

## ABSTRACT

### Fences

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The Southern Gothic literary tradition captures a region haunted by a legacy of civil strife. The genre has become not just a hallmark of American literature but also a tradition which explores human nature as a whole. Author Flannery O'Connor is especially representative of the Southern Gothic. Her work portrays a post-Reconstruction South haunted by race conflict, class tensions, and evangelical piety. Using a grotesque lens, O'Connor explores mortality, race, and religion in an engaging and meaningful manner. In order to write my own Southern Gothic novel as part of this creative thesis, I have read and analyzed some short stories by Flannery O'Connor, as well as her book *Mystery and Manners*, which details her writing process and style. In a review of Flannery O'Connor's writing, I will explore how O'Connor created her rich Southern Gothic writing world through her use of setting, characters, and style. Through a creative thesis inspired in part by this tradition, I hope to find my voice as a young aspiring fiction writer from the very southernmost tip of Texas.

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FENCES

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## LITERARY REVIEW

The Southern Gothic literary tradition captures a region haunted by a legacy of civil strife. The genre has become not just a hallmark of American literature but also a tradition which explores human nature as a whole. Its stories are of “creepy buildings, mysterious landscapes, unhealthy obsessions with the past, revelations of dark secrets, acts of violence, and troubled mental states...grotesque people and situations born of - but in excess of - their southern context” (Marshall). Through a creative honors thesis inspired in part by this tradition, I hope to find my voice as a young aspiring fiction writer from the very southernmost tip of Texas.

Just as the Southeast is haunted by slavery, southern Texas is haunted by the immigration crisis. A racially diverse Hispanic majority meshes and clashes with Asian and Anglo minorities and with itself. Big Catholic families celebrate quinceañeras and communions, sleepy winter Texans shamble to Protestant churches. Wealthy ‘Spanish’ Hispanics snub first-generation Mexican Americans and vice versa. These divisions lend themselves to a gothic narrative which may be told from an undocumented immigrant or Anglo perspective, from a Mexican national or first-generation American point-of-view.

Author Flannery O’Connor is especially representative of the Southern Gothic. Her work portrays a post-Reconstruction South haunted by race conflict, class tensions, and evangelical piety. Using a grotesque lens, O’Connor explores mortality, race, and religion in an engaging and meaningful manner. In order to write my own Southern Gothic novel, I have read and analyzed some short stories by Flannery O’Connor, as well as her book *Mystery and Manners*, which details her writing process and style. In this

review of Flannery O'Connor's writing, I will explore how O'Connor created her rich Southern Gothic writing world through her use of setting, characters, and style. I will also detail how O'Connor's writing methods have influenced my own novel.

Flannery O'Connor's delightfully grotesque characterization captures human nature as it is. She is not so much exclusively a Southern writer but rather a writer who forces morally deformed or primly commonplace humans to face the reality of their own mediocrity or mortality. According to O'Connor scholar Taylor, the author used "the grotesque aesthetic and literary violence" to "shock her readers to recognize the reality of metaphysical and ethical truth" (526). O'Connor's characters include one-legged nihilists, neglectful parents, racist Southern-belles-turned-grandmas, pigs, kidnappers, murderers, and ill-tempered, narrow-minded men unprepared to breathe their last. She at once captivates readers and repulses them, forcing them to ask if they themselves exhibit some of the unsavory qualities her characters possess.

One key turning point in my creative thesis is the paralysis of my protagonist Kate Baker, a fourteen-year-old Anglo girl growing up on the South Texas border. This accident heightens the grotesque nature of Kate's story. Kate's loneliness and emotional volatility prior to the accident are interrupted by an accident which leaves her paralyzed not just emotionally but also physically. In the cases of both Kate and O'Connor's Hulga, physical limitations reflect inner emotional turmoil. Hulga in O'Connor's "Good Country People" is dependent on her mother for support because of her wooden leg and ailing heart. Similarly, Kate experiences further alienation and loss of the independence so crucial to her happiness following the dumbwaiter accident. For instance, when the Bakers visit Kate in the hospital, Kate realizes, "She wouldn't be able to get her feelings

out of her mouth without someone encouraging her or someone assuring her that she need not feel the shame which surely she must feel” (69). Unlike Hulga, Kate grows in emotional strength and individuality. Both Hulga and Kate immediately lose some sense of dignity through loss of mobility. On the other hand, they also grow in self-awareness - Kate a bit more so than Hulga, although this growth in both cases is still left ambiguous. For instance, after her sister Claire asks her for a cigarette, Kate concludes that “Everyone was just as paralyzed as she was” (81). This thought reveals Kate’s awareness of her own emotional limitations. However, in the context of her sister asking for a cigarette she herself is smoking, Kate’s judgement of Claire as “paralyzed” seems a bit irrelevant. Kate’s connection of emotional paralysis to temporary physical paralysis is also a bit questionable, as she does seem to have agency over how she regulates her feelings and her treatment over others.

Kate’s sister Claire also embodies the grotesque. Unnurtured by her family and abused (initially) by Kate, she grows fatter and fatter before succumbing to a mental breakdown. At a restaurant with her family, Claire eats rapidly, food collecting at the “seams of her mouth” (33). She “smothered her fries in ranch and salt and ate two at a time until her lips swoll red from eating” (33). Like Kate, Claire is emotionally detached from the other members of her family. She buries herself messily in nauseating quantities of food as if to forget that she exists. To some extent, Kate is aware of this connection between food and Claire’s unbeloved status. To Mrs. Baker’s dismay, Kate snarkily notes, “I love how all we live for is food” (33). Yet, Kate hardly thinks of Claire while at Hanover, except to occasionally disparage her or wish that Claire admired her as an older sister. Kate’s recognition of Claire’s inner despair only comes about when Claire smears



a stick of butter on her face (86). Here, Mr. and Mrs. Baker become extremely frustrated with Claire. Mr. Baker himself has an angry mental breakdown. Kate, on the other hand, experiences some level of sympathy, perhaps in part due to the stress and anxiety her spinal injury has caused. While Mrs. Baker pleads with Claire and Mr. Baker grows angry, Kate felt “Water began to collect” at her eyes. She is no longer the perpetrator of aggression in her household. Just as Kate’s spinal injury from falling down the creepy dumbwaiter heightens her otherness and self-reflection, Claire’s bizarre eating habits reveal emotional disconnect within the Baker household.

A significant quality of each of O’Connor’s characters is that few of them share her strong Catholic beliefs. Connor was not so much concerned with converting people to Catholicism specifically but rather with driving people to lead lives which acknowledge the grace and love she believed was crucial to healing the South. These qualities, O’Connor believed, were desperately needed by the economically stagnant, race-preoccupied South. O’Connor’s characters reveal her belief in “the true Christian message,” or the idea that humans “must suffer before being brought to the point of redemption” (Chapman 4). Through her use of spiritual subject matter, or subject matter which highlights the existence of God, an afterlife, and morality, Flannery O’Connor enhances both the likeable and problematic qualities of her terrible characters as she forces them to come to a moral crossroads. In turn, through these crossroads, O’Connor leads readers to question the extent of her characters’ development or change. She creates an intriguing sense of ambiguity which I hope to imitate in my own writing.

One example of moral ambiguity in O’Connor’s writing is Hulga in “Good Country People.” In “Good Country People,” O’Connor’s Hulga is a childish adult intent

on being as ugly and nihilistic as possible. She grows romantically attached to a simpering Bible salesman and fantasizes about changing his Christian opinions. Too late, Hulga realizes the salesman is a conman with plans to steal her wooden leg. Through this encounter, Hulga is able to experience some change of heart in the face of vulnerability. She must confront her own repressed need for human affection and understanding. Even so, O'Connor leaves the extent of Hulga's change in character and self-awareness up to interpretation. When "almost pleading," for her leg back, Hulga says, "aren't you just good country people?" (*Good* 203). Similarly, Hulga's judgmental mother says that the slippery Bible salesman was "just good country people...just the salt of the earth" (*Good* 193). In calling the slippery salesman "salt of the earth," Hulga's mother not only reveals her poor judgement of character but also her own hypocrisy. She pretends to know what goodness is by referencing the Bible. Some scholars idealistically interpret Hulga's using the exact same phrase as her mother at the end of the story as Hulga having a transcendental religious experience that eats away her cynicism. In fact, according to some interpretations, Hulga "miraculously" "loses herself" to the salesman as if he is a Christ-figure (Taylor). However, the phrasing similarity here suggests that Hulga is in fact still quite similar to her judgmental mother. In Hulga's vulnerable moment, O'Connor intentionally draws a parallel between Hulga and her mother. In this way, O'Connor leads readers to recognize continued uncertainty and room for growth in Hulga's understanding of self and others.

Like the nihilistic Hulga, Mrs. Turpin from O'Connor's "Revelation" is blinded by her own self-righteousness. A confrontation with an aggressive girl at a doctor's office forces her to assess her own character independent of the middle-class white status in

which she takes pride. Even so, her final revelation contains traces of shallow beliefs which make the extent of Mrs. Turpin's transformation debatable. After a fat teenage girl at the doctor's office calls the proud, racist Mrs. Turpin a "wart hog from hell" (*Complete* 512), Mrs. Turpin has a sort of spiritual realization as she imagines the black people and white trash she despises alongside "battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs," in heaven. In this heaven, respectable, uptight people like herself after death were "shocked and altered" as "even their virtues were being burned away" (*Complete* 512). Through this revelation, O'Connor reveals Mrs. Turpin's recognition that she is one of the people who will be "shocked and altered" out of the self-righteousness she depends upon for happiness. On the other hand, Mrs. Turpin continues to view the people whom she knows will be first in heaven as "freaks and lunatics," suggesting that she may likely persist in looking down on other people and repressing her own new spiritual realization in spite of herself. While Hulga's shift in religious beliefs is highly debatable, Mrs. Turpin does experience somewhat of a spiritual revelation. For Mrs. Turpin, religious beliefs force her to confront her own inflated superiority complex. Without her race and her class, she is nothing.

In my creative thesis, I draw inspiration from O'Connor's use of religion as a way of exploring the initially nihilistic feelings of my main character Kate Baker. While Kate herself is not especially religious, she shares some of the same amorality present in her family members. Attending mass with her family, Kate gets the sense that people like herself are "puppets of their own undoing, and the universe didn't care" (28). At the beginning of the novel, Kate feels as if she completely lacks agency. This in part contributes to her treatment of her sister Claire, treatment too aggressive to be entirely

explained away by teen angst. Religious discussions and encounters in *Fences* also illuminate the questionable character of Kate's family members and peers. For example, Kate and her mother get in an argument over a Día del los Muertos sugar skull and its spiritual significance (17). This drama reveals Mrs. Baker's close-mindedness as well as Kate's defiance. In others' beliefs and attitudes towards religion, Kate faces both inauthenticity and amorality. In these moments, she recognizes her need for some sort of control over the lonely existence she did not ask to have. Her family primly follows religious rituals as if seeking to be kind people, yet they are either cold, excessively neurotic, or unloving in their interactions with each other. They are ethnically exclusive and classist. Kate's roommate sings beautifully in chapel, yet she treats Kate horribly (52). As a girl growing up without a stable social or familial circle, Kate is voiceless. She must fashion a life of her own, following her heart's interests.

Encounters with death in particular are a crucial reckoning for O'Connor's selfish characters. Death forces them to acknowledge that life must have some meaning other than their accomplishments or else give in to undignified despair in the face of mortal weakness, a despair which her characters often fail to overcome. Through this failure, however, O'Connor does not just dangle her characters over hellfire for the amusement of her readers. She also raises questions regarding the extent of such characters' free will over their destiny, implying that amoral inclinations may in fact be somewhat hereditary or experience-based. In "A Late Encounter with the Enemy," O'Connor's sour General Sash, who has "no more notion of dying than a cat" (*Good* 168) is struck by dread when he "saw that the black procession was almost on him...He made such a desperate effort to see over it and find out what comes after the past that his hand clenched the sword

until the blade touched bone” (*Good* 174). In comparing the proud old general to a cat, O’Connor dehumanizes him, suggesting that his decision to view death as an undefeatable enemy is foolish and disconnected from reality. His life, lived as if he has unlimited time, is as mundane as a house pet’s life. That being said, the general’s being compared to a cat also raises the question of why the general has limited existential awareness in the first place. In comparison to other O’Connor characters like the sullen girl who affronts Mrs. Turpin or even Hulga in the aftermath of the simpering Bible salesman’s theft, the general seems to have limited understanding of death as a reality. Interestingly, just as Hulga is unusually similar to her mother in her attitude towards “good country people,” the general’s granddaughter is a 62-year-old college graduate who is just dying to have her grandfather watch her ceremony. Like the general, she is preoccupied with accomplishments. Through this similarity between the two, O’Connor touches on the theme of hereditary blessings and curses in a way which acknowledges some limitations on free will.

In “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” O’Connor explores her belief that inevitable mortality creates a need for humans to exercise compassion towards one another. For O’Connor, living in the moment entails treating fellow human beings decently. According to the Misfit, a murderer and outlaw, the grandmother of the family he pays a visit to when their car crashes “would of been a good woman...if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life” (*Good* 23). The Misfit does not take cruelly sadistic glee in shooting the family members. Rather, he kills them matter-of-factly, almost apologetically, as if he is a sort of grim reaper. The racist grandmother becomes quite pious under the shadow of death as signified by the Misfit. Yet, even as she says

Jesus' name, it "sounded as if she might be cursing" (*Good* 20). Having lived a life devoid of purpose, the grandmother has difficulty truly changing her ways. Rather than lead an amoral existence as if life is a lasting reality, O'Connor believes people should try to be kind to one another as if death is imminent.

