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## Dimensions of the DSM

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University of Mary Washington

Dimensions of the DSM

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ENGL 491

Professor Ray Levy

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p. 2 ... Abstract

p. 3 ... "Lucky Socks"

p. 15 ... "The Shepherd & His Flock"

p. 36 ... "California Dreaming"

## **Abstract**

The Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, or the DSM, is the book that helps psychologists diagnose mental illnesses. Its weakness lies in its categorical approach, a labeling system without exceptions for individuals. Many psychologists agree that it should be changed to support less black-and-white criteria for mental illnesses. I want to tackle this issue through a series of three nontraditional essays that use the DSM criteria as building blocks for the scenes of the story. Each piece will feature a character with a specific mental illness, with the focus being on building a three-dimensional character out of the two-dimensional and categorical structure that the DSM provides. This project attempts to go beyond the limits of the DSM by showing that people cannot be limited by labels of their disorders—that they exist to be so much more than their illness.

## Lucky Socks

I fetch my lucky socks from the rain. They are knotted together at the ankles, one graying toe dangling on either side of sickly pink shutters. It was Mom's idea to repaint them when we first moved into the house. She said black was too depressing.

When my hand grabs the socks, they're just moist enough for me to hope the skyfall cleaned them. My arm is exposed for fifteen seconds after I open the window, reach out, and pull the socks inside. I hold my hand out there for another second until I reach sixteen in my head.

"God, Liz," Lew snorts, flipping a page in his book. "Those socks are disgusting."

"They're not." I say, even though they are. I slide the window shut and set the damp socks on my desk, whose wood is aged tenfold by various and unidentifiable stains. Next, I rummage for the measuring tape, sifting through the mess of office supplies and half-empty mugs that rest beneath my windowsill.

"When's your date tonight?" Lew asks. I pause for a moment, like maybe I can blurt out the words to him in time, but I can't. The muscles in my arm are taunt against the skin, straining. I dig the measuring tape out and hold it out to the stain on the left lucky sock, affirming that it's four centimeters wide. After this, when my body's tension dims enough for me to voluntarily glance at Lew, his nose is still sunk in that book.

"Why do you care?" I retort, tossing the measuring tape back on the desk.

"Because this book says I should show interest in your life."

"Since when do you care about what books say?"

"Since I started wanting to be helpful," Lew says, excavating his nose from the book's pages. He's sitting on my bed like he owns it, nestled between lopsided stacks of pillows and shoes. His face is peppered with the kind of teenage cystic acne that never breaches the surface,

and his hair is greased back with the gel that makes mohawks, not poindexters. “I know Mom’s being a bitch, but at least you have me.”

“Thanks, Lew,” I say, trying to sound like I mean it. My life was markedly better before a fifteen-year-old pretended to care about some offhand comment my college therapist made. “And the date’s at six. With Seth.”

And then, I’m not in my glitized pink bedroom with Lew, but in the shower with Seth. Sure, we’ve never met, but I’ve seen his shirtless pics on Tinder and that’s basically the same thing. As I’m standing there under the nozzle with him, water drooling down his filtered, edited abs, I panic. The water’s gone cold, I’m not having a good time, and when he shows me the condom he picked out, it’s pink. Not even solid pink; it’s splattered with little alien faces. They’re bright green, glossy in the bathroom light.

Next thing I know, I’m crying as the water gets hotter because I don’t actually want to lose my virginity to a guy whose first concert was One Direction. When the water stops, I’m still crying, because maybe I do.

“If he’s coming over, you should clean up in here,” Lew says.

I blink back to the reality of my bedroom, batting dry eyes. When I look at Lew, he’s putting my pillows back where socially acceptable pillows should go. He’s already dismantled the shoe stack, unearthing that one pink flip-flop that can’t be thrown away in case I find its pair.

“Lew!” I snap. Panic unfurls in my gut, a Jacob’s ladder in motion. My therapist has a Jacob’s ladder in his office. He lets me play with it while we talk about what it means to have obsessive-compulsive disorder, how to let go of the things that I will never be able to let go of.

“Mom’s not going to get you help if she doesn’t think you’re trying.” Lew frowns, grabbing his book off the comforter and stepping toward the door. “It’s not just this, either. She told me you’re giving up on school.”

“I’m not giving up,” I say, adjusting the pillows until I’m satisfied. “I switched majors, so it’ll take me longer to graduate. That’s not the same thing.”

“She said you failed your major, though.”

“I can’t keep talking about this,” I say. My hands are shaking like Mom’s after she called my therapist’s office for the first time. I really shouldn’t have signed that paper, the one that gave her permission to see all my medical records at school. I thought it would help her move past everything, to know that I’m healthy and okay.

Even if Dad wasn’t.

As Lew hesitates, I hide the flip-flop back under the shoe pile and right the other wrongs he’s done. Then, I put on my boots to cover up the lucky socks and their smell. When I pass Lew to leave, he’s still gripping that book. The spine is angled toward me, its title legible. It’s called “Living with Someone *with* Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder.” I suppose authors have started writing books for families of people with mental disorders, rather than for the latter. There’s already plenty of manuals about that. My therapist wrote down a list of them for me to buy, but Lew’s the only one who’s been reading them.

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Seth is late. I arrived exactly ten minutes early. Which is how early I had to be, if the date is going to be perfect. Lucky socks can only be so lucky.

All the rain from this morning never managed to turn into snow, but the puddles left behind have shriveled into ice. My boots edge into one that has coalesced on the corner by the

restaurant. To pass the time, I count the cars that drive by. There's not many. It's a quiet street, one of those uptown roads bricked with cobble.

"Hey, are you Liz?"

"Yeah," I say, motionless. He's caught me at a bad time. I'm stuck on car number seven, and I can't look at him until the eighth one passes. My left eye twitches in aggravation.

"You alright?"

I hear him closing in, shoes slapping stones. When his steps stop at thirteen, I smack the tip of my boot against the ground so it's even. That's when a jaunty pink sedan grumbles past, exhaust curling into the uptown air. It's pink like the pink on my shutters, on the walls of my house, of the plastic flowers we left on Dad's grave so they'd never die.

*Eight.*

The tension is still there, pricking pins into my chest and fingertips. This happens sometimes. Once isn't always enough. I squint my eyes until my nose crinkles up.

*Eight. Eight. Eight.*

The anxiety slinks away in defeat.

When I finally turn to look at Seth, I find myself staring. His dating profile was for a hot, abbed jock. Hot enough for me to already be having shower sex fantasies about, for sure. I recall his bio mentioning key phrases like six feet tall, freaky big feet, and an unclever tagline from *Friends* about being awkward for love.

Well, the awkward bit was right. And the six foot tall part. The man standing behind me is tall and angular, cheeks sucked in to make room for a tugboat chin. His lips are puckered like they've been filled with plastic, wrinkles pressed into the skin where they shouldn't be.

Definitely no abs, either.



My dwindling hope of a perfect date capsizes when he opens his mouth again.

“So, I know we planned to eat out and all, but I’d rather take you back to my car instead. My Dad wanted to know why I was going out, and now he thinks I’m studying at the library. I don’t have too long,” Seth says. He slouches when he talks, arms dangling like the wet socks on my bedroom shutters.

“We literally just met each other,” I frown, pressing my own shoulders back until my shoulder blades pinch each other. “I don’t go back to cars with people I just meet. Why does your Dad care where you’re at, anyway?”

Seth gives me a noncommittal shrug. I shrug, too. Just to make it even.

“Let’s eat,” I say. “We made a reservation, anyway.”

Seth (if that’s really his name) shoots me a puckered pout. He glances back down the route he came, at the winding cobbled road he’ll have to journey through to get back to his car in the cold.

“Fine,” he sighs. “But I don’t have long.”

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Everything is okay until the food comes. We’re in one of those family-owned restaurants that was founded by someone’s twice-removed Italian uncle. The genetic dilution over generations has filtered down to the decor. Our table is blotted with heart-stopping pizza grease. A wrinkled Italian flag droops from the exposed rafters above, but none of the blank-faced waitstaff show enthusiasm for their family’s heritage.

