, splattered on his hand.

He gagged, then blinked hard twice. Then the dam broke and he collapsed on his father as the tears burst forth in a way he had forgotten they could.
It didn’t feel how I expected. Death. No Grim Reaper. No light at the end of the tunnel. Just a blackness I didn’t realize was coming until it was all over me. Numbness washed over me like a flood. But there wasn’t much left to be felt.

I thought death would come the way the will to die came. Slow at first, so slow it couldn’t be articulated. Swelling fast, coming over me like waves in crescendos that ebbed away, pulling back until I could barely see them anymore. But it didn’t. It came fast and silently. And now I’m here. And they’re back there. All of them.

I don’t remember the last thing I saw. The last thing I remember seeing was the twilight. The way it danced across the mountains like music. I hope that was the last thing I saw. The dim orange that glows between the firs until it clears to a dirty yellow and fades into the darkness. One last flame burning out. I could just make it out. Winter twilights were my last joy in the dark months after John left. If I squinted, and turned just right, sometimes it felt like summer. Then a shiver would come.

I wonder if that’s what John would have wanted. He always loved to be lonely. Maybe I did too. But I’m glad not to be alone. Not for long, at least. Maybe I’m going somewhere. Maybe I’m not. But I’ll be remembered with someone. And that’s good enough. Not that I wasn’t good enough. I could have done more for them. I should have. So much hurt they shouldn’t have. Maybe they chose it. Maybe it’s what they soaked in for nine months. Sometimes I worried even my breastmilk was bitter. And that’s not gone yet. And it never will be.

I didn’t come from here. Didn’t crawl out of a mine the way it seemed John did sometimes. Pulled out of a cart with the dust wiped off of him and shipped off to school. I don’t know the name of the city. Some string of consonants built on some dirt too close to a river to grow good enough corn. I still see it sometimes. Meat packers and ranchers and prospectors. Train tracks and cow pens. I didn’t know the city when we moved. Didn’t know anything. But I knew I wanted to know. So he took me on his knee and his fat hands wrapped around my waste and he bounced me up and down. Lots of horses, he said. Lots of horses. Bigger and stronger than the ones here. And peace. Peace and quiet. I didn’t care much for that. So he covered my ears and pointed me out the window. Silent even as the trains pulled by and the bridges creaked underneath them. Just like that, he said. Peace. And then we left.

I never knew that peace he was talking about. But I think it felt something like this.