Unlike the family in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," Kate grows a bit stronger and self-aware following an accident. Her fall forces her to question her attitude towards death and life in greater depth. Rather than think of death and ageing simply as something which over time will take its toll on her skin, Kate must come to terms with the possibility of an afterlife and greater good. This possibility in turn influences her drive for self-actualization and purpose. Eating at a restaurant with her family before her accident, Kate thinks, "How long would it be before Claire began to watch her face for lines, her skin rotting into a wisp of a dead leaf" (30). Like the general and the murdered grandmother from O'Connor's stories, Kate initially views ageing and mortality as lessening the significance of life's opportunities, including the opportunity to improve her relationship with her dysfunctional, racist family. By the end of *Fences*, Kate will have made progress in developing her self-awareness and kindness. Laying in the hospital watching the sun cast flickers of color through her window, Kate notes that she "had begun to forget that she existed before the accident. Now, her focus was clearer" (71). While Kate does not necessarily become a more morally guided person, she does take others' perspectives more seriously. For instance, she sympathetically notes her mother's response to grief, that her mother looks "grim and frail" (74). This contrasts to Kate's obsession with her family member's mannerisms present in the first chapter of the novel. That being said, Kate's noticeable progress is limited. She is not much different from the

peers and family members she once looked down on. Just as the reactions of O'Connor's characters to death raises questions regarding the extent of free will and hereditary limits on individuals, my protagonist's encounter with death will force her to confront her self-absorption even as she maintains some insensitivity reminiscent of her past self and the people she once despised.

O'Connor wrote what she knew, lending a vivid, realistic quality to her stories. According to O'Connor, "The writer operates at a peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet. His problem is to find that location" (*Manners* 63). For O'Connor, this significant location of inspiration was the southern United States where she had grown up and which she was more familiar with than Northern readers and writers. O'Connor recognized that an author's decision to write stories based in part on a place, situation, or feeling that they are familiar with helps create a living world for the reader to explore. Fiction as written by O'Connor is an exploration and sharing of reality as she knows it.

As someone who explored Southern race relations throughout her short stories without spelling out race as a singular, obvious story theme, O'Connor believed that moralization should not be the main purpose of fiction writing. For example, in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," while the grandmother in the story makes a snide comment about a "pickanniny" standing by the roadside, the focus of the story is mainly on the shallowness of the grandmother rather than on race relations in the South. In fact, O'Connor complains that "Today novels are considered to be entirely concerned with the social or economic or psychological forces that they will by necessity exhibit, or with those details of daily life that are for the good novelist only means to some deeper end"

(*Manners* 42). Because morals or societal principles do not need fictional stories to be spread or proven to others, O'Connor wants writers to focus on immersing their readers in the world of their story rather than focus on factual accuracy for the sake of accuracy or on proving themes in order to justify their story to an indifferent reader. Rather than focus simply on themes, on technique, or even on making a character relatable, O'Connor believes that the key to a good story is to make it immerse-able.

Keeping O'Connor's belief in fiction as a crafted, experience-informed reality in mind, I have aimed to make my entire thesis engaging rather than just focus on clearly communicating a message to the reader or moralizing singular themes like race. Through my creative thesis, I hope to be able to improve my skill set as a writer by writing a story which takes place in settings that I know, including the setting of southmost Texas on the border near Mexico. That being said, the main focus of the novel chapters that take place in this setting will not so much be the immigration crisis along the border but rather how the border situation enhances and influences the personalities of my morally questionable Anglo characters. While not approaching the border situation from a more activist or informative perspective might in the opinion of some readers make the border setting irrelevant to the novel, the border setting will still play a crucial role in character development and in setting a Gothic tone. Rather than feed readers lessons of ethnic tolerance which they likely already agree with to some extent, my novel will explore a near-passive character whose very passivity is not only evidence of societal issues but also an opportunity for character development.

Ethnic/racial relations are not the forefront theme present in my novel. However, they are crucial to Kate's isolation and growth as a character. Kate Baker's own attitude



towards races and cultures different than hers is accepting compared to the attitudes and beliefs of her family members. That being said, the entire Baker family seems to be a bit out of touch with the culture and concerns of their hometown's ethnic majority. At times, Kate's mother Mrs. Baker appears to associate Hispanic culture with poverty and uncleanliness. Mr. Baker himself does not believe immigrants from Mexico to the United States should be provided with water (29). Kate's grandmother sees Kate's hometown as exotic and touristy in spite of its being quite a normal town, making a comment on one Hispanic waitress's whiteness (33). In spite of her own sullen awkwardness, Kate herself is better able to recognize social nuances. She recognizes that a range of financial stability exists within each race and that her family is worse off than many of the white Hispanics and non-Hispanics she goes to school with. She is open-minded to cultural practices different from those she has grown up with and feels embarrassed when the Hanover girls make a racist joke about her hometown Brownsville being very "brown" (51). However, she does seem to lack some empathy for social issues relevant to her region, not to mention empathy for her younger sister Claire. Through development of empathy, Kate gains some sort of closure or hopefulness by the end of the novel.

## CHAPTER 1

Kate stared at Mrs. Baker. Mrs. Baker was holding the skull in its plastic bag between the very tips of her thumb and middle finger. She opened the bag to sniff, and her spectacles slid to the tip of her nose. Today was the Day of the Dead.

The skull smelled of table salt, syrup, and plastic. Its sockets were holed with pink edible glitter, its crown sparkled orange and teal. Mrs. Baker twisted the bag above her. ‘Made in China,’ read the skull’s lower jaw.

“Ew,” said Mrs. Baker. She brought the tips of her fingers together like a crawfish and sniffed them. Then she pinched her nose as if to stop herself from sneezing.

“I got a sugar granule in my nose. Very ticklish,” said Mrs. Baker. Kate smirked and padded to the clothesline in her mother’s bedroom. When she came back she had a clothespin and clamped it on her mother’s nose. Mrs. Baker snatched the clothespin off her nose and put it in her pocket.

“Kate? Why is there a skull in your backpack?”

“What’s the problem?”

“Don’t eat this skull, okay?”

Kate opened the fridge and slammed it shut.

“I’m going to throw the skull out, okay?”

“What are you doing in my backpack?”

Kate stared once more at her mother’s fingers. They were small and neat and dry from too much washing of hands. She stared at her mother’s round stomach and her mother’s rosy puppy-eyed face. Kate weighed ninety pounds, and her eyes were smaller. She leaned against the fridge. There was a skull behind Kate’s face and her mom’s face

and Kate imagined her mother's eyeballs flicking back and forth in their sockets like a cat wall clock.

Mrs. Baker sighed and tossed the skull in the trash. She took off her gloves and washed her hands, humming Jingle Bells to herself. Kate took a sip from her water glass, then slammed it down on the slender glass table counter. The table face crashed and shattered to the floor.

“Oh my God.” Mrs. Baker jumped and gasped.

“It was an accident,” whined Kate.

“Oh my God.”

“Am I allowed to move?”

“Be careful,” Mrs. Baker said. “You’ll get glass in your feet.”

“Am I allowed to get my backpack now, Mommy?”

“Be smart,” Mrs. Baker snapped, licking her lips.

That day in school Mr. Rodero had brought pan dulce, gingerbread pigs and sugar skulls to Spanish class to celebrate Día de los Muertos. Kate was the only one in the class who was not bilingual, but her accent was tolerable. Her peers were white Hispanics with cars nicer than her parents'. Mr. Rodero had decorated the classroom with rainbow paper mâché skull chains and red skull candles. They'd used icing to make the glitter stick to their sugar skulls.

“Hey, Kate, you like my skull?” asked Joe. Joe had a smirk and dimples and could not be trusted with secrets. His skull was smothered in runny black icing.

“Sure,” Kate had said.

“Hey Kate, why don’t you speak Spanish?” asked Joe. Joe’s voice was nice and loud.

“Because I don’t,” said Kate.

“You should learn,” said Joe.

“You little racist you,” said Kate. “Is your skull Darth Vader?”

“No, it’s the mask of death.”

“Ay Joe, be nice,” said Ana. She took a big bite of a gingerbread pig and the remaining pig half was gutted with dark honey-colored lipstick. Ana was a very nice girl from Matamoros. She had massive chocolate eyes, and her hair was bleached blonde. Her family had moved here to Brownsville when she was held up at a drugstore and two frightening men with guns took her wallet and threatened to slit her little throat. Now that she lived in the United States, she was champion of immigration rights and president of the student body government. She and Kate often greeted each other and made small talk.

“Hey Kate, I drew on your paper,” said Joe.

“So I see,” said Kate. Joe had drawn a smiley face.

“Do you like Satan?” said Joe.

“Not really,” said Kate. She was smiling. Joe was very random.

Kate knew what Joe didn’t, which is how she wanted to live her life. She would be like Ana some day, when her mother wasn’t buying her clothes and haircuts. She would be a slender hourglass trial lawyer in pink suits and dark honey lipstick and live in a marble house with a sculpted boyfriend that all her family members would be jealous of. She took a bite of pan dulce and set to icing her skull, staring at the crusted sugar congealing about the nose and jaw. She had time to reach her goals.

“Happy Day of the Dead,” Kate had said to Mrs. Baker when she got in the car that afternoon.

“How was your day, Pumpkin?”

“Fine.”

“Did you remember all of your tests?”

“Why would I not remember to take a test.”

With a sigh, Mrs. Baker had turned on the Christian radio and commenced to humming a little tune. Kate scowled. The song was cheesy, and Mrs. Baker’s singing was worse than Mrs. Baker thought it was.

Now they were in the kitchen, and Kate was miserable. She kicked a slice of glass across the floor. Mrs. Baker started like a bunny, then snapped.

“Go to your room,” she cried.

Kate grabbed the sugar skull and bit its crown.

“No. I think I’ll watch you clean.”

Mrs. Baker sighed. Kate slid to the floor and sat there among the glass.

The kitchen was cramped and silent except for the crunch of the skull. The most decorated aspect of the apartment was the refrigerator, which was covered in scenic magnets. Mrs. Baker nicked pieces of glass one-by-one with a paper towel. Getting a new glass panel for their table would cost over seventy-five dollars, she said. They’d pay for it with Kate’s allowance.

Mrs. Baker sighed. When she sighed, the front door opened to the hollow cry of wind.

“Make sure you close the door all the way,” said Mrs. Baker.

“The spirit of Satan is coming for you,” said Kate. “You hath disrespected the holy skull of death.”

“Hocus pocus,” said Mrs. Baker. Once Kate had closed the door, Mrs. Baker sighed and commenced to humming. Then she stopped and looked out the window, and Kate knew what she was thinking.

“Is there a scary illegal Mexican outside, Mommy?”

“Go to your room *now*,” cried Mrs. Baker once more.

“Thought you’d never ask,” said Kate.

On the rare occasion that Kate did talk politics with her mother (political arguments are for fat old men on the back porch with cigars after dinner, Mrs. Baker said), their discussions turned morbid. Like that time when Mrs. Baker tried to condemn the families of illegal immigrants as rape enablers. It was so sad how many of them had died crossing, she had said, thinking they would get a better life here by letting their daughters be raped by coyotes. Who on earth would let their daughter be raped? Someone like you, Kate had said. She had lost access to the Internet that day for being smart.

Mrs. Baker sighed. “I remember when you used to be so sweet,” she said. Kate flipped her off. Four more years until she was an adult, thirty more until her mother was dead.

Mrs. Samantha Baker had gotten married past her expiration date to a man named Samuel at the age of thirty-nine. Kate was born a year later on Mrs. Baker’s fortieth birthday, and Mrs. Baker had named Kate after her own mother and her mother’s mother before her. Samantha itself was not a name Mrs. Baker was particularly fond of, as

apparently it ‘reminded her of mayonnaise.’ Kate did not see how this association was possible.

Kate Baker was fourteen years old, and she hated her name now too. She hated how her name sounded like stale cake and tasted prudish in her mouth. If she had a name like Ana, she thought, she would be special.

“We must have been bakers in medieval times,” said Claire.

Claire was Kate’s younger sister by two years. She was vaguely book smart, and her name sounded like a dessert. She’d always gotten better grades, but Kate liked to think she was stupider than herself.

“Can I borrow your eyeliner?” asked Claire.

“No.”

“Mom doesn’t like it when you wear eyeliner to church.”

“Sucks to be her.”

“Why can’t I borrow your eyeliner?”

Whiny little brat.

“Because it’s mine.”

Kate and Claire shared a bunk bed and an old computer in a small bedroom with cream walls and cream blankets. Christmas lights hung from the alcove above Claire’s bed, old magazine clippings stuck to her walls. Next to Kate’s bed was a radiator and a window which looked out on a freeway and a field of mesquite trees. Adjacent to the field was a Walmart, a laundromat, and a forlorn Taco Bell.

“Hmph,” said Claire. Claire was fatter than Kate, but she had a pretty nose. While Kate finished her cat eye, Claire finished applying her lip gloss and harvesting her

earwax. She then began weaving her hair back into a short, lumpy French braid. Her forehead was shiny as a bald man's head, and Kate stared at her. The poor girl could use a corset.

"I like your braid, Claire," Kate said. Then she unraveled her own French braid and teased her hair with butterfly clips.

Someday Claire would be like Mrs. Baker. Would Kate be like Mrs. Baker? No, she would not. But then her brain froze as if she was giving a speech in class. If she thought about her future too much, her arms would freeze, and she wouldn't be able to breathe. There was too much similarity between the way Claire moved, arms lumped by her sides even as she walked, and the way Kate tripped over her too-big shoes. Their eyes were the same medium-small shape and hazel in color.

When they were both small children, Kate and Claire used to play with Polly Pockets together in the park sandwiched between their apartment complex. Claire had a blonde Polly because blonde Polly wore pink, and Kate had a brunette Polly so it would look like herself. The two used to run through sprinklers squealing and frolicking with their tiny dolls, Mrs. Baker watching them to make sure they weren't kidnapped and taken across the border to Mexico and sold for cocaine. After dinner, Mrs. Baker would give each girl a glass of milk with two thumbprint cookies and read them a bedtime story. Even ten years ago Mrs. Baker's hands had looked old and veiny, Kate remembered.

Every time Mrs. Baker went shopping with her children, she would take strawberry and butterscotch candies in her purse, which was nice. She would also hang her children's scrawlings on the fridge with animal magnets even when Kate didn't want her to. When Claire was seven and Kate was nine, Mrs. Baker's friends had thought they



were twins because she bought matching dresses and dolls for the sisters. Claire was as tall as Kate, and Kate had marveled at the similarities between them. This all stopped when Kate turned twelve and acquired anemia.

“You need to eat more spinach,” the doctor had said. “And Pop-tarts.”

“Eat up!” Mrs. Baker would say henceforth at breakfast, four Pop-tarts on Kate’s plate. “So you can have a cute round tummy, like me!”

Kate would stare at Mrs. Baker, then at the four large Pop-tarts. Mr. Baker was inconsequential and ate a normal amount of breakfast pastries. Claire, on the other hand, would eat Pop-tarts until her face turned rosaceous.

