

MODEL HOME

A NOVEL



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AUTHOR OF SORROWLAND

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For my children, and all children

ONE.

Maybe my mother is God, and that's why nothing I do pleases her.

Maybe my mother is God, and that's why even though she's never once saved me, I keep praying that this time she will.

I'm Chava in the garden, freshly aware of my nakedness. Can't let Mother see what lowly thing I've become.

★ ★ ★

One day soon, I'll be a failed deity, too. My daughter is learning not to believe in me.

Tonight, she can't sleep. She wants me to strap her fourteen-year-old body to my chest with a sling, the way I did when she was a baby. Her need is heavy, like a secret.

"Yoyo?" she calls quietly. "You awake?"

I conjure up a fake snore, but when she turns to leave, I flick on the bedside lamp. At least Mama owned up to her cruelty, would say it straight: I don't want nothing to do with you right now.

"What's up?" I ask Elijah, and she shrugs. "Want some company?" She shrugs again, her hands obscured in the sleeves of her too-big sweatshirt.

My ability to dredge up love from the paltry reserves is one that comes and goes. Let tonight be enough to undo all my sins.

I give Elijah a scalp massage. I warm her up a mug of oat milk steeped with lavender. I run her a bath. I make her a snack. I make her another snack when she doesn't eat the first one because it's too wet, which means I put too much sugar-free blueberry jam on it. If I'd put on less, she might have accused it of being too dry, and once it's too dry, it's impossible to add more jam later, because "that's just wrong." In the end, I make her a bowl of ramen with crispy chopped mushrooms and kimchi.

A mother from shul says I do too much for Elijah, that if I keep coddling her she'll never learn to stand on her own. My mother made me

pack my own lunch from the age of four—and any time I woke in the night to ask her for a cup of water, she'd say, Ezri, you know where the tap is. Teddy bear in tow, I'd army-crawl to the kitchen, low to the ground so the ghost wouldn't find me. She always did.

Despite all the coddling denied me as a child, I never became the independent island of my mother's dreams. I'm a baby bird, chirping for anyone at all to spit food into my mouth.

If I make Elijah too many snacks, it's because food-making is effortless compared to the real task of child-rearing: emotional presence. I don't give my daughter too much because I have nothing to give.

I'm not even her parent, some days. Too many times Elijah has squeezed my shoulder, shaken me, and said, Yoyo, I need some money to get food from the shops. I ignore her, no longer her yoyo in those moments, but instead a vessel of ghosts.

Used to my dissociative episodes, Elijah knows when to reach into my wallet and get my debit card herself.

After midnight, when Elijah still can't sleep, I watch TV with her in her bed. True crime. Something grisly about a dead teenager or several. We both find solace in the inevitability of broken girls. Something to count on.

My youngest sister, Emmanuelle, asks how my daughter and I can stomach such ugliness. I tell her we watch the sensationalized breakdowns of people's lives in the same spirit we do puzzles. By the end, we hope to piece it all together. We cling to the promise inherent in the genre's title, that we will find something true here.

Not that any of these series ever deliver. This isn't because they lack in true things to say but because we already know the true things they have to say. What we are actually hoping for is a different truth, a different answer to the question: Why did he do it? How did the wife not know? Why did the mother allow this? Why weren't they watching more closely? How, in such a crowded café, did no one see, did no one stop this untethering of blood from body?

The answer to all these questions, of course, is that human beings are not very good. I say this not misanthropically but with the realization that we, through apparent dominance over other animals, have crowned ourselves kings, when in reality we are ill equipped to handle the basic

demands of life on this scale. We are forest creatures who've wandered into the man-made road, eyes frozen and wide.

My mother had a print of Jenny Holzer's 1982 *Abuse of Power Comes as No Surprise* on the wall of her study. I comment on it for the first time when I am thirteen, shoulder pressed up against the doorframe.

Abuse of power surprises me every time, actually, I say, full of bravado.

Really? she says, and her reading glasses slip down her nose. She sees through my attempt at teenage indifference, knows my earnest heart.

You telling me you don't know by now to expect pain? says Mama.

I lived in a house devoted to my breaking apart, but I refused to be wrong in front of Mama.

I guess I hope every time it will be different.

I wait for Mama to mock my confession. A woman dedicated to relentless self-reliance, she's built her three children to be invulnerable.

Instead, she returns her attention to her computer screen, types an email, or an editorial letter, or her book. When I go to leave, she calls my name.

Yeah, I say. I mean, yes, ma'am.

Don't forget to take the chicken out the freezer.

TWO.

I haven't heard from my real mother in months, not since an email she sent last October asking to talk, but Nightmare Mother, Ghost Mother—always there in Mama's absence—texts me now. Children, the message reads, I miss your screams. Come play.