At some point, Seth tells me about his desperate need to get years of Christian repression out of his system with a literal bang. In return, I tell him about switching my major from Psychology to English, and how it was all because I couldn’t get through statistics and needed

something mathless. I even mention how my Mom has begun to loathe me for this, in case it'll resuscitate something in Seth's conflict with his Dad. It's no use, though. Neither of us is paying attention to the other.

"Which one of you ordered lasagna?" asks a waitress, fingers red from holding our plates in her hands. I say it's mine, and she gives me a canned warning about how hot it is before slipping it in front of me.

That's when I see it. Three chunks of devilish noodle blocks. There were supposed to be *four*. It's the only reason I got the lasagna.

"I need you to eat one of these," I say to Seth, who has already begun lusting after his alfredo linguini. He's got a gob of them curled up around his fork, which he eats after blasting me with an irritated glare.

"No," he says, wet cheese noises erupting as he smacks his lips. "I don't eat red sauce. My Dad thinks I'm allergic to the dye in it."

"Please, seriously," I say. Shrill alarms are chiming in my brain, a brain that has to have what it needs to have or *else*. "I just need you to take one of them off my plate."

And then I need to say it again, because maybe he's not understanding. If I don't repeat myself, he might never understand, and then I'm going to have to eat this lasagna and crash my car into a tree on my way home.

Maybe Mom will leave pink flowers on my grave, too.

"I just need you to take one of them off my plate," I repeat. "Because it's not safe for me to leave it there."

This is the only part of our conversation Seth's been listening to. I can tell because his eyes have lost the buttered glaze that took over when I mentioned college. Silence replaces his previous expression. It sours into something muted and stern.

I gesture twice to my lasagna, like this makes it easier.

"So if that's gonna make you sick, then you want me to eat it first?" Seth frowns, lips bulging at the effort. "Listen, I came here to have fun, not to play mind games. Give it up, or I'm out."

"You don't get to reject me," I hiss. "I have done everything, absolutely *everything* tonight to try to make this go well. If anyone gets to leave first, it should be me!"

In a momentary lapse of common sense, I shove my plate of wobbling lasagna across the table at him. I don't mean for it to go far, but the soiled wood is too slick with grease to hold it in place. Gelatinous noodles spread their oily wings, plastering themselves to Seth's shirt.

I stare, goggling. Seth stands, letting the carnage fall to the yellowing floor.

"You're crazy, you know that?" Seth spits, a little too loud for comfort. A few guests tuck their heads behind their aged menus, pretending not to listen. "What the fuck's wrong with you? Eat the lasagna, don't eat the lasagna. I don't owe you anything."

"I was just—" I cry, but he's already out the door.

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It's dark enough to switch my headlights on by the time I'm back to my car. I text Lew and let him know *the date didn't go well*, and *no, I don't want to talk about it*, and *yes, please don't tell Mom*. When I pull up to my house twenty minutes later, he's waiting on the porch swing. Like every other extremity of the house, Mom painted it pink when we moved in. It was for male breast cancer awareness, she said.

For Dad.

Every splash of pink reminds me that I didn't lock the door to my room that day. If I had, Mom wouldn't have gone in. She wouldn't have put the piles where she thought they belonged. We wouldn't have been stuck at home fighting instead of being at the hospital. Dad wouldn't have flatlined during the mastectomy. Lew and I could still have him, if I had just turned the lock.

"Are you okay?" Lew asks. I'm standing a few feet from him, our bodies lit with the crackling glow of the porch light. I shake my head, reaching for the front door. The porch swing jingles as Lew jumps to his feet.

"Don't go in right now, Liz," he says, scrambling to stand between me and the door. "Mom's waiting for you. She's pissed."

"What's she pissed about?" I ask, frowning. It's getting colder by the minute, and the thin cardigan I'm wearing isn't doing me any favors. When I tug the sleeves down further, I have to do it twice, or else.

"She saw me reading one of your books on OCD and took it away," Lew says, playing statue. He's been broad-shouldered since he was little, which makes him tough to get around. It makes him look like Dad.

No one tells him that anymore except me.

"Thanks for telling me, Lew," I say, narrowly edging past him and into the doorway. I twist the knob and push open the door. The warm light from the living room filters out, and the heat convinces me to hesitate. I turn, able to see Lew better now. His jaw is set, teeth clenched together behind lips pulled into a tight frown.

“I was really just trying to help, I’m sorry,” Lew says. His voice sinks, low and quiet. “I just don’t want anything else bad to happen. You guys are all I’ve got.”

“I know, Lew,” I say, stepping backward into the light. “I know.”

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Mom’s waiting for me in the kitchen, a mug of green tea in one hand and her chin resting in the other. We have one of those kitchens with particle board cabinets built back in the 70’s when they were reserved for the rich. Mom stands out among the sea of metallic pink cupboards, still wearing the pencil skirt and fuschia blouse she always parades around the office. The outfit makes her look more tall, slender, and arched than she already is. Her only palpable curve is her sloped belly, which rebounded brilliantly after birthing two children. She moves to stand when I come in, a witness before the jury.

“How was your date?” Mom asks, as if she doesn’t know.

“It was great,” I reply, as if it was.

“Okay, then,” Mom says, pink nails clicking steadily against the sides of her mug. Her expression fixes on mine, unmoving. “So, I guess you don’t want to talk about it.”

“Talk about what?” I frown, tendrils of tension beginning to scale my ribcage. “I’m not going to say what you want to hear. I know you don’t think anything’s wrong with me, and that’s great. I wish there wasn’t. But after tonight—you should’ve seen the way Seth looked at me, Mom. I used to be able to go on dates. I used to feel like I could do things without worrying that me or somebody else was going to get hurt. ”

“It’s just stress, Liz,” Mom says, taking a sip of tea. “You’ve got a lot on your mind. It’s only been five months since the funeral. It takes longer than that to feel okay again. That’s why

that shrink up at school has been diagnosing you with all kinds of disorders right before he sent you home for break; you're grieving."

"It's *one* disorder. And maybe he has a point, Mom. I've been like this for a long time. As long as I can remember, really. I have to do things a certain way, or else. And whenever I don't, something bad happens. Like... with Dad."

"Your father's death wasn't your fault," my Mom says, almost compassionate. "It wasn't *anyone's* fault. The only thing that you were responsible for that day was the state of your room. It's just laziness, Liz. Don't let some shrink trick you into having a disorder."

"I thought you were right, but not after today," I say, leaning against the frame of the kitchen archway. It's painted pink, too. "Even Lew knows something's wrong with me. We can't just avoid it. It's getting worse. Maybe it's grief, maybe it's school, but I need to be able to clean my room. I have to go on dates and not worry that I'm going to die."

"You haven't even been *trying* to get better from whatever you think you're dealing with," Mom says, setting her mug on the counter. She's careful to calculate its landing, placing it where a previous ring had formed while it steeped. "Your room looks the same every week, even after you tell me you've cleaned it. You don't read any of the books that shrink recommended, although Lew obviously is. I wouldn't waste my money on treatment for you even *if* you were improving, which you're not."

"It's different at school. They make treatment free for students on campus. You wouldn't have to do anything. I want us to be on the same page, to agree about what's going on with me. Because you're the only parent I've got left." I'm tearing up now, trembling. "And you taking me seriously would mean the world."

Something in me has to turn the kitchen light on and off, so I reach for the switch and do it twice. Mom sighs, unimpressed.

“I don’t need another sick person in this family,” she says. “I don’t need to spend your father’s life insurance on shrinks either, or for Lew to deal with more than he already has.”

“I know,” I say, still shaking. “That’s why I think I should figure this out on my own. I just want you to support me, or at least admit there’s something wrong. Please, Mom.”

Mom doesn’t answer right away, stretching the silence taunt. The kitchen light dims above her, a solemn reminder that the bulb is almost out of life. This casts a somber glow on my mother’s purpling and veined undereyes, on her slouched shoulders. She stares at me, eyes rimmed red.

“I want you to stop making excuses,” she says, gnawing at the inside of her cheek. “But we can’t both get what we want.”

I stand there at first, ghosts of tears drying tacky on my cheeks. Maybe, if I wait long enough, she’ll take it back. She’ll change her mind.