It was around the time when Mrs. Baker began buying Pop-tarts that Claire began having night terrors and wetting her bed. She would jolt upright, eyes open at 2 AM and start screaming in her sleep. Sometimes she would crawl down the bunk ladder, pop her head into Kate’s bed space, unhinge her mouth, and emit a high-pitched squeal.

“Grow the hell up,” Kate had said. “You’re ten years old.”

Then Mrs. Baker would come padding down the hallway to see what was the matter. She’d shake Claire awake and hug her close. One morning when Kate got up to wash her face she stepped in a small puddle by her bedside. When Claire came back from the bathroom, Kate was waiting right outside the door. She grabbed Claire’s arm and squeezed.

“Clean up your goddamn mess,” she said.

Claire yanked her arm away and stuck out her tongue. Then she went to the kitchen to get paper towels.

These night screams continued to happen on and off for four months. It was unbelievable what Claire could do in her sleep. During a bad episode, Claire even peed in Kate's backpack.

"Do we need to clean your sheets?" asked Mrs. Baker to Claire. Claire sniffed and cried into Mrs. Baker's arms.

"Do we need to clean my backpack?" asked Kate.

Mrs. Baker walked over to Kate's backpack and sniffed.

"God dammit," she said. She unzipped the book compartment to rescue Kate's books from her sister's bodily fluids. Then she squeaked. From her hand slipped something black and rubbery.

"Did you find a little rat?" asked Kate. "An illegal alien?"

Mrs. Baker frowned. She had discovered a banana peel.

And so Mrs. Baker began checking Kate's backpack every afternoon when they came home from school, to make sure that Kate was not harboring banana peels.

Mrs. Baker organized Claire's backpack sometimes in the mornings before she went to school, but it wasn't the same, Kate thought. And Claire was allowed to pick out her own shoes for school. When Kate was Claire's age, Mrs. Baker had given Kate a flip phone and a whistle 'in case someone tries to kidnap you.' Claire had a smartphone that she played stupid games on every night for an hour before she went to sleep. She'd forget to turn the volume off when she was texting, so her phone made tiny clacking noises every time. Both of them went to a private school because Mrs. Baker hadn't wanted them playing with rough children. Education was very important.

Kate had begged and begged to get a phone like her sister's. Tragically, whenever she did, a conversation like this ensued:

"Hey Kate, remember when you broke that lamp?" asked Mr. Baker.

"The lamp was stupid."

"Phones are expensive," said Mr. Baker. "We don't want you to go round breaking everything we give you, right?"

"But I wouldn't break something I like--"

"You know what, sweetheart? Some people mature faster than others. And that's that."

Kate glared at her father. Then she remembered that she didn't talk much to her father anyway. She shouldn't care that much about his opinion.

"Some people mature faster than others," Mr. Baker would repeat, uplifting his hands slightly as if to make the conversation holy. He would clear his throat, then look into the window's reflection to adjust hair over his bald spot.

Claire grabbed a Pop-Tart from her Pop-Tart stash underneath the bed and shoved it in her mouth. She looked like a chipmunk, and Kate wondered if she still wet her bed. It was twenty minutes until church time now. "Time to go," said Mrs. Baker. Her heels clicked soft as mice and Kate hated her. She had been prettier than Kate once and now she was uglier than her. There was nothing and everything wrong with Mrs. Baker and the way her arms and legs moved, the way her bra was too loose for her, how her knees twitched when she walked and her hands folded neatly when she was sitting. Kate had to keep fighting and itching for something, or one day she'd end up like mother.

"Look at my pretty daughters," said Mr. Baker.

“You look nice, Dad,” said Claire.

It was hard to believe that people had their own thoughts, Kate thought. She wouldn't be surprised if Claire's mind was blank as a puppy's.

Church was the worst part of the week. Inside the cathedral she sat between Mr. Baker and Claire and hated it the whole time. The green velvet cushions made her legs itch, and the organ sounded like a dying walrus. The priest looked like a naked mole rat. His face broke into an oily sheen under the old fluorescent lights as he broke the body of Jesus into crumbs. Mr. Baker and Claire sang and prayed simply, and Kate despised them. But the worst part about this was Mrs. Baker singing like a choir boy behind her laced veil and liking it.

Every time Kate saw Claire in her veil or heard Mrs. Baker sing, her blood would congeal. It was only right and just that Claire should be a favorite and Kate should be spanked. Through Kate's own grievous fault, she had been born a brat, and now she must pay the price. All wombs must veil themselves from the giants, or the giants might fill the wombs with their seeds.

Once Mr. Baker had decided to sit between Mrs. Baker and Claire instead of on the end by herself. Kate wondered if this was because of something she'd done and then remembered that today was Confessional Day. The Bakers weren't horribly religious, but they followed what God told them to do because they wanted to and wanting was fun.

How did Ana experience church? Did she care about being a good person but not too much about silly doctrines like no-birth-control and veil-before-giants? That would be ideal, Kate thought. Except when does a good person become a bad one?

“I’m just here because my mommy wants me to be here,” said Kate when she got to the confessional. She was Chaotic Neutral.

The priest paused. Kate folded her hands across her chest mummy-style, and they compromised with a blessing. Then Kate left and turned to look back as her sister entered the confessional, a laced veil covering her forehead. She tripped on her own feet some as she turned around and hated herself when she saw Claire do the same thing. Her blood congealed within her veins. Claire’s face was so round and punchable.

The red velvet hallway between the confessional and the main sanctuary reeked of popcorn and disinfectant. On either side of her as she walked down the aisle, cow-eyed women, veiled and unveiled, lined the ends of the pews with their husbands and small children. What was it like to be fourteen and pregnant? That had been Mary’s fate. Did she like being pregnant, or had she felt abused? But pregnancy would be Kate’s and Claire’s fate too, Mr. Baker had said. He wanted his daughters to conceive so that he would have cute little babies to keep him company in his old age. Kate had suggested that he adopt an urchin from Russia.

It was all the same, giving birth and dying. None of it really mattered to the un-elect. But at least the candles were golden-red and cinnamon-bun scented. What would it be like to be an altar boy, smiling like Mona Lisa in emerald green under the dull fluorescent lights?

What must it be like to be gowned in turquoise and gold, rosy-cheeked and God saying, this is your destiny from the beginning, for me to get you pregnant? It was as if here was a vessel for what someone religious had thought and wanted to happen to them.

Surrender to your destiny, they had said and wanted for themselves. They were all puppets of their own undoing, and the universe didn't care. Maybe she was just like them.

Mr. Baker cleared his throat. Kate began mouthing the words to a hymn. She couldn't hear her voice, but her lips were moving so that Mr. Baker would have to assume that she was singing. The hymn was holy and Kate's blood curdled inside. She felt as if she were sinking into the burden of existence. She was standing on a scaffold, her family present with hands folded.

After church, Kate felt disgusting. Her neck was sweating and her insides itched.

"Did you girls have fun in church?" asked Mr. Baker.

"Church was nice today," said Claire.

Kate patted Claire on the head. "Good dog."

Kate had some half-baked theories on past lives. Claire had been a dog, Mrs. Baker had been a cow, and Kate had been a violet-eyed demon with black angel wings.

Mr. Baker slapped Kate's arm. "Don't you touch her," he said.

"Yes, Daddy," said Kate.

"Don't you talk to me with that tone of voice."

Claire stuck out her tiny pink cat tongue. Kate gave Claire the finger.

On Sundays, the Bakers liked to spend special family time together at a restaurant. This was one of many activities which made the Bakers complete. Mr. Baker fried fish on Fridays, and the family watched a movie with popcorn on Saturdays.

Watching movies is what families do, Mrs. Baker had said. But really it was just an excuse for Claire to eat butter.

The Bakers also liked to go on leisurely afternoon family drives. Sometimes Mr. Baker's mother would visit, and then she would go on the drives too.

After church, the Bakers picked up Grandma from the airport and took her out to see the border fence that everyone was talking about these days. It was a waste of money, they all said, but necessary nonetheless. Mrs. Baker said water stations were humane, Mr. Baker did not agree. Kate opened the window a crack to taste the salty air. A flock of invasive parrots screeched overhead. They'd all wanted to go to the beach, but Claire was too fat to fit her swimsuit. So instead they were ogling at some stupid iron fence like it was a national monument.

The border fence stretched eighteen feet high across fields of sugarcane and ragweed and trailer homes. Five years had passed since its construction, and each year hundreds of Hondurans scampered over its walls. "Good *night!*" said Grandma, craning her head upwards and beyond. She snorted, then looked at Kate with a smile. "That is a big ugly fence."

"Apparently last week an illegal immigrant woman fell to her death climbing over it and got impaled on a spike in front of her son," Kate said and tried not to smile.

Grandma grunted a nervous laugh. Two illegal immigrants came every week to clean her house, Kate knew. Mrs. Baker coughed.

"She was already clinically malnourished though, so--"

Mr. Baker cleared his throat and turned to look at Grandma in the rear-view mirror. "You know, things've got real bad down here, because just last week we had that Toyota speed through our driveway, remember, Sam?"

"There was a drug car in our lot?" asked Kate.

Mr. Baker cleared his throat. “And then five seconds later comes a border patrol hightailing after them – ”

“Is that how the cat got ran over?” asked Kate.

“Good grief! Sam, I’m sure glad I don’t live here, what with all the illegals. You must feel so unsafe.”

“Well, we’re glad you’re here while you can be, Mom.”

“I’m glad you’re here, Grandma,” said Claire.

Kate couldn’t wait until Grandma left and she could go home and hide under the bedsheets. It wasn’t Grandma’s fault, though. Claire was a passive fat-ass and Mom was a bigot who hadn’t done anything but give birth to daughters who wanted to forget they existed.

What would happen when they all died? Would they grow cold in the earth, or fall into a warm sleep? How long would it be before Claire began to watch her face for lines, her skin rotting into a wisp of a dead leaf?

Sometimes Kate wondered what it would be like to be a starving person. She clenched her hands against her ribs and cracked her bones. She imagined her mouth filled with grey dirt and her stomach impaled and bloated. One day vines would scale the fence like Hadrian’s wall and no one would remember them. Mrs. Baker would correct her later for talking about impaled people in front of her grandma, she knew, but the fence was their idea and Claire’s fault for being fat.

After they were done touring the border fence, Mrs. Baker asked her dear sweet Claire where she wanted to go out to dinner, and Claire said Big Red’s.

“That’s what I was gonna choose,” said Kate.



“I get to choose cause I’m the baby,” said Claire.

Big Red’s was low-lit with red booths and tiffany-style lamps. It was always crowded with greasy fat people eating Tex-Mex, and the air was heavy and smelled of beer. At least the bar was basically a giant fish tank, so Kate could distract herself by watching neon blue fishies instead of fat people. When the waiter asked to take the Bakers’ orders, Mr. Baker couldn’t understand him.

“I couldn’t understand him,” said Mr. Baker to Mrs. Baker.

“You can tell he’s new here,” said Mrs. Baker.

“Well, yeah, cause I didn’t recognize him.”

“I think I’ll get some fish cause we’re in the tropics,” said Grandma. Kate smirked.

Today Grandma wore an orange jumpsuit with a chunky orange necklace and bracelet, palm tree earrings to match. The earrings were also chunky and stretched her ear holes beyond repair. Kate smirked.

“I’m surprised there aren’t monkeys down here, what with all the parrots and palm trees that grow,” said Grandma.

“It’s dry,” said Kate.

Claire smiled at Kate, and Kate looked down. She must have thought Kate was smiling at her. Claire ordered cheese enchiladas and steak fries, and her parents said nothing. She smothered her fries in ranch and salt and ate two at a time until her lips swoll red from eating.

“Claire is very hungry,” said Grandma.

Goddamn trash panda, thought Kate. Claire liked Kylie Jenner and had gotten a lip kit for her birthday, and Kate just knew she was happy whenever her lips swelled after eating something salty or sweet. Kate would need to eat more herself, though, if she were to have hips by the time prom rolled around.

Once Ana had invited Kate over to her house for a birthday party. Her fluffy rose marshmallow room was laced with rose and amber and spangled with fairy lights. Ten people had crowded into her room to play Twister, which Kate did not like. An hour in, Ana's cousin brought in a frosted coconut ice-cream cake, and Ana smashed her face into icing. Her face came up crusted with coconut flakes and iced mush and looked like a snowman.

I'm going to try to get a corner piece, Kate had thought to herself. Then she'd stood in a corner for thirty minutes mushing ice cream into frosting and wishing she too could look pretty like Ana in her pink silk dress with frosting on her face.

"You would never know the waitress is a Mexican," said Grandma. "She was so blonde but when she spoke you could hear it in her voice."

"Don't say things like that, Mom," said Mrs. Baker. "You might hurt someone's feelings."

"Don't say things like that Mom. You might hurt someone's feelings," said Kate. Probably Ana had an abuelita way less stupid than hers who didn't think monkeys lived in Texas.

"Can we get dessert?" Claire asked. Cheese and beef sauce collected at the seams of her mouth.

"I love how all we live for is food," said Kate. Mrs. Baker frowned.

“What?” retorted Kate. Grandma winked, and Kate had no idea why.

“Slow down, Claire,” said Mr. Baker. Claire gulped and coughed. Her cheeks were red.

“You’re eating like a pig,” said Kate.

“Shh shh,” said Mrs. Baker softly. She kicked Mr. Baker softly under the table. Kate smiled.

“Chew your food,” said Mrs. Baker to Claire. “You are not a snake.”

Kate watched Claire fidget and Mrs. Baker’s stomach breath in and out and wondered if Claire had ever had a role model. She was the older sister, right? But she wasn’t the role model, and Claire would be fine on her own without her.

Ana was within Kate’s grasp. Four years from now Kate would be done with high school and could be some sort of cross between her and Elle from *Legally Blonde*. She would have a fat chihuahua, a rose-gold-themed house, and lots of friends.

Kate knew Claire well for not talking to her much anymore. Claire had four friends at school, and they were all normal. She was book smart and conscientious enough to get attention but not enough to do well in college. She would shove salty pizza in her face until she was obese and become a total failure.

Someday Claire would be just like Mrs. Baker. She would be plump and sweet as a French pastry, wearing simple shirts too small for her stomach and feeding strawberry Pop-tarts to her five fat little children, one for every day of the creation.