Never satisfied bringing ruin once or even twice, Nightmare Mother sends the message several more times. The text bubbles stack one on top of the next like blocks in a toddler's tower.

After vomiting, I upload a screencap of Nightmare Mother's threat to my and my sisters' group chat.

What tf am I looking at, asks Eve.

These texts just got sent to me from Mama's number.

Okay. But Mama didn't send those, says Emmanuelle.

I know.

Neither of my sisters says anything more. I shove my phone into my pocket, and the tiny hole in my joggers becomes a big hole. My sisters and I speak daily—we are close—but it's a closeness that dissolves quickly into loathing on my part.

I run the tap and stick my mouth underneath, gulp down water till I'm half choking. Seconds later, I have to run to the kitchen bin to let the water back out, and with it, a glut of fresh, green bile. It's the same color as the *Goosebumps* logo.

I wish Emmanuelle was dead and I wish Eve was dead. They might as well be if they're not going to answer me.

My phone dings, finally, and I slide it out of my torn pocket, ready to receive whatever comfort, whatever regurgitated worm flesh, my sisters have to feed me in this moment of obvious catastrophe. Their words will be derisory and remind me only that I am alone, but they will provide fuel for my self-pity, which is its own comfort.

But it's not my sisters who make my phone buzz and buzz. I scan the screen to find more Nightmare Mother. She has evolved, become

technologically adept like one of the digital monstrosities in those late-nineties, early-2000s horror films. *Pulse*. *feardotcom*. In a first-season episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Willow's anonymous new chat pal turns out to be a demon.

I was a child on the internet in 1999, so this plot barely feels made up. Willow's internet friend, Malcolm, manifests himself, kidnaps her, and declares his love. A version of this has happened to me at least twice.

Being well versed in the specific tropes of a genre should save me from worry, but knowledge has never saved anyone.

My phone dings and dings and dings again. I turn it si lent, afraid the noise will wake Elijah in this house of tissue-paper walls.

★ ★ ★

I need a cup of tea—something black and smoky to jerk me into action, competency—but I pinch rosehip and hardy hibiscus into a mug instead because that's what's in front of me.

Max, my therapist, once had me make a list of five activities that could ground me when I'm feeling away and unreal, like the world is a film set and I'm the animatronic baby being fake-sung to sleep by a C-list actress, my electronic eyelids clicking, malfunctioning, until one of the film crew sets me to the side and replaces me with a double.

I am bad at homework and wrote only one item out of the assigned five. *Make tea, loose*.

I turn on the kettle, startling at the turbulence of its process. It whirs too loudly for how new it is, like something dead has nested inside and is trying to heave itself out. It wants a proper burial, to go home.

This house lures in animals with a death wish. Last spring, a skylark made her nest in the crawl space beneath the ground floor, where slugs ate her hatchlings. I witnessed the tiny slaughter live when damp-rotted floorboards gave way beneath me and I sank into the under-house den.

It's not so far off, then, to think something dead lives in my kettle. The water that I pour from it has tasted off for months. Metallic, like blood. Every day, minuscule flakes of what could be dried skin appear in my morning brew. Online, they say it's limescale, but I'm not reassured.

I pour water over the leaves and the tea darkens red-purple. Ribbons of steam warm my stirring hand. My spoon clinks against the ceramic. The sour-sweet fragrance of dried buds and flowers slithers inside me.

Moments like this, only ever moments, I pretend I'm in a little cottage in the English countryside. The stove is the hearth. The unfinished concrete floors are stone. The dead, devoured skylarks from last year aren't dead at all, but chickens I raise in the back garden.

My house does not let me linger in this fantasy long. I open the back door to let in some fresh air and the knob half comes off. A light drizzle wets the world outside, and I fear that even this meager shower will do my putrescent shack in.

Eighteen Heathcock Way is sinking, God help her, in that invisible way all things do. Rusted pails catch her leaks, but in the end, nothing will prevent her subsumption into Earth's mud belly. Land is not dirt. It is esophagus, stomach, bowels. A mid-terrace Victorian in bad repair does not fare well on top of the chomping mouth of Leviathan, nor do any of us.

The first time my sister Eve visited here, she clocked the significance of my housing choice right away. Lips tightly drawn, she eyed the peeling wallpaper lining the decayed walls of the vestibule, beneath which lay a different peeling wallpaper.

So. Running away to England wasn't enough. You had to disavow all Mama and Pop's bullshit, Eve said. She looked impeccable, her Afro-textured hair slicked into a top bun that, despite the English weather, had not managed to frizz at the edges.

Though she's technically younger than me as the middle-born child, Eve slid into the role of wise, bossy eldest years ago when it became clear I could not do the part justice.

I get it, Ezri. Fuck Mama. Fuck Pop. Fuck the Oak Creek Estates. Fuck gated communities. Fuck bullshit elitist private schools. Fuck capitalism. But here? This isn't cute. You're going to get asbestos. You're gonna die of pneumonia like Brittany Murphy, God rest her.