Instead, she leaves.

She takes her mug of tea from the counter and pushes past me. I’m still standing in the archway when I hear her bedroom door slam down the hall. The front door clicks open and shut just after. A shivering Lew slips inside. He joins me in the kitchen archway, each of us pressed against one pink column. His cheeks are the same color, but at least they match the decor.

“How did it go?” he asks, rubbing his hands together to kill the cold. “I didn’t hear any shouting.”

“There wasn’t any,” I say. The anxiety from before is beginning to wane. My limbs and my choices are becoming my own again. “But it didn’t go well, either.”

When Lew's arms pull me in, I'm thinking about the last time we hugged like this. It was back in August, at Dad's funeral. Mom was having trouble soaking up all the well-wishes, already saturated. So were Lew and I, which is why we went outside the church to get some air.

We sat down in the grass, our backs pressed up against the building. I was the one who reached out to hug him that time, and he was the one who relented. We didn't have to say anything. We knew what we needed then.

I know it now, too.

When we pull apart and settle against opposite sides of the arch, I feel tension trying to root itself in the pit of my stomach again. Before it can get the better of me, I look straight at Lew.

"You don't have to worry about me," I say, taking a bottomless breath. "I can take care of myself. Don't read books for me, or stand up to Mom. It's not your job."

"I want to help," Lew says, eyes brimming with tears. "I can't lose you, or have something bad happen, or—"

"It won't," I whisper, pulling him back in for another hug. "I can handle it."

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It's not until I'm back in my room, boots unzipped and paired behind the door, that I realize I'm still wearing my lucky socks. I peel them off, one after the other. A wicked stench erupts as they unstick from my skin, rotten and sour. I hesitate for exactly ten seconds, feeling their sick warmth in my hand.

Then, I toss them in the waste bin.

If they weren't lucky enough to make my mother believe me, they're not so lucky after all.



## The Shepherd and His Flock

Caden tells us about his 4th wife like he's relaying the weather forecast.

"Meet Clara," he says, buck teeth bared into a grin. "I have a feeling we'll all get along."

His plump arm is slung around a skeletal young woman who weighs half of what she should. Her cheekbones strain, gaunt against taunt skin, as she offers us a dazed smile.

Caden tugs a chair away from our dining table to offer her, letting the legs scream across the wooden floor. The wails continue long after the chair is stilled, reverberating in the recesses of my brain. They've been happening more lately, these echoes. They only sing to my ears, though. The other wives can't hear them.

The stranger sits, resting elbows where they don't belong. They're angular things, corners knobbed with bone as they jut out from below the sleeves of her Sunday-best dress. Now she's invading my territory, an alien at our table. This rickety slab of oak is the only furniture downstairs, save for the chairs. Caden likes to say there's more space for God when there's less things around. It's why he gave most of our things away, after his grandfather died and left it all to him. At the time, this excuse for a table felt like a necessity. I slept with him twice in one day to persuade him into keeping it.

"Happy to be here," the woman whispers, not looking straight at anyone. Her eyes warble, flitting back and forth between faces. She must be young, hardly eighteen.

*Hopefully* eighteen.

"If you girls want to show Clara around, I can get the bed ready," says the ever-subtle Caden. His voice is malted and dry, words crumbling inside his throat. Crow feet track around the edges of his eyes, while deep, shadowed valleys tear through his weathered forehead. He is growing old. Like God, I suppose. He won't be able to find a girl as young as this again. It's a

good thing for me, at least. His spotlight never shines on more than one wife at once. Right now, it's me. Besides, this girl looks sick. I've never seen someone with so little flesh between skin and bone being healthy enough to bear a child.

Caden doesn't care for much else in a wife.

Cleo and Circe, formally titled as wives two and three, put on trained smiles as tithed offerings to this woman. All smiles are taught around here. They're on either side of me, one to the left and the other to the right. The stranger sits at the other end of the table from me. She hunches over as Caden rubs his fingers into her shoulders.

"I'm Cheryl," I say, pushing my breakfast away. This particular meal is one I'm happy to abandon. It's already stale, the corn flakes bloated with milk, but that's not what's killing my appetite. The milk is the wrong color. It's tinged green, green like it's gone bad, green like Circe's slipped something into it. I have my suspicions, inklings founded in her scoffing laughter and loose tongue. I've been ill every morning after drinking her tea. Caden says it's morning sickness. I say it's Circe being a jealous bitch.

"You ought to eat, Cheryl," Caden says, gesturing toward my swollen, infected cereal. He adjusts Clara's hair, tucking it behind her ears. "It's important to keep your strength."

I look at Caden, perking at the attention like a dog to the doorbell. With my shoulder blades cinched together like a good corset, head raised like a horse on its bit, I press my cheeks into a smile. "I'm not hungry right now, but thanks. I'll help show Clara around."

"My name's Cleo, by the way," Cleo mutters. Air whistles from her bulbous nose like a freight train through a tunnel.

"And I'm Circe," Circe says, words buzzing from between teeth clenched in a grin.

Cleo and Circe rise with me in unison, adding to the welcome chorus. Caden pulls his hands away from Clara's skeletal shoulders and leaves. The bedroom door clicks shut behind Caden in the distance, sounding our cue to begin the tour.

"This is the dining room." I say, gesturing to drab white walls that corner the room into an unappealing rectangle. We live in one of those quaint Avon houses, hardly half an hour from the heart of Hartford. That city bursts at the seam, people swarming like termites through narrow city streets. Our house in suburbia is plenty quiet by comparison, however boring. Sometimes, when I'm being a bad wife, I almost miss the noise of the city, of my college campus before Caden took me away.

"It's all very open-concept, so this is technically the living room, too. We don't have the television or couches anymore; after Caden's grandfather died and left us the house, Caden sold everything. We did, however, keep what came with the kitchen."

I walk toward the kitchen, which sports an array of yellowed tiling and eggshell backsplashes. The colors do nothing but add to the tedium. When I first came here, every room sparkled around the edges. It will be like that for Clara too, at first.

Until it's not anymore.

Cleo and Circe scamper into the kitchen like trained dogs, fumbling for their footing on the tile. There's a heated tension that radiates off Circe today as she steps into the kitchen. Her smile is terse, motions rehearsed. Clara follows us more hesitantly, her light footsteps inaudible.

"This is where we do all the cooking," I say. "Caden goes out and gets the groceries once a week from the Shiloh Baptist food pantry. Our YouTube channel has gone down in views and we're getting less donations from his Sunday services, so we don't have much income at the moment."

I slip back through the living space, walk down the hall, and open the nursery door. My worshippers file in behind me, reverently silent. Circe is giving me a stiff stare, probably waiting for me to drop dead from the poison. That honey glaze in her voice might sound sweet, but jealousy turns people wicked.

“This is my favorite room of all. When Caden found out I was pregnant, he moved all of us into the bedroom across the hall so this could be the nursery.” I run my hand along the wall as I talk, blue paint gritting under my palm. “He even bought paint so we could make this look like it’s part of the sky.”

“When did you find out you were pregnant?” Clara asks, sunken eyes wide.

“Last month. I’m going to the doctor tomorrow with Caden to make sure everything’s okay. I’m his first wife, and the first to get pregnant by him, so everything needs to be perfect.”

We take a moment to let Clara look around the room, at the mobile spun from pieces of dangling thread and curtains which were clawed by someone else’s cat before Caden got a hold of them.

“This is where my baby will sleep,” I smile, the first real one of the day. I nod to the makeshift crib that crouches by the window, sagging to one side like a lopsided scarecrow. It’s a little thing, humble and cheap, but Caden tells me he’ll bless it before the baby is born.

“And mine,” Circe says, corn-yellow curls stuck to her neck with sweat. Her flustering motions fester by the second as she rolls her hands in and out of fists. “Because I’m pregnant.”

My heart hurtles to a halt.

“You’re what?” I croak.

Panic rises in my chest, parting around my heart like Moses and the Red Sea. Cleo is cackling in the way witches do and Clara’s lips are parted in awe as Caden crashes through the

door. He's pallid with shock, pale as the milk in my cereal this morning. He staggers forward, reaching for Circe's trembling hand.