When they got home Kate felt tired and numb and wondered why she was still standing. She came up behind Claire adjusting her headband and yanked her hair strong as she could.

“Ow,” whined Claire.

“You worthless little brat,” Kate hissed. Claire said nothing.

“You smell like shit,” said Kate. Claire stuck out her tongue. She looked like a Precious Moments cherub, only she was a muffin-topped twelve-year-old and not a toddler who’d died and gone to Jesus.

“You’re mean.”

“Listen to me you piece of human trash,” said Kate, pulling harder. Claire twitched.

“You think you can do anything you want ‘cause mommy and daddy let you don’t you.”

Claire shook her head.

“Someday, you’re going to be a little mousy secretary doing nothing all day but typitty-wiping like your precious mother and I’m gonna be doing awesome things and you’re going to see my success and squirm. And you aren’t going to be able to handle yourself but guess what? There’s nothing you can do about it but sit and pray for Purgatory.”

Claire laughed. She was trying so hard to act like she didn’t care. “I can’t believe you have a problem with Mom being a secretary.”

“Oh, I don’t have a problem with secretaries and nurses and mommies who want to be what they are. I just have a problem with pathetic people.”

Claire was stiff and Kate could hear her breathing.

“What’s going on in there?” yelled Mr. Baker from the kitchen.

“Nothing,” yelled Kate.

Claire sniffled and hugged her forearms, looking down.

“Wow, you really are spineless,” said Kate, yanking Claire’s ear. “Try standing up for yourself sometime.”

“No.”

“HAVE SOME SELF-RESPECT,” Kate screamed, lunging at her sister’s face. Claire squealed and the Bakers came running.

That night Kate’s flip phone was confiscated. Kate was the reason woman couldn’t speak in church, Mr. Baker had reassured her. Of course, he did have a cause to be upset.

The bedroom Kate shared with her sister always made her almost happy after their fights. She liked the Christmas lights and magazine cut-outs, the plump Talavera sun and ten-year-old computer. She hated having the bottom bunk normally but after a fight she was always happy to have a safe hole. She liked staring up at the wood panels of her bunk and feeling a rush to her head. A car light arched across the wall nearest the radiator window.

It was one in the morning at this point, and from her bottom bunk Kate could still hear Claire sniffing. She’d been crying for two hours, trying and failing so hard to stay quiet. Kate scaled the ladder between their two levels and crawled over her sister.

“You doin’ okay?”

Claire sniffed. “Why are you so mean to me?”

“Because you have an iPhone. Just kidding.”

“Mom would like you better if you were nicer to me.”

“Is that so? Maybe I should try that and see what happens.”

Claire stared blankly to the side. Her shoulders were hunched in the dark. Her eyes and nose would be so much cuter if she wasn't fat.

“Why do you eat so much?”

“Bitch.”

“I'm really sorry for what happened earlier today.”

“Yeah, whatever.”

Kate lay in bed that night and couldn't fall asleep. She was amazed by Claire's behavior sometimes, that Claire had said the word “bitch.”

If Kate was gone, Claire wouldn't feel bad for her. She would pity Kate as a lower being and then continue to wear pink bows with a pink shirt and khaki pants, do all of her homework, and use her stupid little iPhone to text her nerd herd of friends.

Kate got up and padded down the hallway. Mrs. Baker was snoring loud as death. Her small feet felt cool against the dirty white tile.

It was if Kate didn't exist, Kate realized, because she didn't deserve to.

Ana had had the same boyfriend since middle school. The boyfriend was not particularly interesting, but he made Ana happy. It was in high school that Kate began to notice other girls falling in line with Ana, giggling on their boyfriends' knees at lunchtime. Kate did not understand why anyone would want to have a boyfriend for the entire school to see. The little exhibitionists, anyway. Secrets were much more fun. This

was a fortunate opinion to have, since no one that she liked had asked her to the school dance.

For some reason Ana and Kate always talked with each other in the restroom. They didn't really talk anywhere else, except sometimes Ana would approach Kate casually at lunch munching a tomato sandwich and making her rounds to each table like the social butterfly she was. But they would always have these weirdly intimate conversations in the restroom, probably because Kate spent a lot of time in there. Once Kate spent a half hour pretending to fix her hair in the bathroom because her friends were stressing her out. They had said she was the most likely of all five of them to become a nun, a claim which Kate did not appreciate.

It was after the third time of washing her hands that Kate heard snorts and retches. Jesus, thought Kate. Someone sounds like an obese pug.

"You need help?"

"No," sniffed the girl. It was Ana.

Kate passed tissues to Ana under the stall. "Thanks," Ana said.

"Everything alright with you and Andres?"

"We had a fight," said Ana.

"Wow, that sucks."

"He told I'm too needy. He wants to have other gal friends."

"Wow," Kate said. "Jerkface."

Ana came out of the stall, and it smelled like vomit.

"Let me know if you need any water or anything."

Ana half-smiled, and Kate wished Ana would share more of her life problems.

“If it makes you feel any better, I wish I were you.”

“No you don’t,” said Ana. Her mascara raccooned her red-pink glittered eyes perfectly. If only Kate and Ana could exchange skins. Hot mess makeup really was a look. Ana couldn’t help herself being so perfect and sad at the same time. With Kate everything was all her fault. Her parents and Claire were annoying, but Kate made everything worse. Ana’s parents were so nice at that birthday party. They really were just so nice and normal.

Still, it made her sad that Ana was sad, for Ana’s sake.

It was sad that if Kate hadn’t asked Ana if she was okay, Ana wouldn’t have said anything. They weren’t really close after all. Kate was just asking too many questions. If Kate was more outgoing and less weird, they could be friends - except Kate would be too jealous of her to get close to her, so in all cases a relationship wouldn’t work out anyway.

One day at school awhile back Ana had held a bake sale. Pink cupcakes thick with pink frosting and pink pearl sprinkles, two dollars each, all donations to save dogs from being euthanized. I don’t like dogs, but I like cupcakes, Kate thought. So she bought two heavily frosting cupcakes from Ana, who thanked her profusely.

Kate had sat down on a bench to watch Ana from afar while eating her cupcakes. The cupcakes were sticky and rich, in a good way. The bench was in part masked by a buff ebony tree, so Kate wouldn’t look like a creep staring at Ana. Ana was smiling, her hair almost strawberry in the afternoon heat.

What is behind this smile? Kate couldn’t be the only one who felt like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, the only one with an obnoxious family and academic distress. She couldn’t be the only one. She’d rather die than be the only one who felt like herself.



At school Ana and her friends had talked of setting up dating profiles, so Kate decided to set one up as well. She took a photo of herself with an old digital camera her mom had never used. At least this camera will make my photo look vintage, she thought. On her profile, she listed her age as eighteen.

Here is my escape from reality, Kate thought. Then she thanked Jesus that her mother could not read her mind and had not yet put parental controls on her laptop.

Two weeks later, Kate received a message from a nineteen-year-old man named Jesús. He had dark tan skin, a huge nose, and small eyes. Not bad, thought Kate. He wasn't terribly attractive, but he was good enough. His complexion disagreed with her family's values, which was perfect. They agreed to meet at the mall carousel after school on Friday.

The carousel was sleek and candy-colored. Jesús opened the door of the spinning teacup for Kate, and she thanked him even though she was kind of annoyed. What if one of her classmates saw her here with him? He wasn't even that attractive, and he got annoyed when she tried to pronounce his name correctly. "Call me Jeesus," he'd said. After all, he didn't want it pronounced like "Hay-seuss," as if she'd actually said it that way. But whatever. He'd brought her to the mall, so that was nice.

After the carousel ride Jesus took her to get elote at a nearby stand. Once finished eating they got on the Ferris wheel outside in the mall parking lot, probably to distract them from having to say much. Jesus could be cuter and more outgoing, but at least he gave Kate food and would take her to do things like see fireworks, watch movies, and ride carousels. If Jesus was cuter, he wouldn't do those things. And she needed to get out of her stupid house.

That night Kate snuck out of her room. She'd left a lump of pillows in her bed and a dark sweater where her head would normally be just in case anyone woke up. Jesus was waiting for her in his old car and met her with a kiss.

"I feel so rebellious," said Kate.

"That's because you are," said Jesus. "You're my little rebel."

"I'm your little fourteen-year-old," said Kate.

"Shut up," said Jesus. He really did like that she was fourteen, the little creep.

"Didja get the birth control like I told you to?"

"Hell yes I did."

"Good girl."

Jesus's apartment was downtown near the college. On the outside it was a small stucco building framed with Christmas lights and lemon trees. On the inside it was filthy, with puzzle pieces, trash, and hair on the floor, and bowls of ramen and burnt stuff on the stove.

"It smells like ramen," said Kate.

"Yes, it does," said Jesus. This was because his roommates were trash and always stole his food. Unfortunately, the bathroom was even more horrific than the kitchen. The toilet was almost overflowing, the sink was filled with hair, and there were prawns on the shower floor.

"Why are there prawns on the shower floor?" asked Kate.

"Ay, don't worry about it," said Jesus. "You're my girl."

This answer confused Kate deeply.

Jesus decided they would watch *La Llorona*. This was great, because Kate wasn't allowed to watch scary movies at home. Mrs. Baker wanted her children to fill their minds with good things, and scary violent things were of the devil. Kate remembered this and wondered what Mrs. Baker and Grandma would have to say if they saw her watching her movie with a little Mexican boy. Mrs. Baker would not like his age, and Grandma would not like his face. This was all very satisfying to Kate. Teehee, teehee, she thought to herself.

The movie was more frightening than she'd imagined. It was so horrifying to see the veiled face of the Llorona and know there was rot behind the faceless veil just waiting to reveal itself. That night, La Llorona would remember Kate. She would hiss and crawl and scamper into the Bakers' home on all fours to steal her away, and Kate would be thrilled with terror as the stringy-haired decayed creepy lady pinned her shoulders down to suck out her soul.

Halfway through the movie, Jesus, began kissing Kate. His breath smelled almost like pizza and egg, but not quite.

"I'm not ready," said Kate. "I'm just not attracted to you."

"Whatever," said Jesus. Kate thought he'd be more disappointed that she wasn't attracted to him, but he didn't seem to care one bit. Without hesitation he grabbed his car keys and led her out into the driveway. He held open the car door for her, and she said thanks. They did not say a single word to each other on the ride home.

When Kate opened her dresser at 11 am the next morning, the birth control she

had placed there was not there. Her parents were murmuring in the kitchen. Claire was humming a little hymn to herself, so Kate came up from behind her and grabbed her by the hair. Claire stopped humming, and her arms hung frozen at her sides.

“You know why people don’t like snitches?”

Claire whimpered.

“Because they’re lower than dogs,” hissed Kate

“Mom, Kate’s being mean again.” Claire was crying now. Her young face was contorted into wrinkles and her large velvet headband slid backwards and fell off the edge of her large forehead. Kate pushed Claire to the floor.

“You snitch.”

“You popped my eff-ing shoulder,” shrieked Claire. Hysterical witch.

“Stop talking like a ghetto girl and get in the kitchen,” yelled Mr. Baker.

“I didn’t do anything.”

“I’m sick and tired of you treating your sister like trash.”

“It’s not my fault you love her more than me.”

“You said it not me,” said Mr. Baker.

“We love you both equally,” said Mrs. Baker. There were tears in her eyes.

“Kate, what did you buy with my health insurance?” asked Mr. Baker.

“Drugs.”

“Tell the truth, Kate.”

“I don’t know, what do you think I bought?”

Mrs. Baker held up the birth control between her two chapped fingers. Kate stared.

“You know, there’s all kinds of disease out there. And you could be with a guy who likes you one minute and dumps you the next and then you’re stuck with some disease he gave you.”

“I thought you were religious,” said Kate

Mrs. Baker put her head in her hand. “That, and also the Bible says that intercourse is for -”

“Shut up,” said Mr. Baker.

“Yessir,” said Mrs. Baker.

“You really are intent on rejecting our values, aren’t you?”

“What values?”

Mrs. Baker slouched her head once more into one of her hands. She looked pathetic.

“The values of our God and our country,” declared Mr. Baker. “Go to your room.”

The next few weeks were horrible and silent. Kate never talked to her parents or Claire when she could avoid it, but now they were avoiding her as well. She no longer ate dinner with the family, and Mrs. Baker no longer checked her backpack. Her flip phone was not confiscated. On church Sundays, Mr. Baker sat in between Mrs. Baker and Claire.

Thanksgiving was hell. “Come sit with us, Kate,” Mr. Baker had said. “We don’t bite.” But Kate poured a glass of water and went back to her room. She lay face down on her bed, hands behind her neck, and listened to Claire’s chewing. She could hear Mr. Baker say “Delicious stuffing, Sam” as if nothing had happened. I might as well be

Claire's goldfish, Kate thought. Or the prodigal son. One thing that was kind of nice though was when Mrs. Baker left some pie on Kate's bed, when Kate wasn't in the room.

Christmas break came, and Kate was sickened by the idea of spending nearly two weeks stuck at home. The Christmas tree overcrowded the den and showered it with needles. Claire and Mrs. Baker liked to hum along to Christmas carols whilst they decorated and baked, which was annoying and stupid. Kate made a Santa wish-list only to be informed that unlike Claire, she was too old for Santa.

What really made this break horrible is that Mrs. Baker was making her apply to all-girl boarding schools, so that she wouldn't become abusive or inspire a divorce or commit fornications. There had been too much conflict for too long. Between Claire's fat ass and herself, they had chosen Claire, if only they would admit it.

"We want you to be happy and safe." This is how Mrs. Baker had introduced the subject of prep school. She had then proceeded to say that growing up was hard, that there were many good schools in Texas that would nurture Kate and teach her well. She was a sheep, but surely at a school like Hanover she would be safe from the wolves.

Of course, boarding school was expensive, but Grandma would be happy to pay for the privilege. Grandma had called to let Kate know she was keeping her in her prayers. She would send Kate ten dollars every week for treats, she said. Kate looked pitiful and needed to get some meat on her bones, she said.

Kate didn't deserve to have to leave the house, but at least she wouldn't have to talk to anyone anymore.

## CHAPTER 2

The first day Kate saw Hanover she was amazed by how green the lawn was. Girls already lay in it, their skirts splayed and shoes butterflyed together. Over the lawn stretched a web of oak and palm trees.

“Thank god it’s a uniform school,” said Kate.

“Yes, yes, the uniforms are so cute,” said Mrs. Baker. She smiled big, and her mouth made a clicking noise.

“Can I go to boarding school?” asked Claire.

“We’ll see,” said Mrs. Baker.

“We’re too poor,” said Kate.

Claire huffed, and her chin doubled. In the sun her face looked lined like she was a forty-year-old baby. Finally she was reaching for something that Kate was. Claire could be altered and fashioned into a reasonable human being.

“You’re going to love it here,” said Mr. Baker.

“Yeah, I feel so punished,” said Kate. The girls and their families here were so rich it would be a miracle if she could convince them for a week that her family was not broke Bible beaters. The school was an escape from the Bakers, but friendship was futile.

At the front office, the Bakers were greeted by Kate’s roommate Lily. Lily wore a pale pink t-shirt and a Cinderella band-aid on one knee.

“I thought we had to wear uniforms today,” hissed Kate. Mrs. Baker elbowed Kate and smiled. Lily was sweet to all of them and led Kate up to her room carrying one of her bags.

Lily's hair was caramel blonde, her nails a cupcake pink. Kate hated how Mrs. Baker had made her wear a headband to match the uniform. If Kate's own hair and nails were as gorgeous as Lily's Kate would be such a bitch people just wouldn't know what to do with her. She'd show them, all right.

Mr. And Mrs. Baker loved how cute Lily was. They'd probably lick her toenails if she asked them to.

Their room was on the third floor. It was a fire hazard, with old wood floors and a long wooden window seat under which blazed a radiator. It was August. Each girl had a large six-by-five closet, the walls of which were scrawled with obscenities. Kate watched Mrs. Baker as she scuffled between boxes of stuff like a goddamn human hamster. When Mrs. Baker was finished she went to hug Kate goodbye. Kate squeezed Mrs. Baker until Mrs. Baker squeaked.

"Be careful," said Mr. Baker.

In her head Kate could see Mr. and Mrs. Baker getting in a car crash on their way back. Mr. Baker, sleepy from eating too many big macs would drift over into the left lane right into an oncoming semi-truck. Then a spark would ignite the gas and the whole car would explode. Her family would be gone and she would go to live with her tacky rosary tourist grandma and never have to go to church again. She would have to leave her new school, but what would that matter? She wouldn't have any friends here anyway.

In spite of Mrs. Baker's one-man cleaning job, Kate's side of the room was somehow plainer and more cluttered than Lily's. Like Ana's room, Lily's living space was rosy and soft, with fairy lights and a laptop that didn't look like trash. So much for Mrs. Baker's rustling, the little goddamn human hamster.



After the Bakers had gone, Lily suggested she take Kate around to meet people. So Lily led Kate through a thin, steep winding staircase wedged between utility closets down to the second floor.

“It smells like ramen,” said Kate. Her palms felt swollen, her legs leaden and detached. The dorm halls were an old off-white and lined with an olive-colored carpet.

“Interesting,” said Lily. Kate hated how Lily would not even acknowledge the scent, as if she pitied Kate for having a pessimistic nose. She couldn’t wait to get out from under Lily’s wing and go do some things on her own, like visit the laundry room.

Lily was friends with Kaitlyn, a girl from Martha’s Vineyard who’d been her roommate the year before. Lily had been boarding at Hanover since she was thirteen, and Kaitlyn had been her roommate. Kaitlyn had wide-set eyes and a small mouth and would have looked something like Jackie Kennedy had she not been overweight. Her room overlooked a perfect soccer field lined with apple trees. She had a promise ring on her finger that her boyfriend had given her the summer before when a police officer had made them roll down the window of his car to make sure she wasn’t being raped. It was pure gold with a real diamond, Kaitlyn claimed.

“Neat,” said Kate. She wished she had a boyfriend that came with diamonds and scandalous police encounters.

Now Kaitlyn was talking about sneaking her parents’ alcohol and how her parents were way richer than anyone else’s parents at the school. So this is the kind of stuff I’ll have to listen to all year if I have friends, Kate thought. The shallow little sluts. But part of her wished that she was Kaitlyn. If she was Kaitlyn, she would be her same miserable self, but with benefits. When Kate finally grew tired of her exclusion and stood up to

leave, her phone fell out of her pocket. Kaitlyn saw that it was a flip phone, so Kate had to explain herself. Kaitlyn and Lily glanced at one another and sniggered.

In spite of themselves, the girls were interested in Kate's concerns and asked her more questions about boys, which she answered. Kate couldn't help but answer, because her mouth moved before her mind did. Her words were not her will. I am a puppet and my spine is a stick, she thought. But it was inevitable that they would find out she was a loser. They would use all information she gave against her. Might as well rip off the band-aid.

After her first day of school Kate retreated unseen beneath her bed to take a nap. The beds were too small for a trunk to fit under but perfect for a person and a laptop.

"My weird roommate's studying under her bed," said Lily.

"I'm watching platypuses on YouTube," said Kate. "Don't mind me."

Kaitlyn stuck her head under Kate's bed to look at her, and Kate snorted.

"Teehee," said Kate.

"You little creep," said Kaitlyn laughing. Kate giggled nervously.

Lily was sweet and pretty, but not as pretty as herself, Kate thought. She had a vat of pink Goldfish that she snacked on and liked to walk around topless and braless in their room. When topless, Lily would send photos of herself to Kevin, a seventeen-year-old Mensa scholar dreamboat who had developed alcoholism because his rich parents left him home alone five months out of the year.

"I'm a size double D," said Lily sweetly. She had a tiny waist. Kaitlyn was a size A, a size which she was very proud of but pretended to be embarrassed about anyways since the rest of herself was huge. Kate rolled her eyes.

“Does anyone want to know my bra size?” asked Kate from underneath the bed. But no one heard her, so she went back to studying. For some reason, both girls had been able to acquire these black lacy Victoria’s Secret bras that Mrs. Baker wouldn’t have touched with a ten-foot pole. Someday, Kate would be president of the United States of America with an attractive First Man and a herd of pure-bred sausage dogs. Perhaps in the near future she would sleep with Kevin. That would show them.

Another girl whose name Kate couldn’t remember came into their room with a vegetable pizza that smelled terrible but met Kaitlyn’s dietary needs. Vegan and gluten free, because dairy made her fat.

“Can I have a slice of pizza?” asked Kate, half-tugging herself from underneath the bed, even though she wasn’t hungry. But maybe she might as well do them a favor and keep them from getting fat. Or maybe she’d like the taste of this new pizza in spite of its scent. The girl holding the pizza shrugged and stared.

Kate really hadn’t had a motive for wanting pizza. Again, her mouth speaking before her brain. She could not talk loudly, but she could be a creep. This was why everyone hated her.

Lily and Kaitlyn were reading each other’s palms. Lily was destined to live a life full of love and mid-life illnesses, while Kaitlyn would be very financially successful. But Kate knew these readings were false. Someday they would live in mediocre houses with two kids and ugly husbands, and Kate would rise above them all. Claire would be stuck living with her parents until her thirties, Mrs. Baker fattening her up like a butterball turkey for the slaughter.

“Hey, Kate, is it true you’re from *Brownsville*?” asked Kaitlyn.

“Yeah.”

“Is it true that everyone there is like, really *brown*? Like *beans*?”

Kate laughed nervously.

“Don’t be mean to my nerdy roommate,” said Lily.

Was Kate racist for laughing? Maybe she was just like Mrs. Baker. Always sensitive but perceiving nothing. From below her bed she could see the cracks of skyline above the radiator struck white with the trails of an airplane. If I was a bird, she thought. Then she forgot what her mind had been working towards. Her head snapped back to nothing.

Kate slid from under the bed, her head cracking and her elbows bent upwards at right angles. The other girls were staring at her. Don’t hurt me, Kate thought. Then she wondered who her head was talking to. She tripped to the floor and fell on one knee as if proposing. She grabbed a slice of pizza from the box on the floor and chewed at a mouthful of mushroom. The other girls are staring at me, Kate realized. She could feel her throat twitch and the food congeal and burn in her stomach. It was better than the nothing she’d eaten in the past few hours. The other girls were staring at her. No, they were absorbed in their own pink glittery worlds. Just like the pizza absorbed by her stomach acid. Congealing. Soon they would be dead, all of them. Paralyzed in their coffins beneath the surface of the earth. Kate, too, in spite of her rising destiny. All gone. The nameless girl whispered something in Lily’s ear. “Later,” said Lily. “When she’s gone.”

They too are waiting for me to die, realized Kate.

Chapel each week (7:00 am sharp MWF) was hellish. Kate would tag along behind Lily and pretend to be friends with her. They would make small talk about the weather, how their room was too hot or too cold until Kaitlyn and the pizza girl and a couple other girls whose names Kate could never learn would join them. Then Kate would shuffle behind them squeezed against a corner of the hallway into the chapel, which was always lighter than other rooms because of the mustard-colored stained glass which lined half the whitewashed walls. The rooms at the back, where Kate was always caught standing no thanks to Lily's friends, experienced direct mustard-colored sunlight. Sometimes it was blinding.

"Too much," said Kate to herself. Light was stinging her eyes and she was sick of never getting a seat. Perhaps this blinding and seatless-ness was a sign. Truly, she was destined not to be Elect but to be Un-Elect. Alas. Her legs were leaden and her stomach felt sick. At least Christian Heaven would be better off without her, she supposed. She was programmed to be annoying, after all.

"Pardon?" asked a teacher built like a plump stingray. She had thought Kate was talking to her. Kate rolled her eyes.

Sometimes in chapel Lily would go up to the front by the pulpit and sing. She was pretty good, actually. Good enough to probably study at Julliard if she had a work ethic, or if she was a smidge more talented. This not-bad singing was the one part of Lily that Kate admired, besides the fact that Lily's side of the room they shared was always cleaner and more aesthetic.

"I liked your performance," Kate mumbled to Lily as they exited the building.

"Thank you, sweetie," said Lily. She fell backwards onto Kate's toes.

Coming back to her dorm, Kate went up the stairs two at a time. Was this what a hell would feel like, just gravity and headaches all the time? Claire was probably eating her third breakfast right now, Pop-tarts oozing out of her mouth like blood.

When she reached the top-flight of the stairs she stopped. From a panel of cedarwood came laughter and whispers. A whispering cavern, a place of adventure where sparrows and mice might nest. She cracked the panel open to find two artsy-looking girls holding their index fingers together. A thick drop of blood from the two fingers dripped to the floor. Kate saw it and shivered. She'd tried to make Claire cut her finger once so they could hold their fingers together, but that was when she was eight. One of the girls turned her head so slowly that Kate almost jumped. She looked annoyed that Kate had discovered them. The other girl held a finger to her lips and laughed nervously. The two were pressed tightly together as if sharing some secret. "Can I join?" asked Kate. The girls ignored her. Then she realized what was going on. They must have been making out or something.

Humiliated, Kate slid the panel back in place. At least they didn't know her name. She'd probably never talk again to those two. She knew no one's names and didn't really care too much whether or not she did in fact learn them.

Lucky girls, they had been able to escape chapel. Maybe if she was an artsy theater kid she'd have friends.

She'd have to explore that dumbwaiter. It'd be a good place to work in privacy. Or to just sit and think.

"I'm so thrilled you didn't bring Claire," Kate said. It was parents' weekend.

“Well, Claire would have liked to visit but she was busy with school,” said Mrs. Baker. She smiled a fat cheesy smile and made a clicking noise with her cheeks. It didn’t make sense, but somehow this smile made Kate guilty. Mrs. Baker seemed to fear for Kate’s existence.

Lunch tables this weekend were assigned outdoors with place cards and individual flowers for each guardian, everything pulled together. The food was much better than it normally was - grilled cheese with chives, instead of pizza decorated with undercooked chicken, celery, and chives. The Bakers sat next to Kaitlyn’s parents, who were really nice, well-dressed, and trim. Kaitlyn’s mom looked to be about ten years younger than Mrs. Baker, and you could tell she’d become way nicer since high school, back when she was probably a mean girl. Kaitlyn’s face was more her dad’s than her mom’s, as if someone had taken her mom’s Barbie face, given it dark black eyebrows, and smushed all the features in slightly, like a pug’s. Mrs. Baker smiled her wet little smile at Kaitlyn’s mom. “That’s so good that our girls are friends,” she said.

“Yeah, of course, let us know if y’all need anything,” said Kaitlyn’s mom. But Kate could tell she was really annoyed by Mrs. Baker leaning in towards her, probably because Mrs. Baker’s breath was terrible. Also, Mrs. Baker had spilled some tomato soup on her sagging secretary shirt, which she scraped at with her perfectly manicured pinky finger before covering it politely with her lap napkin.

Kaitlyn’s mom must have known that the girls weren’t friends, either that or that Kate was annoyed with her mom, because she sparkled her eye at Kate when she said ‘y’all.’

It was while Kate was thinking this that from across the quad Lily and Lily's parents approached them.

"It's so lovely to meet you," said Lily's parents to the Bakers.

The conversation hummed and rushed like water, and Kate stopped paying attention to it. Lily's father made some complaint to Mr. Baker about how his daughter never studied.

"Well, we wish we had a daughter as lovely as yours," said Mr. Baker with a laugh. "Wipe that frown off your face, silly," he said to Kate, patting her on the head.

"Shut Up!!!" screamed Kate. All four of the parents froze. They were concerned but didn't want to appear to be too concerned, because Kate was clearly a very strange girl.

Kate's head was rushing, filled to the brim with words that others had said and moments that she hated. She turned a corner and ran up a flight of wood stairs into a group of girls laughing and eating. The girl she ran into looked confused and Kate heard a 'you okay?' but it was too late to do anything about what was happening. Running fast for the first time in a while she could feel her bones bruise against the concrete and blood pool to the bottom of her legs. After climbing four flights of stairs she finally reached the dumbwaiter, peeled the door open and slumped to the musty floor, wood splintering her fingers.

The inside of the dumbwaiter was dark, warm and cedar-scented. In here Kate could feel the rise and fall of her clean breath and appreciate the moment. She scraped the wood dust from underneath her short raw fingernails and picked at the bumps on her skin.