"I heard you through the door, and—" he begins, but then his phone rings. He pulls away, still aghast as he draws it out of his pocket. By the looks of it, it's the one that used to be mine. The floral case is unchanged. Caden does that, when we come here. He takes the phones away and tells us we can earn them back with good behavior.

No one has ever been good enough.

As he starts squabbling with the person on the other end, Cleo falls to her knees.

"Thanks be to God for this miracle," she cries. Clara kneels too. Somewhere in the stern of my sinking mind, screams are erupting in wrath, distracting me from myself. I should kneel, but my legs aren't listening. They lock me in place, tetanized as I hold the crib for support.

Circe can't be pregnant. Even if she is, the baby won't be good enough. Mine is supposed to be the only baby, the *true* heir to God. That's why I got pregnant first, after all. Even Caden said so, when we first found out.

He told me that *we* were the special ones.

Caden stuffs the phone back into his pocket. The motion breaks me out of my own trance. When I turn my gaze from the kneeling women to him, his expression has shifted into indifference.

"Cheryl, are you alright?" Circe asks like she cares. All her tremors and tension from this morning are replaced with pride as Cleo and Clara worship at her feet. Caden's hands have found her shoulders, thumbs churning her skin like butter.

"Of course," I say, like I mean it. "It's just the morning sickness."

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“There’s going to be something wrong with that baby,” I say, slicing the carrot down the middle. It splays outward, flesh bright beneath the gleam of my knife.

“Caden knows all, and he didn’t say anything,” says Clara, snatching the bait as quickly as she strains the pasta.

The three of us are bustling around our box of a kitchen, negotiating where to stand. For now, Clara owns the sink. I’m pressed up against the counter as I slice carrots. Cleo fetches a jar of sauce from an overhead cabinet.

“Weren’t you there when she announced it?” I huff, cutting carrots into half-moons. “She acted like she was better than us just because of the pregnancy. It’s going to make the baby suffer from jealousy, too. This is exactly what happened when I tested positive. I had Caden’s attention then, and now Circe’s leeching it away from me now before I’ve even gotten the chance to have my baby.”

And then I’m thinking about how this isn’t the *first* time. My mother did this to me, too. She stole all the attention away from me and beamed it at my sister, trying to abduct her into this realm of learning better behavior, changing maladaptive traits.

All it did was alienate both of us from her.

Earlier, Caden escorted Circe to the bedroom and ordered us to make dinner. I felt the spotlight shifting here, too.

“This wouldn’t be the first time you misread something, Cheryl,” Cleo says, voice rising above the pop of the sauce lid’s seal when she twists it. “You’ve been on about Circe slipping rate poison into your tea to make you miscarry.”

She chuckles. Clara mimics her, desperate to belong. In the near distance, there are groans and the banging of Caden’s headboard on the wall.

This quickly ends their laughter.

*“False prophets will lead them astray,”* someone says. My back is turned, so I don’t see who’s talking. Perhaps it’s Clara; I don’t know her voice well yet.

“False prophet? It’s harsh, but true,” I sigh, sliding the last of the carrots into a nearby skillet. They begin sizzling, and I turn to face Cleo.

“You can’t keep making up what we say and then expecting us to play along,” Cleo tisks, scratching an itch on her monstrous wad of a nose. She takes the noodles in the strainer and marries them to the saucepan.

“I’m not making it up, I heard Clara say it,” I frown, the sinister shadow of doubt curling into my consciousness.

“Why don’t you go take a break, let us finish the cooking? That’s what helped last time. I know Caden’s in the bedroom with Circe, so maybe just go out on the porch? The fresh air will do you good,” Cleo says, sharing a nervous glance with Clara.

The carrots have long since passed the point of being edible. Smoke wafts away from their charred carcasses, leaving me breathless. I stand in the cloud of ashes, eyes watering as I think of Circe again. Circe, Circe, Circe. Caden’s fucking *her* right now instead of me because she’s pregnant, and he did this to me when last week, but I don’t matter to him anymore, and—

*“One of them will betray you.”*

“What?” I cry. The smoke is growing thicker. I look at Cleo and Clara, at the hazy expressions of their faces. Their mouths are twisted into smirks, eyes shrunken into beads, tense veins on their foreheads chartering black blood.

“You don’t love Caden,” I say with a shuddering, strangling cough. My hand reaches for the burner’s dial, turning it up without my permission. “Either of you. You’re just here to see that he fails his mission, to jeopardize our salvations.”

“Cheryl, please,” Clara says, stepping toward me. When I look at her, the evil I saw through the smoke is now nothing but concern. “Just turn down the burner. I think it’s about to set off the—”

And then the fire alarm is screaming the sound of the guilty. The bedroom door opens down the hall and Cleo scrambles for a chair. Clara reaches my side as Caden enters, white slacks unbuttoned. Circe sulks behind him with her eyes trained down, a wounded animal.

“What’s going on out here?” Caden fastens his button, cinching the limp belt that droops around his pants. He looks to me for the answer, because I’m always the one who has it.

Right now, I can give him nothing.

“I’m sorry!” Clara shouts over the noise, twisting the dial off so the charred carrots can finish cremating in peace. Cleo manages to turn off the fire alarm, her elephantine calves trembling the chair beneath her weight. All the while I’m standing there, playing statue in the midst of chaos. My eyes dart back and forth as everyone talks over each other, trying to place the sixth voice in the room, the *someone else* that’s been speaking, but there’s nothing out of place. I’ve been hearing things lately, sure, but not voices. Not words. It could just be the pregnancy hormones or the honey Circe stirred into my tea yesterday, if I’m lucky. Only I wouldn’t be so lucky, because it wasn’t honey, it was poison. She doesn’t want me to have this baby. Everyone wants to be the first to have Caden’s child, but it’s me.

Now, even that isn’t enough to make me special.

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Caden's alarm goes off at midnight sharp. I startle awake on the bare mattress, along with the other three wives. We're bleary, quiet, and half-asleep when Caden ushers us into the sanctuary. It's not so much an actual worship space as it is a spare bedroom, complete with carpeting and a closet off to the side. Four plastic lawn chairs are ordered across the space in staggered formation and color arrangements that aren't visible in the dark. Clara won't have one to sit on today. The fourth chair is always up at the front of the room, facing the others. That's where Caden takes his place, waiting for us to find our chairs before he lights the candle.

"If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin," Caden whispers, setting the candle by his feet. His face shifts expressions in the candlelight, a stop-motion picture. "I'm sure all of you are tired, but I bring good news to this midnight prayer. Our YouTube channel has gained five new followers since Tuesday, and I'm negotiating a deal for our show with TLC. We'll be picketing tomorrow again at the corner of Main, after I return with Cheryl from the doctor."

I nod in the darkness, but he's already talking about something else. He goes on for ten minutes more, speaking into the void before he spends his finishing line.

"At midnight, I will rise to give thanks to you because of your righteous judgments," Caden says, blowing out the candle. All of us kneel, knees thudding against the carpet.

And then, we scream.

Guttural, primal, orgasmic screaming. We howl like wolves, like beasts in pain, like hellfire is licking our heels. It lasts sixty seconds, enough to raw the vocals. Each of us sputters to a stop in turn, breath and voice spent. There is silence, now. Silence in which we're supposed to hear God.

In the last few weeks, the quiet has stopped being empty.

I hear their screams ringing in only my ears long after it's over.

That's when, in the echoes of our howls, I see it. He flashes for a single heartbeat. A flare of light erupts, heavenly light in the diluted, loose form of my Savior. I can make out hands, a featureless face, a halo, bare toes on the carpet. Above all, it's light, a spotlight singling me out from the others, casting the glow of the chosen onto me as I scramble to my feet.

Then, He's gone.

"Did you see that?" I cry. My heart is frantic, crumbling into my chest cavity like the walls of Jericho. Circe mutters something to Cleo under her breath.

"See what?" Caden asks.

"The light," I say, breathless. Everything catches in my throat, choking and gargling my words past the point of recognition. "It was Jesus, I swear. That has to mean something!"

"Now isn't the time to speak," Caden says, his lawn chair shifting under his weight with a crack. "We can talk about this later."