It was no fair that she had to come here alone and other girls came here to tell each other secrets. Is being alone what dead feels like? Kate wondered. It might be nice to fall asleep for a very long time. Then again, it might not be. The frightening string-haired demon woman from her dreams might come try to eat her in her sleep. La Llorona might feast on her soul as punishment for annoying Mrs. Baker and tempting Jesus. Her head slumped against the blackness of the wood panel. From outside she could hear the rushing of cars like the ocean.

“Am I going to be allowed to come home for Christmas?” asked Kate over the phone that night. She had no service, and the call kept breaking at the worst parts. Last Christmas had been so terrible. But if they wouldn’t let her spend it with them, that would be even worse.

“Well...do you want to spend Christmas with us?” asked Mrs. Baker sweetly.

“No mommy, I want to spend all of Christmas break trapped in my dorm room,” said Kate. As soon as she said this, Kate turned to look over her shoulder. What if someone overheard her talking and thought she was secretly rude? Maybe she was just like Mrs. Baker after all. Mrs. Baker sighed. Kate imagined she must be mentally sorting Kate into Purgatory for being a disrespectful young lady. Still, she couldn’t bear to tell the Bakers that she didn’t have friends. They had thrown away way too much of their lives into trying to preserve her goddamn purity.

“You can come home – on one condition.”

“And what is that little condition?”

“Your father and I think it best that you see the school counselor.”

“*What,*” Kate spat.

“Counselors have a PhD in psychology,” said Mrs. Baker. “That means they are very smart and know what’s best for you.”

Kate went to the nurses’ office the next day.

At the nurses’ office, the counselor gave Kate was given an inane questionnaire. What is your favorite color? It asked. What is your ethnicity? Why do you not feel happy?

“What are you testing, exactly?” asked Kate. “I think you might have given me the wrong form.”

The counselor smiled simply. “Sign your name at the bottom of the questionnaire, please,” she said.

Kate signed without answering anything. The nurse reviewed the form, sniffed, then retreated into the file-cramped recesses of the office. After much rustling and scampering, the nurse returned with a bottle of medication.

“Come in to take one of these every day,” she said.

The first week of taking the medication, Kate tried to push the pill between her teeth and the sides of her mouth. But the counselor became suspicious and made her start opening her mouth. The second week, Kate was being fed pills through a tube which the counselor slid into her throat. It was this week that Kate began to feel so dizzy she could hardly concentrate in class. The algebra teacher got mad at her for putting her head down on her desk and gave her detention on the regular. Kate called Mrs. Baker to tell her about the vertigo and headaches, to no avail.

“Sometimes medications can take a while to get used to,” said Mrs. Baker.

“Whatever. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, honey. Your mom and dad love you very much.”

One month into taking the school’s meds Kate began to feel like the top of her head had been taken off. She was no longer too heavy but too light, almost paralyzed. She moved in a dream, paying attention to not much in particular. Nothing she did was right or wrong, she just was. That would have to be okay. That would have to please people. Funny how she no longer called Mrs. Baker on the phone anymore. If she did, she would have so much to tell her. How she’d been persecuted by her roommate’s friends and could no longer eat without feeling her organs stir.

Ceramics class was the one class Kate did not despise, at least. Her and the others would peel clay into curls and strands, coat jugs with emerald and sapphire glaze. Sometimes when she was shaving away at a work, Kate would feel the nerves of her legs twitch. Once she thought she felt her big toe move. An actual twitch. Normally, blood congealed at the bottom of her feet and made them swell. But here at the kiln hut when working she could almost feel them come alive. She was no longer a puppet of her own destruction.

“You are one of my most hard-working students,” said the art teacher one time to Kate after school.

Hard-working is code for best, thought Kate to herself. Then she felt embarrassed and suppressed this thought. Her vases and boxes were no art. They were just lumps of burnt earth painted pretty colors. Still, they were better than ninety percent of the other students’ works. Each one had a certain personality to them. One box was for her antique lockets and blush, another for dried flowers. One mug’s golden face was cursed with blackened dents and splotches, like the burnt spots of a cheese pizza. “Beautiful,” the

teacher had said. Kate wasn't so sure of this judgement. When Mrs. Baker had seen the mug, she frowned. "Hmm," she said. "What are all those little black splotches?"

"The spots are red," said Kate. "They're supposed to be craters."

If Kate had to choose between companionship and her own artistic abilities, she supposed she would choose ceramics. The clay and kiln were her own, unlike fair-weather friends and blood relatives. She was beginning to understand, more than she'd like to, why Puritans always treated their children like little adults, as if they'd die and go to Purgatory tomorrow.

In any case, Kate had found her niche. The clay was her friend. She could shape it into anything she wanted it to be and make it hers. Maybe someday she would own her own pottery business, a rundown cottage with an herb garden and kiln and everything. That would be nice. Her current project was a short, round vase the color of blood. When she finished it would be candy-apple colored. Every time she ran her finger along the glaze of her creation in progress she had the urge to devour it. Mrs. Baker would be pleased, and she would be satisfied.

After her candy-apple vase was finished Kate placed it carefully on her nightstand along with her other pieces. They glistened in the light and the dark, emitting a liquid sheen like the top of a lake at night. Every once in a while she'd just rearrange them and stare at them, taking pride in her handcraft. She bought lavender sprigs and placed them in the skinniest tiger-colored vase, its rim unfurling and twisting like the curls of a vine.

"My roommate is so artsy," Lily began saying. "She's weird, but, like, really good at art."

"You're the one who can sing," Kate would suggest with a giggle.

These days Kaitlyn was always standing in front of her. She would go to chapel with Lily by Lily's invitation as usual, and once they got there Kaitlyn would just shift to stand in front of her without saying anything. And the two were always stepping on her toes. Kate might approach another group of Hanover students and be talking with them just fine, and Kaitlyn passing by would jab her elbow so hard into Kate's back that she was bruised black underneath her brassier for four days. Once Lily invited Kate to join her at a diner, then tripped her while they were crossing the street. Gravel pitted into her cheek and scraped it.

When Kate came into her bedroom one afternoon, all of her work was broken. Shards of tiger and apple and twisted evergreen were smashed across the floor in a fan shape. There goes the exhibition, thought Kate. There went her grand dreams. The pizza girl whose name Kate still had yet to learn sat on Kate's bed, strumming a ukulele. Kaitlyn and Lily sat on the floor by Lily's vanity, giggling. Kevin had sent Lily a shirtless photo.

"What happened," Kate said, softly. Her lungs tightened within her chest. She wasn't really asking a question, because she knew the girls wouldn't respond. She might as well be an offender of the worst variety.

"Sorry I knocked over your shit!" Kaitlyn said. Lily glanced at Kaitlyn meaningfully, then took a big swig of what appeared to be sparkling cider.

Kate picked up a shard. Its edges where cracked were a chalky grey. She frisbeed it casually in Lily's direction. It hit her chin.

"You little slut," said Lily.

Kate turned and left. It was just an accident, but they did not care. The entire dresser would have had to have been knocked over.

Too many memories were coming back now from home when Kate had first pushed Claire. She could feel the whispers of her parents pulsing in her brain. Whispers and ghosts of memories blurred into the girls she passed in the hallway. The lawn was dry and brittle now, scattered with frayed pumpkins and trash. The rushing highway brought her off her feet and she floated, senseless, to the dumbwaiter to sit with herself and be silent.

Each day now after school Kate would sit in the dumbwaiter. It was cool and dark and smelled of cedar. Alone in the warm dark Kate wondered what it would be like to be a moth. Claire had once told her that moths were the ghosts of people who had killed themselves in a past life. They were destined to seek light like hamsters on a treadmill, only to discover the light they'd been searching was an electric chair and once fried by a streetlight they'd have no choice but to cease to exist. Their family and friends would forget about them forever. But the moth wouldn't care, because it was soon to be nothing and there was nothing within it worthwhile.

There was nothing much to care about, really. She was destined to be an unworthy member of society. She had no friends that mattered. If she was on a lifeboat with a dozen of her peers and they had to vote one off the boat, she would be the first to be voted off. Just the other day she had heard Lily talking with Kaitlyn when they thought she wasn't in the room. She was the worst roommate Lily had ever had, according to Lily. Kaitlyn thought Kate looked like a corpse. Of course, Kate could always improve

herself somehow. Besides ceramics, nothing was actually interesting. In any case, she could hardly concentrate with the medications the school counselor was shoving down her throat. Half the time she wasn't sure if the school was real at all, or if it was just some mirage that would disappear once she reached a place of crossing.

It was December now, and the school was trying its best to be festive. The dining hall began feeding the girls stale gingerbread men at lunch. The school maintenance lady trimmed the hallways with plastic pinecone garlands. To Kate's surprise, Lily invited to walk with her to the school's Christmas party.

The Christmas tree reached two stories tall and was set in the center of the school's red velvet assembly room. Kate felt someone place an ornament in her hand. A glass of cider was in the other hand, burning. How did it get there, she wondered. Her chest tightened and her back itched. Lily had abandoned her. God forbid Lily talk to Kate in front of other people.

Kate climbed a ladder behind Kaitlyn to reach the upper height of the tree. The branches crackled against her pink swollen fingers. The tree should have been pine-scented, but like the garlands it was also just plastic. Claire and the Bakers would have so much fun with their baking and live tree decorating this year without Kate's disapproval.

Someone nudged Kate's leg, and the ladder wobbled. Kate fell on her tailbone and shrieked. Kaitlyn looked at her for a second, but no one else seemed to notice. Slowly I'm ceasing to exist, Kate realized. Everyone hates me. Hanover was just as she had suspected it would be – a dead end. She could change schools, abandon her family, but she could not escape her awful self.

Kate tried to approach Lily at the bonfire afterwards, but Lily did not seem to hear. Everyone was talking with someone else but her. The fire squealed and reached for the girls. A foretaste of hell, Kate thought. She could imagine Mrs. Baker watching the fire with her dry hands folded in front of her and a small smile on her face.

Maybe the sheepish girls felt the same way she did. Maybe she was a sheep. But that couldn't be the problem, because when she looked in the mirror she saw someone with potential. She would see herself magically working her way to the top of some government, a natural born leader, doing important government things in a sharp suit and scaring interns with her finicky coffee preferences.

But every day she watched the girls and noted what they wore, wondering what they thought of themselves and herself. Watching some of them she wished she could unzip their skins and step inside of them, become them for a week or so and then step inside someone else to be whatever they were and have what they had that she could also have if only the world weren't against her. If only she could have friends. Other girls she watched were so ugly or stupid or boring or friendless or fat that she couldn't understand how they could bear to live with themselves. She would rather jump off a cliff than be one of these sheepish girls. But still, she was the one who didn't want to be herself and whom no one else really cared about. Every day when she woke up she would feel something like happiness. Then by the time she'd finished microwaving and sipping her tea she'd remember that she didn't have friends and it was all Mrs. Baker's fault for sending her up here with a flip phone to save Mrs. Baker's marriage from divorce and keep Kate's purity wrapped in gold leaf like a cherry cordial until she was ready to become the next generation of Mrs. Baker's vague hopes and dreams. But what if all of



this was her fault? And the horror of this thought sucked at her head and chest like a vacuum, making it impossible to think straight. She felt demented. Her small legs felt too heavy to be moving on their own, she realized as she walked back to the dorm that night. Someone or something was making her move her legs to get back to where she was supposed to be. Something was controlling her actions and thoughts and words. Her destiny was a sham. She was nothing but a mini version of the people she hated for so many reasons but no real important reason at all.

These were feelings Kate felt on the edge of her consciousness, something nagging her fourteen-year-old head but not yet quite there, feelings which she would not be able to articulate until much later when it was too late to force herself to change or be nice to the people who annoyed her the most. She couldn't think these feelings in words. To her, words were more like old friends worn thin than a flowing stream of consciousness. She'd never been able to use them to be and say what she wanted them to be and say when the ice needed breaking.

It didn't matter what she had been or why or if she'd been static before. She was herself, and she existed somewhere in between life and death.

The fire was too hot, and Kate decided to leave.

Each December at Hanover there was an initiation ceremony. Every year at this cultish ceremony one freshman would be tossed by two large seniors in white robes into an amoeba-infested lake while the other students watched. Afterwards there would be ice cream sandwiches for everyone.

That evening the new girls were ordered by the dorm parents to sit in their hallways and wait. For half an hour the girls on either side of her whispered and giggled over nothings Kate couldn't follow. Conversation came so easy to them. As if their minds unlike hers were not lumps consumed by nothing of interest at all. At half past nine the dorm parents whistled for the girls to be quiet, and the whispers crackled and stopped. A dull thud commenced to echoing beneath them, shaking the floor where they sat.

A line of twelve girls two-by-two in hockey masks pounded lacrosse sticks in a slow rhythm down the hallway, their faces oily and lined with darkness. When they got to the new girls, they stopped. In silence, the other girls rose and followed them. The pounding of lacrosse sticks resumed.

The procession stopped at a gazebo surrounded by a shallow lake. Under the gazebo, five girls in white robes were singing murky sentimental hymns. One refrain was repeated fifteen times. From across the lake two robed seniors got in a canoe and paddled towards the freshmen on the other side. Then they grabbed Kate, picked her up like a tantruming five-year-old, and dunked her into the lake.

"What the hell," screamed Kate. The freshmen were silent. Some of them were looking nowhere in particular. Others were staring at her. The placid seniors finished their dunking and crawled up from the lake bottom back into their canoes and paddled across the water.

"What the hell," Kate screamed once more, straddling the back of one fat senior and ripping at her hair. The other freshmen fish stared in consternation. From the downhill lantern path came three teachers running towards the girls, and Kate knew

they'd been watching the entire time. The three women waded into the pond and grabbed one limb of Kate each. The fat senior girl grabbed Kate's arm.

"Let me go," Kate screamed.

"Hush, hush," said one lady that Kate recognized as the receptionist. "You're just scared, is all."

"Y'all are violating me," screamed Kate. "Let go of my arms." The fat senior squeezed Kate's arm until it fell asleep.

When Kate ceased squirming she could feel her captors' relief. Kate looked up at the receptionist, and the receptionist looked down at her with pity. Kate stared back down at the receptionist's pale hairy calves, and her mind went blank.

When they got to the nurse's office, the ladies plunked her down on the wooden steps and held down her head while the nurse popped a tablet in her mouth. In the distance she could hear the other girls singing as they walked back to the main quad, where a bonfire awaited them.

"Swallow," said the nurse. Kate swallowed and wondered if they were going to euthanize her.