"You didn't see it?" I whisper, faltering.

No one says a word.

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"You're special, Cheryl," Caden tells me, like he's never told me this before. We're out on the front porch. It's just before dawn. Caden's white van, which is parked crookedly in the street, is barely visible in the periphery of morning fog. He's in one lawn chair and I'm in the other, spaced the three feet apart that the short porch will allow.

"To see Christ last night even when I couldn't, to hear him speaking those verses to you in the kitchen; you're gifted. You're powerful. And our child will be, too." His eyes rock down to

my belly and then back up again. “You’ve done the will of God by telling me what you’ve seen and heard, but it’s against His wishes to continue telling the other women.”

“Shouldn’t they know, if it’s so important?”

“All they need to know is said through me,” Caden grins, buck teeth poking from between chapped lips. “I’m the only person who can know God’s will, who can see it all at once for what it is.”

“How did you not see it then?”

“Not see what?”

“Last night; if you’re all knowing, why couldn’t you see Him, too?”

Caden hesitates. It strikes me as funny, to see him tilt his head and angle his eyes downward, but I can’t quite place the cause for amusement. When he meets my gaze again, I realize what it is.

Caden has never been lost for what to say.

“While I might not’ve seen that, I do know something else,” he mutters. “Something I haven’t told you, but I fear that I must. I wasn’t sure if you were ready, but—”

“Tell me what?”

“Your mother called me yesterday. I know we’ve told her not to call, that your home is here now, etcetera, but it wasn’t about that.” His forehead is creasing again, the skin ruckling. “She invited you to your sister’s funeral.”

“My sister? She’s—” I start, the Red Sea rising in me again, but he cuts me off.

“Your mother told me she drove her car off a bridge, said it was all in the obituary. I thought you might’ve read it in yesterday’s paper before I tossed it, but we’ve been busy. I told her you couldn’t go. And you don’t want to, right?”

He pauses, giving me one of *those* looks.

It's a look that means I'd better say the right thing.

"Of course not," I say, swallowing the lump of sin that lodges itself in my throat. My sister is dead, and Caden can't know I care. They're not my family anymore. They're nothing but the others. Others who don't believe in Caden, who don't understand our mission.

We're not supposed to care about others here.

"Good, I'm glad. I didn't want you to hear of it and think I was keeping things from you. Let's just focus on getting to the doctor," Caden says. "We wouldn't want to be late."

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Our first appointment for my baby is full of paperwork. Caden insists on filling it out. The receptionist insists I do it instead. We're sitting in those green plush couches in the hospital lobby, fluorescent lights winking overhead, when I get to the question about family medical history.

"Do you have any on your side?" I ask, twirling the pen back and forth between my fingers. "I don't think I do, besides my uncle with his lung cancer."

"You need to add your sister," Caden says. He taps his shoe against the ground, nibbling on the edge of a fingernail. "Just put down 'mentally ill' for her."

"Suicide doesn't equate mental illness," I reply, circling 'no' with my pen.

"Your mother mentioned schizophrenia," Caden says, gnawing off a sizable chunk of one nail and moving to the next.

"Schizophrenia?" I frown, scribbling out the circle over 'no.' "I would've known if she was schizophrenic. We grew up together."

"You're not the one who knows everything, Cheryl. Just write it down."

He doesn't take his eyes off of me, even when I write 'schizophrenia' down next to my family medical history. The two of us are quiet for a moment as I finish the rest of the form, a pregnant silence strung between us. When I'm done, I decide to sit there, clicking and unclicking the point of the pen.

"What is it *now*?" Caden sighs.

"I don't want to overstep, Caden, I really don't," I say, mincing words as sharply as I mince garlic for pasta nights, when we're lucky enough to nab the cloves from Shiloh Baptist. "I just want to know why I was the only one who could see God. What... what if I'm like my sister? What if I'm seeing things, too? I've got to stay safe for our baby, since we're the special ones and all."

"You're not the only special one now, with Circe's pregnancy. You've got to have more faith, Cheryl," Caden says, waving a hand. All his nails are chewed to nubs. "If you are having doubts, this is the first of many more serious conversations. I hope you haven't begun to miss the others, or question your place here."

"Of course not," I whisper, hopes sinking as quickly as I sink back into my chair. He leans forward in his, filling the space I leave behind. "I wouldn't dream of such ingratitude."

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Caden is quiet the whole way back from the hospital. For once, it's an empty silence.

When we get back to the house, Circe, Clara, and Cleo have already set up for tea. The picket signs for this afternoon are leaning against the dining room table, glaring Caden's own Gospel in print.

“How sweet,” Caden says, barely glancing over the arrangements. Clara has folded the napkins like little swans, their elegant arches juxtaposed by the plastic plates and cups from Ikea. A copper kettle rests on a nest of paper towels, steam swelling from its spout.

“Do you want to join us?” Cleo asks, pursing parched lips. “I know you don’t usually, but I thought with the pregnancies, it was cause to celebrate. We have a special treat today, too.”

She gestures toward a plate of stale Triscuits, the crackers arranged in a stack that is already slumping.

“I appreciate it Cleo, but not now. I believe it’s time for me to properly bond with Clara, since the blessing of Circe’s pregnancy eclipsed her arrival yesterday.”

Clara glances up, her fingers still busy wringing the neck of an uncooperative swan.

“Right now?” she asks. “I was really looking forward to—”

“Yes, Clara,” Caden snaps. “Right now.”

This inevitably sours the mood. Caden guides Clara away, clicking the bedroom door shut behind them. Circe puts their dishes away in a cupboard as Cleo pours our tea.

“Watch out, Cheryl. It’s hot.” Cleo says unhelpfully, clattering the cup against my plate. “How did the doctor’s appointment go?”

“It was alright,” I mutter, looking at my tea. It’s swirling and green, tinted even darker by the forest-hued cup assigned to me. “Did you put something in this? It doesn’t look right.”

“Just tea and honey,” Circe calls from the kitchen. She’s rummaging around, dishes colliding. “It’s the mint tea you like from the church pantry.”

“It just looks funny,” I repeat, glancing at Circe’s drink. Her seat is to the left of me, the tea in her cup practically crystalline. As I inspect it, a wicked thought conjures itself into existence.

*Is Circe trying to poison me?*

One one hand, she's Circe. Painfully angelic, willing and able Circe. She didn't know she was going to completely ruin my moment with the new girl, a moment which would've cemented me as being the special one, the chosen one, the *first* one.

And then I find myself feeling the anger again, that raw, evil, dark sensation. It curdles my blood, twisting the red into black. She's trying to get me to miscarry. She wants to be the first, to make me more useless to Caden than I already am.

So, before Circe leaves the kitchen, I do it.

I switch our cups.

Cleo doesn't notice. She's preoccupied with grooming her nails, which is a hopeless and dirty task. Dirty like *sin* dirty, like how I'm feeling right now, buried alive under guilt.

If I'm right, if Circe poisoned my tea, she'll lose her baby when she drinks what's in front of her. Caden will know what I did, because he knows everything, even if I was the only one who saw God. Maybe I only did this because I'm turning into my sister, and I'm going to die just like her, because nobody's safe.

Especially not here.

I stand up from the table abruptly, chair clattering backward toward the floor. The banging and grunts from the bedroom resume after a brief hesitation.

"I'm ready to go picketing," I say, grabbing one of the signs from beside the table.

"I'll come with you." Cleo looks up from her nails, then turns to Circe. "Are you gonna be fine here for a little bit?"

"I'll be just fine Cleo, don't worry about me," Circe smiles, those buttery yellow curls framing her dimpled cheeks. I stare at her, at this woman who carries the threat to my legacy.

And then, I walk out the door.

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It's mid-afternoon. Cleo and I sit at the corner of Main in lawn chairs lugged from the apartment. Our makeshift cardboard signs rest at our feet. People walk by now and then, but it's not a busy time of day. No one stops to ask what these two girls dressed in white are doing. We don't tell them.

I'm mostly lost in angry thoughts while we sit, my eyes closed. I see Circe telling Caden she's pregnant, the expression on his face when he finds out he'll be a father twice over. I dream up her and that satanic embryo curled in her flat tummy, how the room still feels empty with the two of them in it.

*"Jenny?"*

I spring awake, a comet in motion, bursting from my seat and onto the sidewalk.

"Did you hear that?" I say, looking left and right down the street. It sounded just like my mother, like she was standing across the street calling my birth name, but no one's there.

"Hear what?" Cleo asks. I walk closer to the edge of the road, abandoning her to my periphery. Now that my body is free from the confines of the lawn chair, I can really breathe. The air feels cool, whispers of winter warning in the wind that carries through quiet city streets. It fills my lungs, inflating them until I'm giddy in vertigo, a distant tension in my stomach reminding me how long it's been since I've eaten properly. I feel like I'm dancing in this hunger, the bile at the pit of my stomach serving as a dance floor. That's when I realize I am. I'm twirling, swirling, and giggling most of all.

*"Jenny, enough."*

I slow to a stop, shoes grating against the pavement.



*“It’s time to go.”*

My legs don’t listen, but my eyes do. They race my gaze to this line of payphones across the street, hungry little machines, hungrier than me, and I don’t have any quarters. They’ve been starving for longer than I have, left from a time before when they were needed. Nobody wants them anymore, either. And then I’m thinking about my mother, about the way she cried when I called to tell her I wasn’t ever coming home. I think about my sister the night she drove her car into the river and let it sink, water pouring through open windows that she never tried to swim out of. I think of my mother all alone at the funeral, of Caden telling her I didn’t want to be there.

Cleo is looking at me when I glance her way, head tilted like she’s never seen a woman dance and cry at the same time. I start thinking about Caden. I watch him bringing Cleo home like it’s a bad movie playing in my periphery, switching scenes to me cutting Circe’s hair in her induction. I think about all the times I’ve had to sit there and listen to them fuck each other, say it’s about God, and dodge every question I ever ask.

I’m twisting to the right again, back toward the payphones, when I see her. There’s a woman there, distracted as she looks toward the sky. She has these long, cherry-red curls that stretch down her back and snuggle into themselves. At the sight of her, my body sinks into stillness, arms limp by my sides instead of angled in a misinformed pirouette.

She looks like my mother.

A mother who might be able to give me an answer to what I’ve been trying to find.

I want to run to her, but my feet will only dance, so I let them. I twirl and spin and leap through the staggered traffic, timed perfectly with the rhythm and flow of the chortling cars around me.

Once I reach the payphones, I stand in front of her, a smile burgeoning its way across my face. She looks down from the sky, eyes narrowed at me. As quickly as the excitement filled me, it deflates. These are unfamiliar eyes.

This is not my mother.

“Are you okay, honey?” the woman asks, taking a step back toward the bus stop bench.

“No,” I whisper, taking her spot against the payphones for support. “I thought you were somebody else.”

“If you need to make a call, I can scrounge up a few quarters,” she says, her voice light and unknown to me.

“I do, actually. That’s very kind,” I reply. As she digs around in her purse for a moment, I try to catch a glimpse of Cleo. She’s still sitting in her lawn chair, picket sign at her feet, and gives me a death stare when we meet each other’s gaze.

I turn back to the woman and take her offering of coins. One by one, they plink into the payphone’s slot, until I’m ready to call Caden. He’ll come get me, talk me down and tell me I just have to believe a little harder. He’ll even leave Circe behind at the apartment with Clara to fend for themselves, because I’m too important to wait for.

But my fingers don’t reach for the numbers to Caden’s phone.

They tap out my mother’s instead.

I try to stop them, to waste this money on a wrong number rather than reignite the past into the present, but it’s already ringing. I press the metal phone to my cheek, align it to the edge of my jaw, and listen for a sound in the silence.

When she answers, she sounds different from the voice I've been hearing. It's the same woman at different times, one fiction and the other fact. She breathes into the phone. In tune, my lungs fill with air. I can picture them on the verge of popping.

"Hello, who is this?" my mother says. Her voice crackles through the phone, a familiar static.

"It's Cheryl."

"Cheryl? I'm sorry, I don't know a Cheryl. You might have the wrong number."

"Sorry, Cheryl is—it doesn't matter. I'm Jenny. Your daughter, Jenny."

I hesitate, giving us both a moment of silence. I don't want to tell her, but my mouth has as much a mind of its own as the rest of my agitated body.

"Is this some sort of joke? Because if it is, that's seriously messed up. I just lost my daughter, and—"

"It's me, Mom, it's really Jenny, but I can't talk for long. Someone's been whispering things to me from where I can't see them, and I need you to tell me if it's true. I need it to be true," I say, heart scratching the sides of my throat as the nice woman leaves to sit at her bus stop. My mother tries to interrupt, but I keep talking.

"They've told me that Clara is a false prophet, that Circe and Cleo are going to betray me, that Caden doesn't really talk to God. I just need to know if it's you, or somebody else, or if this happened to Lilly too. I can't be like her, Mom. I'm pregnant, and we're special, and we need to be safe, but I don't think it's safe here anymore."

"Baby, I don't know what to tell you; you've got to come home. Your father and I, we miss you so much." There's rustling over the receiver, jangling keys. It's the sound of someone coming to save me.

“Tell me something real,” I say.

“What?”

“I need you to tell me something *real*. I need to know it’s really you,” I whisper, clinging onto the phone. My fingers clench into metal, throbbing.

“I-I don’t know what to say. I guess, I know your birthday? May 21st? You were born right after midnight. Your father and I always joked it was because you wanted to be a Gemini, not a Taurus like Lilly was.” She’s sniffing now, the noise grating through the phone.

“Tell me about Lilly,” I say. “Caden said she had schizophrenia, and you never told me that, so I don’t know if it’s true.”

“She... she did have schizophrenia,” my mother says, her voice gargled with tears. “The doctor diagnosed her with it a few months before she died. You’d decided to stay with Caden; we didn’t want to drive you even further away by telling you the gravity of it all.”

“If this is real, I need you to come and get me,” I whisper, watching Cleo across the street as she gets up out of her chair and paces to the edge of the road. “I’m so scared, Mom. I need you. I need somebody to keep me safe.”

“Where are you?”

“Main Street, by the bus stop.”

“I can be there in fifteen from the office, baby. Just don’t move. I promise, I’ll be right there, and you’ll be okay. Swear to me that you’re gonna stay put.”

“Cross my heart,” I say, hoping my feet won’t dance somewhere else. I don’t want to hang up, for fear she’ll never come, but she’s already ended the call before I have the chance to tell her this. When I put the phone back, I see Cleo packing everything up. She’s glaring at me expectantly whenever she can, her expression reeking of disgust. She hooks our signs under her

arms and leaves, dragging her lawn chair behind her. She leaves mine there, empty and alone at the corner of Main Street. As she fades down the street, I stay put because I crossed my heart and I don't want to die. I plant my shoes into concrete, roots catching, and count the seconds until fifteen minutes comes to an end.

## California Dreaming

“Where the fuck is Sam’s lunchbox?” I say, spinning through the kitchen like a rotary blade in motion. Being the expert multitasker I am, I’m also singing some song at the top of my lungs and getting half the lyrics wrong. The door of every cupboard has been opened and shut and now they’re flung open like frozen chicken wings. Not frozen chicken wings, scratch that. Those don’t stay open and only taste good in hot sauce or barbeque. Wooden doors don’t taste good with dipping sauce.

“Babe, come on. Don’t cuss right now, okay? Sam’s about to come downstairs,” Roland says, both hands wrist-deep in his pockets as he rounds the corner into the kitchen, rifling for his keys.

“Can’t talk, too busy,” I call, my voice a decibel too loud as I pause to rifle through the mail on the counter. Roland’s going to think I’m yelling at him, and I kind of am, even though he’s right here so there’s no need to shout. He’s dressed up in that nice collared shirt that I forgot to iron for him this morning, but it looks wrinkle-free, so at least *he* remembered.