"You won't get away with this," Kate muttered.

"I'm sorry, did you say something?" asked the fat senior.

"Alrighty, all done now," said the nurse, wiping her hands on her blouse. Kate got up and left without looking at them or saying anything.

It was pointless to stand up for herself or try to say anything the faculty would listen to. They were the kind of people who had to have emotions screamed in their faces to recognize a problem, the kind of people who think screaming is insanity.

Kate limped upstairs. She stepped into the dumbwaiter, then realized nothing was under her feet. Her stomach dropped, and she screamed. Something snapped and funneled out of her. It felt like someone was sucking the being out of her veins. She felt herself crunch on the dumbwaiter plank below. Then all was dead.

### CHAPTER 3

Kate looked up. All of her body but her legs was in pain. Above her the fluorescent lights were white and twitching with moths. An eyelash flickered into her cornea. Blurred faces lingered about her.

“Thank God,” said Mrs. Baker said with a little sniff. Her eyes were wet. She must have been sitting by Kate for quite some time. Grandma was by her side, her hands folded across her lap.

“Hi Mom,” groaned Kate. Her head felt under water. Above Kate a fat nurse in a mint mask stared down at her and adjusted an IV. The room reeked of disinfectant and cheeseburgers.

“We’ve brought you takeout,” said Claire.

“Thanks,” said Kate with a smile.

How was Claire so nice? It would be the death of her one day.

When they’d left, Kate took a bite of a cheese curd. Her back was on fire and her arms were casted.

“I can’t feel my legs,” said Kate.

“You severed a nerve when you moved,” said the fat nurse. “You’ll be paralyzed for life probably.”

“Was I not supposed to move?” asked Kate.

“Nope,” said the nurse. “We thought you were dead. Your heart rate was at zero for a good ten minutes. Then you twitched in your sleep.”

“Oh,” said Kate. “Sorry.”

“I can tell you one thing,” said the fat nurse with a snort. “You won’t be exploring more dumbwaiters any time soon.” Kate blinked.

What had happened to Kate was that she’d just gotten tired of people. Was that an excuse? Or maybe she’d skipped some development stage, some trying and liking of new things, her life thrown far out into a lake as a stone to flatten schools of fish. If only she had been a normal teenage girl. Then she wouldn’t have gone to sit in the dumbwaiter like some whipped dog in the first place. If only she hadn’t gone to the Christmas tree decorating party with Lily, she wouldn’t have fallen off the ladder, and she wouldn’t be paralyzed from the hips down. There had been so many possibilities before, and all those were now gone from her.

Now that she was paralyzed, everything would be worse. People would pity her to make them feel better about themselves. She wouldn’t be able to get her feelings out of her mouth without someone encouraging her or someone assuring her that she need not feel the shame which surely she must feel with her condition.

What would home life be like from now on? Her family would be kinder than usual, she guessed. Once they found out she was paralyzed, they would become even nicer. Mrs. Baker would start cooking Kate’s favorite meals whether Kate ate them or not. Mr. Baker would offer to play board games with her, and it would all mean nothing to Kate. Claire would be her usual nicety-nice self, and Kate would get in fights with her. There was nothing to be done, no way to change anything and nothing that could make her feel better.

“You be a good girl and get some rest” said Grandma. She was wearing a teal jacket with pearl earrings and looked less tacky than usual.

“Don’t you worry about me,” said Kate. Grandma was so much sweeter than she remembered.

“Your mother and daddy and me were real worried about you,” she said. Small tears sparkled in her sagging crow-footed eyes.

“Do you think Mom pities me?”

“No one’s pitying you. We all just want you to get better.”

Kate sighed and turned to her nightstand. There were flowers there now. Why had she not noticed them before? They were overripe waxen red tulips peeling open to reveal their black speckled insides, bending at an awkward angle towards her face in the direction of the window beside her. She must have been at the hospital for at least a week.

The skin of Grandma’s chest heaved as she shifted to stand. “Heavens to Betsy,” she said, touching her heart. Then she fell flat to the ground. A nurse opened the door before Kate could call anyone and leaned over her. Then that nurse called another nurse and they heaved her grandmother onto a stretcher into another room.

What if she dies, thought Kate. The thought didn’t really bother her, she supposed. But the thought of Grandma dying did make the poor woman feel more real. They weren’t unsimilar. They had each other’s blood in their veins, and everything Kate had done with her existence was because someone had decided her grandma was worth having. Because of Grandma, Mrs. Baker had been born. And Mrs. Baker was a real person too. But everyone would die being connected to each but not feeling much of anything at all. And Kate’s spine was messed up and her grandma would probably be dead either now or in five or ten years and part of Kate wondered, what does all of this

mean to Mrs. Baker? Does she see this as a test or as something the universe let happen on accident or as something the devil threw at her? How many times will she cry when I'm not looking and how much uglier does she think I am now my legs and nerves are weak? None of this would affect Claire too much, but that was to be expected. Like Kate, there really was nothing much to Claire, except hunger and passivity and gradual dying in spite of having done nothing too wrong but nothing really right either. And no one could really blame me, could they. They were all just people, like everyone else.

As Kate lay in her hospital bed, so Grandma lay on hers. Two relations on the hospital at once. Maybe God is punishing us for being annoying, Kate told herself and laughed. Wouldn't that be hilarious.

Each day for a month Mrs. Baker padded into Kate's room to give her candy and tell her to stay strong. Grandma was still in a coma, she said. After all this time.

"You should get her some candy, too," said Kate, "For when she wakes up."

"Yes, yes, we should," said Mrs. Baker. She looked tired and puffy. A clump of something wet got caught in her throat, and she snorted.

"Hospital food," she explained. Kate nodded and closed her eyes.

The window at Kate's left was hot and sparkled at high morning. The sun cast mint, indigo, and nectarine flickers across the dull wall in dancing circles. At night, car lights flashed like meteors on the ceiling. Kate watched each flash and counted, waiting. She had begun to forget that she existed before the accident. Now, her focus was clearer.

Mrs. Baker had always been closer to her mother than she was to Kate. Kate supposed that this was because, unlike Mrs. Baker's mother, Kate did not love Mrs. Baker unconditionally. If Kate was always nice to Mrs. Baker and never caused any



trouble, they might actually find a common point of interest. But why would they want to? They clearly were just destined not to care about each other.

A few times per year, Mrs. Baker would drive Kate up to San Antonio. Kate used to love these trips because sometimes there they would go to SeaWorld or the Riverwalk. But most times Mrs. Baker and her mother would play chess together while Kate watched. Such a boring game, she had thought. But the elder Bakers seemed to enjoy it.

Mrs. Baker came into Kate's room that night full of tears and sniffles.

"Your grandmother has passed," she said. There was stoic finality in her voice.

"Sorry Mom," said Kate.

The funeral was to be held after Kate got out of the hospital. Joy. Now that the death actually happened she didn't feel too existential, though.

Once Kate got out of the hospital, Mr. Baker was in charge of pushing Kate's wheelchair. This was because even though his belly was big and his arms were small he still had more upper body mass than Claire and Mrs. Baker. "I can roll myself," Kate said. "Let us baby you," said Mrs. Baker. "You can role yourself when you get back to school."

Kate had never received so much positive attention from her family members in her life. It was pretty overwhelming, when she thought about it. Now I know what I have to do to win an argument with them, Kate realized. I have to get myself killed.

She could not possibly have been dead for ten minutes. It was not possible. She had just been in a deep sleep. There was the fall, and then there was nothing. She should not be alive. But then there was the twitch. That was what had paralyzed her. The pig

nurse had almost seemed happy that the two forks in the road of a fourteen-year-old's fate were paralysis and eternal slumber.

At the funeral Kate sat in the aisle since her wheelchair would not fit in the pew. From her position at the front of the church she could hear Mrs. Baker sniffing as she nervously rattled a rosary in her hands. The rosary was all she had ever known of ritual, really, besides Christmas tree decorating parties. Like half of religious people Mrs. Baker was just going with what she was raised with. She offered up all emotion capacity god-given to her to the life of her mother. It was a ceremony, that was all. But it was all she knew, all she wanted to know. Keep things simple, she'd say. Almost as if Mrs. Baker was trying to forget she existed. Don't think, don't ask questions, and you will be happy. Mr. Baker's demeanor was solemn yet calm. And Kate for the first time suspected that their attitudes towards the living and dying were similar. Apathy was hereditary, and Kate had caught the bug.

Where would everyone go after they died? Would Mrs. Baker go to the purgatory she believed others to be in? Would all of them go to some sort of heaven but feel no need for each other? Or maybe Kate had another mother, some other family who'd all been living different lives separated in different families and worlds who would reunite once their spirits snapped from their frames.

"Is it hard being paralyzed?" an old lady asked her at the reception. She was munching a long strand of prosciutto and looked to be having the time of her life.

"It's not permanent," said Kate. "Because the spinal nerve wasn't severed. So I just have to get therapy."

“That’s hard to believe,” said the lady, “That you’re the one in the wheelchair, even though I’m real broke down,” she said with a chuckle.

“Ha ha,” said Kate.

What a bitch, thought Kate to herself. It wasn’t like she herself was never a jerk, but some people could be so mean sometimes. This was why she had to say it wasn’t permanent, her paralysis. But she knew the truth. In truth the doctors she’d seen believed she’d never walk again. Kate had tried to press her mother for physical therapy, to no avail. Mrs. Baker was hopeless. The Bakers as a whole were pretty hopeless, Kate realized. Herself included. Maybe hopelessness was their problem.

Still, sometimes while sitting in her chair Kate could feel a fire leap into her legs, cold then hot and tingling. Something was still right with them. She just needed therapy. She’d have to wait until she graduated college and got a job, but someday she would walk again. If she just forced herself hard enough, her legs would move again.

Mrs. Baker was surrounded by cream-colored lilies now, her cheeks fair and burnt with cold. She didn’t look as fat as Kate had remembered her to be a year ago. She looked quite grim and frail, actually, now that her mother was dead. She wasn’t touching any of the appetizers she’d spent three hours mulling over. And she was wearing a pearl necklace. She never wore jewelry, because it was “unprofessional.” But now she was wearing jewelry.

“I’m really sorry, Mom,” Kate said, reaching out as if to half hug her. Mrs. Baker flinched. “Here, I’ll move some of the lilies so you can stand next to me,” Mrs. Baker said.

“I can’t stand,” said Kate. Mrs. Baker winced.

“What’s wrong?”

“Go talk with your Aunt Beatrice,” Mrs. Baker said. Kate did not know who Aunt Beatrice was, but she could tell Mrs. Baker probably wanted Kate to leave her alone. Probably having a paralyzed daughter was not a mood booster in the aftermath of your mother’s death. So Kate wheeled herself outside to the pavilion outlooking a resaca. The murky lapping water was framed with sable palms and rippled with silent unseen turtles.

If only Kate was a turtle. She could disappear forever beneath the surface of her mind’s ocean and bury in its mud.

Kate’s dad came up behind her. Like the old lady, he was also munching prosciutto.

“You should try this prosciutto,” he said.

“No thanks,” said Kate. “I wouldn’t be able walk it off, you know.”

Mr. Baker leaned in towards Kate’s ear. “Come in and socialize with the rest of us. Okay sweetie?”

“Will do,” said Kate. She felt Mr. Baker munching and waiting behind her.

“I just realized I haven’t talked to you in over a month,” Kate said. She turned around, but Mr. Baker was not there. The munching was coming from another elderly lady wearing tie-dye and an appleseed necklace. Kate wondered how Grandma had knew her. She was probably seventy but appeared at first glance to be an overtanned fifty-year-old. Her face was round-shaped with big popping eyes. She looks like a cosmetic frog, thought Kate.

“Need to smoke,” she croaked in a raspy grudge voice.

“When I was your age,” began the woman, “I was so young and free. We used to travel all over the country in our bug.”

“That must have been fun.”

“What?” spat the woman.

“I said it must have been fun...traveling.”

“Yes, yes,” said the woman with a wink. Why had she winked, Kate wondered. What was the point. “You should get out of your comfort zone,” the lady continued. She finished her cigarette halfway and tossed it into the resaca. When she left she forgot her pack of cigarettes left neat on the sand wood railing. Softly Kate took up the packet between her painted fingers and sidled it into the inner pocket of her jacket. She needed drugs more than anyone at this funeral, except for maybe Mrs. Baker. Too bad she wasn’t old enough to consume alcohol.

Kate wheeled herself across the school’s cobblestone pavilion. On the bright lawn out of the corner of her eye she sensed the glances of a group of girls gathered to look at the snow with their coffee. They were busy talking and laughing and licking flakes out of the sky.

Still, it felt like everyone was staring at her. She wouldn’t be able to run anymore, as if she’d ever run much before anyway. She hadn’t run much since she was a small child, in fact.

When she got to her room, Lily greeted her with a hug, get-well muffins, and a pink butterfly card. At first Kate thought it was a get-well card. Then she realized it was an invitation to Lily’s birthday party. Wow, I feel so accepted, thought Kate.

Everyone could care from a distance. For now, she would look to herself for the feelings she needed.

An airplane struck a white line against the sky on the other side of her glazed windowpane. Kate imagined herself diving from the plane, legs hanging free and the wind beating at her lungs. Someday she would be free to isolate herself, ignore other people and tuck herself away from the world. For now though, there were people she had to make up with, places to explore, lessons to learn.

The doctor had said she'd get her legs back, but Mrs. Baker's faith in him was shaken. "*If* you get your legs back," she would always begin each statement of hope. "*If*."

"Do you like that I'm paralyzed?" Kate asked Mrs. Baker once.

"What? No, of course not," Mrs. Baker had replied. She then redirected her attention to a list of ice cream flavors.

"Everything happens for a reason," said Lily. "Everything will be okay."

"Yeah, thanks," Kate said. But if everything happens for a reason, Kate thought, that meant that she had some kind of bad karma. Or that the thoughts in her head that moved her hand to make decisions she felt like making weren't actually hers. With or without legs she could not move without fate willing her footsteps. She was a hopeless case to be pitied by those with destinies that matched their deepest needs. Lily was only being nice to her because she pitied Kate. Kate had been weird, awkward, and annoying. Now, she was handicapped. She was an inferior member of society to be used as an example of how to treat the other better ones. There was no reason. It was an accident. Just like there was no good reason for why she hadn't had friends for a long time. It

couldn't be her. Nothing that she'd done was of any permanent consequence. It was an accident.

Kate pushed herself into the bathroom, muffins in her lap. When she wheeled over the threshold her chair bumped over the tile. I hope I don't fall, she thought. The counter was higher than it should have been, so that Kate could hardly see herself in the mirror. A freshman fish coming out of a stall gave her a half smile. She's pitying me, thought Kate. Then she realized that, considering the girl had not bothered to wash her hands, the girl probably was just thinking about herself entirely. Figures.

There was nothing to be done now except sleep as much as possible. A third of your life is sleep, she reminded herself. Just sleep. Sleep and breathe. Maybe one of these days she would fall asleep to never wake up.

If only people didn't have anything inside their hearts. Because if people did have anything lasting within them, she knew couldn't be one of them. She just couldn't be.

It seemed like Mrs. Baker was more and more nice these days. Kate didn't know what had gotten to her. Or perhaps it was herself. Maybe Kate had been flying into her own reflection for too long.

This was the problem with people. Sometimes they seemed real. Living and breathing and thinking things. Other times, anyone besides yourself was unimportant. The summer after the accident Mrs. Baker would take Kate to the shopping mall once per week, to "have some fun." Kate didn't know what was fun about getting stared at in a mall, but going to a shopping mall was better than going to church. So each week Mrs. Baker would escort Kate on wheels from store to store in the mall. Kate would wait by

the front of the store while Mrs. Baker padded through the aisles. Sometimes they would buy caramel apples or try on hats together.

“We should wear Baker hats,” Kate noted. “Since our last name is Baker.”

“Ah ha,” Mrs. Baker said and smiled. She was still wearing jewelry now that Grandma was deceased.

“We need to get some new dresses,” Mrs. Baker said on one of these excursions. She guided Kate’s wheelchair into the mall’s Forever 21.

“I thought you thought Forever 21 was for prostitutes,” said Kate. An athletic saleswoman with a thick torso and tiny legs turned around to glare at her.

“Don’t talk like that right now,” said Mrs. Baker. “It’s not polite.”

“Hmmp,” said Kate. She supposed Mrs. Baker was looser now, now that Claire was a teenager who wanted trash trendy clothes and Kate herself was ‘differently abled.’ Also, Kate was pretty sure the splotches by the dressing room carpet were urine.

Mrs. Baker’s long fingers gleamed under the cracked yellow lights high in the store rafters. She snipped through the racks of skater skirts and leather dresses. The dress she settled upon was pale robin teal. It had coral flowers and a square laced neckline.

“Beautiful,” said Mrs. Baker. “It would look great on you with your collar bone.”

“You should wear it then.”

“All your dresses are old,” explained Mrs. Baker. “You wear nothing but that tiny black sweatshirt all the time. People are going to think that you’re homeless, if you don’t dress nice in that chair.”

“It’s velvet, if that makes you feel better,” said Kate. “And I don’t like the goddamn dress.”



Mrs. Baker sighed. "Please just try it on."

Kate edged her way out of her wheelchair seat and onto the dressing room floor. With all her might she pushed her wheelchair into Mrs. Baker, who responded with a delayed jump and mild shriek.

"Suck it," said Kate, loud enough for the others to hear. What did it matter, they were all just doting mothers and their skinny-jeaned horse girls. She would never see them again.

"Get back in your chair, Katie," said Mrs. Baker with a wince.

There was so much horrible pity in her voice. As if she thought the chair was a punishment for being rude. How terrible of a person did you have to be to believe that paralysis was karma for being rude?

Mrs. Baker did not go the mall the next week. In fact, this was the last trip the duo would make to the mall for quite some time. Kate's mother would either go to the mall or thrift store with Claire when Claire begged her to go, or not at all. She took to weight lifting and cycling, drinking chunky purple-green juices for dinner. Kate noticed this change after a while and was relieved, in part for Mrs. Baker's health. But when she began to miss getting out of the house, and wondered why Mrs. Baker no longer took her places, it made her head ache.

That summer the Baker's landlord decided he wanted to install balconies on the upper floors of his apartments. Each evening the cold apartment swung open to the humid air of the night balcony overlooking the gas station and the laundromat, moths floating to each burnt light set like long-wrung giraffes keeping watch over the basketball court.

All those moths made Kate remember something, which was that time freshman year she'd seen a luna moth. The luna moth was plastered wet to the fire escape over her dorm's sunroof, its wings silky mint as a budding sprout. But it was hard to tell if it was alive because one of its curled tails was broken. This was three in the afternoon, back on one of the days when Kate had believed Hanover maybe could be a fresh start after all.

"Remember when Mom wouldn't let us play basketball," asked Kate. She could smell Claire's body scent from behind her. Somehow Claire always smelled a bit like cheeseburgers.

"I wish I could be as perfect as Mom is," said Claire.

"Perfection is impossible," said Kate. "Everyone's horrible. Even I'm horrible sometimes."

Kate took out her lighter and the frog lady's pack of cigarettes. She hadn't touched it since the funeral.

"You smoke?!"

"All the time. Want one?"

Claire paused.

"They'll make you skinnier."

Claire took one and coughed. Kate also felt strongly like coughing but masked her symptoms so as not to make a fool of herself in front of Claire.

"You can cough if you want," said Claire.

Kate grunted. "You can stop smoking if you want."

Then she laughed. Everyone was just as paralyzed as she was.

Almost one year had passed since the accident. Nothing much had changed that the Bakers were aware of. Although Kate had mellowed somewhat, they supposed. She had become more docile than she'd ever been since she was a child of smaller proportions.

The causes of this change were debatable. Mrs. Baker suspected Kate's agreeableness was because she had started taking the new vitamins she'd bought her. Claire believed Kate was experiencing melancholy due to her being 'differently abled.'

What Claire had dubbed Kate's 'Dr. Seuss ceramics' lay on the nightstand table by Claire's Virgin. Kate had acquired some rainbow string lights for Christmas, which really added to the tone of the room, in Kate's opinion.

Ever since Grandma died the home phone would ring at the most inconvenient times. Once at midnight, once at five in the morning. And the number was always different. "Must be another telemarketer," Mrs. Baker would say. By the next day several unanswered messages would pop up on the answering machine, each of the messages in a cracked voice.

*"I just want to let all y'all know that I love you very, very much."*

*"Can't wait to see you and your family for Christmas turkey."*

Kate knew who the voice was, but she didn't bother to tell Mrs. Baker. She wouldn't believe it anyways. Or least, she would pretend not to believe her. Maybe the lady was more perceptive than Kate gave her credit for.

The last message the family would receive was before Christmas dinner. When it came no one looked up. Claire kept right on eating.

*“Why won’t you call? Don’t call back.”*

Mrs. Baker had put together a lovely Thanksgiving dinner table, Kate noted, with buttered biscuits and ruby-colored cranberry sauce and tamales and a stuffed fried turkey. A cornucopia of slim evergreen branches lay on the table adorned with fake candied currant sprigs, scarlet candles held in bronze tins from either side of the center. Rainbow Christmas lights jumbled together at the foot of the couch near their crowded breakfast table. This was the table where all meals were served.

For a hot second Kate saw her family at dinner before her in her mind, from back when Grandma was alive and kicking. She had made all of the meals for that dinner, in spite of Mrs. Baker’s protests. Mrs. Baker was a better cook, Kate realized with embarrassment to her grandmother’s memory. If you excluded the turkey’s being burnt.

“You look hungry,” said Mr. Baker. “Eat more.”

“Was going to,” said Kate. Already so much gravy was on her china plate.

Claire was stuffing herself, as usual. And nothing new was to be done about it. She would always be this way. And if that’s what she wanted, then fine. No one Kate could control. So much more she could lose.

It was the first dinner she’d been paralyzed at, and the first dinner since singular digits she’d been half-able to enjoy.

“I love the tamales we get down here in the vayé,” said Claire. “They just seem more real than the ones I had in San Antonio.”

“Literally half of Texas is Hispanic,” said Kate. “Get a grip.” She shifted forward as if to get out of her chair. She wasn’t planning on standing up, but Claire looked at her expectantly, so she had to. There was no choice.

“Don’t fall,” squeaked Mrs. Baker. She was frightened.

“You can help me if I do,” said Kate. Her foot edged forward, then fell numb.

“I just walked for a second,” Kate explained. Mrs. Baker looked physically sick.

“Here, hunny bunches. Let me get your crutches,” said Mrs. Baker. The hallway of their apartment was too narrow for a wheelchair to enter the rooms on either side.

“I said I’m fine.”

Mrs. Baker raised her hands slightly in protest, then continued eating. Her head was bent so far down it looked like she was praying. What would that lady pray about, Kate wondered. Her mother? Purgatory? Peace and harmony on earth and within her homestead? Kate crouched down from her chair and slowly eased herself to the floor. She crawled on her forearms, making note of each crack of tile she passed. The tile was pink-spotted, like someone had spilled juice on it in an orderly fashion. Out of the cracks of each small tile square grew hideous black mold. It didn’t matter how much time Mrs. Baker spent trying to scrub it. It just wouldn’t come out.

I feel like a large ant, thought Kate.

“Quit crawling on your belly like a snake and get some goddamn crutches,” said Mr. Baker.

“Too late,” explained Kate. Mr. Baker probably thought she was fallen.

“Hashtag lit,” said Claire. “Lol.” Lit and lol were Claire’s new favorite phrases.

Like Kate, Claire had undergone her own metamorphoses. Recently, Claire had grown in height, a growth which had favored her width. She had stopped overlining her lips and started over-glossing them instead with lip gloss that caused her cheeks to

break out in hives. Kate could always tell which glasses were Claire's when it was her turn to do the dishes. Claire always left behind a big lip grease stain.

The entire vat of stuffing was all gone. Empty tamale foils and husks lay on the floor.

"Eating yourself sick?" asked Kate.

Claire stared at Kate. Her eyes were dull and blank.

"You should clean yourself up," whispered Kate. Claire kept staring and gnawing. A yellow crust gathered at the corner of her eyes. Claire's body reeked of fish. Her face glistened with an oily sheen in the dim streetlight. Her face was as pallid as if she'd just risen from her grave to whisper her fate into her survived family's ears: *buried alive*.

"Too late," a voice rasped. The voice must have come from Claire's throat, but it couldn't have. The voice was too unlike Claire's own. Claire shuffled a foot towards the refrigerator and squeezed it open slightly, so as to make no noise. She grabbed a hunk of foil and unpeeled it to reveal Mrs. Baker's fried turkey. She took a big bite, chewing and crunching at the golden skin.

"Good luck with that," said Kate. She crawled back to their room on her elbows, her small limp hips pivoting from side to side like the snake she was.

Claire did not get out of bed in the morning. She lay there doing nothing.

"Get up out of bed right now," commanded Mr. Baker.

"Feed me," Claire croaked. Her face was white and rimmed with red. Her stomach rose and fell like a hill underneath the sheets where she lay.

"Feed me, feed me," Mr. Baker mimicked. He slammed the door.

As if pulled by a string, Claire sat up slowly. Time for me to make breakfast, she rasped.

“You talking to me?” asked Kate. She wished she could still use her legs like Claire could to make herself some coffee. Instead she had to ask Mrs. Baker to do it for her. She was always having to ask people to do things for her.

Claire bit a stick of butter and smeared it across her face.

“Oh my God,” said Mrs. Baker. Claire spit in her face.

“Sweetie, give the butter back to your Mom,” said Mrs. Baker. Mr. Baker walked matter-of-factly to the sink and washed his hands.

Claire snorted. She breathed like a cow being led to the slaughter. Butter fell from her hand to the floor.

“Sweetie, sweetie!” cried Mrs. Baker, wringing her hands. “Come, come. Come, sweetie, come,”

“Mmph,” said Claire.

“Would you shut your little trap?” cried Mr. Baker, grabbing Mrs. Baker by her neck.

“Turn around,” said Mr. Baker.

“No,” said Mrs. Baker, shaking.

Claire let out an unearthly screech. She screamed and screamed and screamed and threw butter at the walls. Water began to collect at Kate’s eyes, her heart thudding like a rabbit’s heart. She turned to wheel back into her room, but Claire grabbed the back of her wheelchair.

“We need to talk,” shrieked Claire.

“Good idea, good idea,” cried Mrs. Baker.

“Jerks,” whispered Kate.

“What did you say?” asked Mr. Baker. His face was calm one second, then mad the next. He had always prided himself in his ability to control his feelings. Yanking Kate out of her wheelchair, he threw it through the apartment window. He grabbed Kate by her feet, dragged her into the closet, and locked her from the outside in. She could move her legs now, but barely. They twitched in protest.

“I have lost my daughters,” said Mrs. Baker with a snuffle. She wrung her hands. “My pretty little ones.”

“Shut up,” said Mr. Baker. “Get in the car.”

Kate now sat alone in the Bakers’ apartment. A fat mouse scampered out of a hole in the back of the closet, and Kate clutched it in both of her hands with a squeak. The apartment was empty. Nothing could happen to her now. All was gone. She could no longer feel the ground beneath her. Her legs were not a part of her and might as well be cut off. All they could do was twitch. That was it. She could hear the car dip from underneath the complex and leave, three fourths of the Baker family inside of it. Using a pocket knife she was able to pry the door open. If she tried she could stand, but why try. All trying would remind her of was that she was a bundle of twitches and emotions. If she could run now she would. Never had she ever wanted more to feel her lungs burn. Ashes to ashes. Mrs. Baker would have been proud of her pottery collection. Why hadn’t Kate been the favorite? Even without Kate tensions ran high in the house. She could see that now. She was not the only terrible person to ever exist. But compared to others she was nothing. A frightened rabbit.



This was the fever breaking. All she had wanted was to be a better person than them. That's all she could ask for at this point. Just better. Whatever that meant. No screaming, squirming through life, no wavering between everything matters and nothing matters at all.

Kate would be able to walk someday. But now was not the time to be worried about the control she had over her limbs. Ten hours had passed by now. The apartment slipped into darkness, air ruffling the faded checked curtains which hid the kitchen window from view above the sink. A lump of half-melted butter sat on the floor. Butter lined the walls. She was scared to know what had happened. Hopefully everyone would be fine. Because fine was her only option. Picking herself up, she slid into her butter-greased wheelchair.

Everything would be okay. It would have to be.

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