“You’re all over the place, babe. Slow down,” Roland says, smoothing his tie. He’s getting better at knotting it without my help. “Did you steal one of my energy drinks out of the fridge? You barely got out of bed last week, and now you’re—”

“I didn’t take anything from you, and I can’t slow down, because now Sam’s going to be late for school. It’s not about the fucking sandwich, it’s about the lunchbox. I don’t have another one for him,” I say with a snap. Today, my words are popping like knuckles cracking, like the sound Sam’s collarbone made when he fell off the swing last summer. When I look at Roland, it looks like his face is breaking too, cracks blooming in porcelain veneer, but then I remember that

skin can't do that. In all the distraction, my hands stopped sorting mail. Now they're just pulling the pockets of my jeans in and out, like cabinet doors, like frozen chicken wings.

"God, Moira." Roland sighs. "I've got to get to work. Just give him money for the cafeteria."

"He's not eating that garbage," I say, looking straight at Roland even though I want to stare somewhere, anywhere else where the lunchbox might be hiding. Or at where the clock is tilted on the wall. I wrote a post-it note about putting it straight, but I haven't seen it in days.

"See?" I continue, gesturing to the evidence. Crumbs are scattered on the counter, a jelly jar is nearby with the knife still stuck in it, and there's smudges of peanut butter on the backsplash. "I made him a sandwich this morning, because I'm a great mom, and I make the best sandwiches. Just ask Sam. Maybe he took it to the car already."

"Sam? Do you have your lunch with you?" Roland calls. Right on cue, Sam dashes through the kitchen archway from stage left, his shoes on the wrong feet. If we were in a sit-com, the directors would be telling the audience to laugh right about now, even though it's not funny.

"Nope, sorry Dad," Sam says. His owl-eyed glasses are as crooked as his shoelaces. Come to think of it, the way the glasses pinch his nose makes it look like a beak.

"See?" I repeat, victorious. Sam skirts out the front door without me asking him to wait in the car. He's such a good kid. Even if he kind of looks like a barn owl. That must be why he has acid reflux even though Roland and I don't, because owls regurgitate everything they eat.

That's when I notice Roland's still here, lingering by the counter.

"If Sam's school counselor thinks these mood swings are a problem, he's probably right," Roland says. "Which means we need to figure out how to deal with them." His bearded chin trembles like the big bad wolf pretending to be a grandmother, face twisting into the sadness

that I saw in him last week, when I was more dead than living. I was sinking into that familiar black place, black like the stratosphere without stars, black like the only color that absorbs every lightwave that begs it to feel alive. And now I *am* alive like my world is on fire because I am untouchable, already ablaze. Roland doesn't like me either way, and that's when the anger creeps in, bright red.

“Don't sluff off your insecurities on me, Roland,” I say, taking the knife out of the jelly and licking the blade. “Just because you don't think you're great doesn't mean you can spin that back on me. I've never done anything except be a fucking fantastic mom. I didn't lose the lunchbox, you did. And you did it because you want me to feel crazy and make the whole kitchen look like chicken wings, because I'm better than that.”

“I'll take Sam to school,” Roland sighs again, ignoring the part about the chicken wings. “And I'll be back at five to take everyone to the birthday dinner. I made the reservation at Bob Evans. Sam requested their smiley-face fries, just like last year.”

“Piss off,” I say. Roland shrugs, shoulders jerking like he's Pinocchio on strings, and leaves me behind.

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“Do you want a lemon with your water?” asks our waiter, legs wobbling like he hasn't had the chance to sit down in hours. He probably hasn't. I'm less concerned with that and more worried about his suggestion. Lemons are awful. They eat you from the inside out, acidity eroding your gums, exposing your teeth until there's no pink left behind.

Or maybe that's pineapple?



“She does,” Roland says. “Can we get a birthday pie, too? Maybe a song? It’s this lucky boy’s birthday.” He nods at Sam, who is scribbling in his kid’s menu, the kind that are actually coloring pages in disguise. He’s got what’s left of a blue crayon trapped between his talons.

The waiter nods, giving us one of those smiles that means singing a birthday song to someone’s kid is above his pay grade. When he walks away, I hope he thought we were a normal family. We look like one tonight. I picked out one of my mother’s dresses to wear to the birthday dinner, because I don’t have any of my own. She sent a box of hers with me when we left California. Sometimes, on dark days, I put one on and stand in the yard, pretending this air tastes like home.

“You look pretty, Moira,” Roland says, patting my arm from his seat across the booth. He shaved for the occasion, a sharp line drawn between his beard and cheek. “Thanks for dressing up.”

“Anything for my Sam,” I smile, teeth bared like a doll arranged in a pose. “How was school today, baby?”

“It was fine,” Sam sighs. He’s not looking at us, scribbling away with that blue crayon and drawing up oceans to swim away in.

“Just fine?” Roland chuckles. “Well, hopefully some smiley fries and ketchup will make it better, buddy. The pie will help, too. They might even bring us an apple one, just like last time.”

“What happened at school?” I say, nudging Sam’s leg with the edge of my shoe like it’s a rubber hammer and I’m a doctor, checking reflexes. Sam is motionless.

“I can’t talk about it,” Sam mutters, his voice thick with emotion. “It was just a bad day.”

“He doesn’t want to talk about it right now, Moira. Let’s drop it,” Roland says, like he knows what my son wants. “It’s his birthday dinner. The least we can do is let him have a normal night, no antics.”

“Oh, because I can’t let him have that? Because I’m not normal?” I say, shooting Roland a glare. This is always how it goes when we try to be perfect. He’s a squeaking, scuttling mouse, and I’m the trap, ready to snare him at the first opportunity.

“You know, you’re probably right,” I continue. Anger gurgles in my chest, red and raw, like chicken wings fresh off the chicken. “If I wasn’t here, it’d be a whole lot better.”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it. Can you please just—”

“Shut up?” I hiss, but then the waiter is back and we have to play make-believe. I sit pretty, hands crossed on the lap of my mother’s dress. Roland gives the waiter our orders, even though he hasn’t asked me what I want. He requests the pie again as a reminder, like the good father he thinks he is.

Through all of it, Sam doesn’t say a word.

“Can I talk now?” I snap as the waiter walks away. My brain is alphabet soup in a blender, words whipping themselves around and splashing up against the sides.

“Not right now, babe. Sam’s already upset, and now he’s having trouble at school. So why don’t we just save this for later, when it’s not his birthday?” Roland says. Sam’s pretending like he can’t hear us, beak pointed down. It doesn’t look like owls have ears, but they do. You just can’t see them under all the feathers.

“We’re not going to save it, because I can’t be with someone who doesn’t love me for who I am,” I say, grabbing my purse. That’s when the waiter comes back out with two of his coworkers in tow. One of them carries a slice of ambiguous pie on something that resembles a

lunch tray from Sam's school cafeteria. A single burning candle is pinned in the pastry, wax already dripping down to the crust.

The three of them stop at the foot of our table, sliding the pie in front of Sam. It's the first time he's looked up from his menu all night, and there are tears budding in those big owl eyes. They're dotting the lenses of his glasses.

He probably bawls after I leave mid-song. I would, if I were him. Roland probably comforts him and pretends he's a good father, breaking the news to our son that his mother has left the nest. After all, little owls have feelings, too. They use the tufts over their ears to tell their school guidance counselor that their mom is losing her mind.

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I'm walking on the edge of the freeway, thumb tilted up, and no one is interested. It's cold out, like frozen chicken wings when you first get them out of the freezer and the box is covered with frost. That kind of cold is biting and alive like the world is tonight, gnawing into my blue-tipped fingers and cartilage edge of my nose.

My stomach growls at the thought.

Headlights blink by, chasing the shadows. One car slows down as it passes. It's a big white van that looks like it might be full of something sweet, but it doesn't stop. Another car slows a few minutes later, the heat of its exhaust palpable for a single moment before it saunters away. It's a gold Corolla, cheap and shabby, but reliable. A woman is behind the wheel, singing along to something on the radio.

And then my thoughts kick into gear, alphabet soup whirring on the highest setting. Maybe her name is Casey. Casey might take me to California, and we can live on the edge of Cabrillo Beach, which is where Roland and I lived before we had Sam, before I became myself.

It was my Dad's life insurance that bought the house, that furnished the rooms, that paved the driveway. But Casey won't know that. I'll take her to the house and pretend I still live there, pretend that we didn't ever have to move away, that it wasn't my fault and my Dad never tried to fly off a bridge. Casey will be none the wiser. She'll think I'm the best thing next to peach pie, which she says because she's a Southern charmer, and she doesn't really know me. Everyone loves me until they know me.

That's when Roland pulls up in our silver Honda and honks the horn, tugging me away from Casey and Cabrillo Beach. He stops, because he's the only one who ever stops for me. I'm still stuck in California when Casey's gold Corolla is pulling over too. She rolls down the window, leaning over into the passenger seat.

"You okay, hon?" she says, in a voice that's as buttery as Southern biscuits. A glass pendant in the shape of California dangles from the neck of her rearview mirror. It's rubbing against one of those pinetree car fresheners in the black ice scent.

"No," I reply. Roland puts his window down too, motioning for me to get in the car. The passenger side door unlocks with an expectant click as I stand there in the darkness, halfway between our car and Casey's.

"I don't know if you and this guy know each other, but I can take you somewhere safe if you want," Casey says, clearing her throat. She turns down the song that barely whispers through the radio, then continues: "Anywhere, within reason."

I say "yes" because I can't get in the car with Roland and see Sam sitting in the backseat, hunched over a slice of Bob Evans birthday pie in a takeout box. He'll be crying, and Roland will be mad, and then I won't be on fire anymore, a match all burnt and black, and I won't be able to get out of bed tomorrow. Roland will tell me to get help, and I'll yell at him, and he'll

threaten to leave just like he always does, but he won't really go, because neither of us do what we're supposed to.

Neither of us are trying to get better.

So I get in Casey's car. Roland blares the horn at me, edging closer to us in the van, but I'm on my way to California and he can't find me there.

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Casey, who mistakenly tells me her name is Elizabeth, doesn't stop talking for the first fifteen minutes. She seems friendly enough, which I suppose you have to be if you pluck strangers off the side of the road. She wants to know what my name is and where I want to go. I tell her it's Moira and I want to go to California. Needless to say, she can't drive me that far, but she promises me that she'll take me as far as the nearest Greyhound bus station. Then, she asks why Roland is following us, his car stalking ours in the darkness.

It's the first question I don't answer.

"Are you sure you're alright?" she asks, glancing at Roland's headlights in her rearview mirror. "That guy is still trailing us."

"He's my boyfriend," I tell her in this detached way, like it's someone else's story. "I just don't want to go home with him right now."

"Do you need me to call the police for you?" asks Casey, tapping on her brakes to slow Roland's approach. "If there's a problem with y'all, they can help. They helped me with my first boyfriend. I got a restraining order and everything, the works."

"No, he needs me," I say, my heart switching gears into a leaping panic as the thought of not having Roland crosses my mind. "And I need him, too. We have to be together. If we weren't, I would lose all the sandwiches, Sam would never get to school on time, and Roland..."

I don't know what to say next, because Roland wouldn't be missing much without me. He'd be missing my sandwiches, mostly the peanut butter and jelly kind, but I can't think of what else I give him. Maybe I've never given him anything. Other than Sam, of course, but that was years ago. We were still living in California then, until Sam was two and we hightailed it with him to the opposite coast of the country. That was something Roland gave me, too. I couldn't live in the same space where Dad died; I kept seeing his ghost. The house, the money, the things left behind, they stayed there with Mom. We settled with nothing, all because of me. It's always been about *my* highs, *my* lows, not his. Roland rides these waves like I haven't made him absolutely miserable, like it makes sense that he loves me.

"All the sandwiches?" Casey asks, nose wrinkled. "Are you *on* anything right now, honey? Would've been valuable information to know before I let you get in my car."

"No, no, I'm not on anything, I just don't want to call the police. He's not the problem," I say, swallowing a lump down into the pit of my stomach. "I think I might be."

I'm spiraling as she turns off the next exit, drowning in the blur of black trees that whisk by. I'm lost in *other* thoughts, the scary kind edged in darkness. If Casey lost her grip on the wheel for one moment, we'd go plunging into the iron bars that separate pavement from woods. The car would crumple around us, metal sinking into flesh. I might not even feel it.

I'd be snuffed out in an instant.

"I really just need chicken wings or maybe some Bob Evans birthday pie," I begin, words spewing from my mouth because alphabet soup is too hot to stay inside of me for long. "And I need to go home and make it up to my son since I left his birthday dinner, and I don't know why my boyfriend still loves me. I miss things the way they were before my dad died, before we had

Sam, when we were living in California by the beach and I didn't feel like I was on fire half the time, and—”

“Okay, I don't know what drugs you're on, but we're almost to the bus station. Don't do anything crazy until *after* I drop you off,” Casey interrupts, turning the music up to drown me out. She clicks the locks on the car door, like she thinks I might jump out.

“I'm not on any drugs, so can you not call me crazy right now? I don't think that's appropriate, honestly, and don't take me to the bus station. I changed my mind. I need to go home.”

“I call it like it is,” Casey says, staring straight ahead. “And you'll figure it out.”

“Take it back please,” I beg. “I just don't want you to think I'm crazy, because I'm not, probably, and even if I am, you shouldn't know, because I don't want you to remember me the way everyone else does, especially when my thoughts aren't making sense anymore. Just please, okay? Take it back.”

The roll of Casey's eyes tells me she's done listening, that Southern charm gone sour. She pulls into some parking lot that's nowhere near the Greyhound bus station. Roland's right behind us in the minivan, flashing his brights.

“What you said, take it back.” I'm raising my voice, because I don't know what else to do. No one listens to me until I stop making sense. “Take it back and say I'm not crazy; you can't just walk into people's lives and get their hopes up about California, and then tell them they're insane!”

“Fine, you're not crazy,” Casey sighs, putting on the brakes and unlocking the car. The California state pendant clashes with the air freshener as she gestures toward my door. “Now, can you please get the fuck out of my car?”

And so, I do. I get out, hellfire licking my heels as I slam my door shut behind me. Casey's car sputters away into the night, snatching the hope of California and Cabrillo Beach away with her. I've barely been alone for a minute in the darkness when Roland steps out of the van, shoulders shrugging forward as he walks my way and stops a few parking spots away. A safe distance, to guard him against the flood I bring with me.

"I don't know what's wrong with me, Roland," I say. I'm crying, but I don't remember starting to. Tears quell the red anger, simmering it back to black. "I don't know how to fix it, but I know I need you; I know I can't do this without you, and I haven't been good, to you or to Sam, but that I can try harder, I really can, because I'm so sorry, and—"

"You do know, Moira. You know what's wrong." There are pits under Roland's eyes, deep and dark with worry. "This is what you said last month, when I found you after your Walmart breakdown. You told me it would be different. You always say it's going to be different. It never is."

"I'm going to deal with it, I promise," I say, black tears building in the corners of my eyes. "But I can't do it without you, Roland. Please. I need another chance, so I can be a good girlfriend, a good mom. Sam needs both of us. I do, too."

"How can you say that when you won't even admit there's a problem, or that it's in you?" Roland says, stepping forward in the darkness. "I can't help you if you're not going to help yourself."

"You've got to understand, Roland, I'm not in control all the time," I whisper, all the anger from earlier gone cold. "And you keep saying I can make it to go away. You say it like if I were trying hard enough, I'd be normal. But it's not like that. It's never been like that."

He's quiet for a minute, almost solemn.



“What kind of help are you going to get?”

“Therapy, I guess. An official diagnosis. Meds. Whatever it takes, Roland, I’ll do it. I’ll do it for you, for Sam, for our family,” I say, crossing my heart and hoping to die.

“I don’t want you to do it for me. You’ve got to do it for yourself, or you won’t keep up with it. You’ll leave when you don’t like it anymore, just like with everything else,” Roland sighs. He takes one step closer. If he moves again, we’ll be standing in the same parking spot. “And if you try to do it, Moira, then sure. I’ll be more understanding. We can go home together this time.”

I don’t want to think about what happens if none of this works, if I can’t keep my sanity and my family together. So when Roland comes to hug me and wrap me up in those great big arms with a hesitant squeeze, I don’t.

I dream of what it’s going to be like to try and know myself again.