Eighteen Heathcock Way is the opposite in every way from the house my sisters and I grew up in. Narrow, wet, rotting, and old, 18 flaunted its failings. The palatial suburban new-build of my youth had been a rotting thing, too, only it was a rot no one but my family was ever allowed to see.

The tangible failures of 18 are a relief compared to my childhood home's invisible tyrannies. Mold blackens her walls, fixtures, and tiles. Mice nibble at her wiring. Nothing like the cursed McMansion my sisters and I fled.

Mama and Pop have a brand. That brand is Black Excellence. It's the Talented Tenth. It is perfectly coiffed kids in a giant house no cracker ever thought a family "like this" could afford. Perfect lawn. Perfect children.

There is nothing Black or excellent about 18 Heathcock Way. Poor Mama and her disappointed dreams. To think of her eldest wunderkind jobless, sick, genderbroken, surviving off disability benefits, and living *here* of all places. My God, what would the neighbors think?

Upstairs, a door slams—the wind, I'm sure. In this house, it's always the wind, but my phone jolts at the same time in a way that feels cosmic, the past reaching out to me to say you can take the faggot out the house but this house has legs and will find you.

I pick up my phone and read the new message, this time from Eve. You need to come home, she says. We've booked you a flight for tomorrow.

THREE.

Mother is God, I'm her whim made from clay. Mother is God, I'm Earth's broken rib. Over and over again, she says: Child, this is paradise. I say, Mother, I've never heard of a paradise with a talking serpent, nor one where I must daily encounter food I'm forbidden to eat. I may be newly made, but even I know apples are to be consumed. They're on the list of WeightWatchers foods worth one point.

It's 9:00 p.m. Today I've eaten a bowl of Special K with skim milk and nothing else. I could devour fifteen apples before midnight and still burn away my body.

Mother. Mother. I promise I am learning. I am learning not to eat. I am learning to become a sliver.

★ ★ ★

When my sisters and I were children, our games of hide-and-seek could last hours. Once, Eve lost me for the space of a day. When she found me in the attic, a room I couldn't have entered on my own—I was too short to reach the pull string that opened the hatch in the ceiling—she knew not to ask how I found my way up there. I would say, I just did. Or, I don't know. Or, the woman without a face reached her arm down and pulled me up, up, up, like I was a weed being plucked from her otherwise perfect garden.

Or: I didn't hide in the attic at all. I hid in the closet by the front door, but then I was in the attic anyway, inside a suitcase, and I awoke screaming, and then you finally came for me.

Mother is God and our house, our strange house, is the Garden, big and teeming with things that I've been tasked with naming but cannot. There are words for walls and tiles and banisters but not words for what it means when walls, tiles, and banisters savor the taste of your collapse.

The world unfolds according to a logic most strange when you're a child, and it wouldn't do any good to try to parse it. If a house has claws, a

house has claws. This is another fact in your database of facts: oatmeal is sticky and worms are the same pink-gray color of Grandmother's tongue and winged insects fly unless you clap one between your palms as hard as you can and then it's still, still as a girlboy under xer blankets hiding from the figure watching in xer room.



At Saturday's WeightWatchers meeting, we discuss the importance of understanding the root of our weight-loss goals. It's not enough to want to disappear; one needs a good reason for wanting to disappear. At eleven years old, I write that I need to be a sliver because slivers fit between cracks and if I could fit inside a crack, troubles would never find me.

People love slivers. If a sliver were to happen in a life that looked like mine, that life would change its ways for the itty-bitty sliver. It would look at the sliver and think, my Lord, what a beautiful sliver. What a charming, funny, smart sliver! Something about this sliver is just! Irresistible! Nothing like that other child, that non-sliver child.

The mothers of slivers aren't always sighing, always wondering, What to do, what to do, what to do.

A sliver is so small and so convenient that it is no trouble to carry it with you everywhere you go. No one need ever set the sliver down to relieve the burden of carrying it, and then, while rushing off to the next thing, forget to pick it back up.

When I was six, I lay down for a nap on the couch and woke up inside the oven. Mother is God. I'm Sodom and Gomorrah. No ounce of good left in me. Run.

FOUR.

I return home because it's the siblingly thing to do. This is how I manage in a crisis. I refer to abstract models of good people in my head and do what they'd do. I become these people. Sometimes these people become me. When I'm no longer fit for purpose, they say, Shhh, Ezri, go to sleep, then live my life for me.

Good Sibling is not a part I take on willingly, but I've been backed into a corner by my sisters. Out of duty, I hush the outcry from the most tender parts of me who would rather drink lye than go to Mama and Pop's house, to Nightmare Mother's house.

Another faction, less savory, roves my insides, too. Desper ate husks, they run toward ghosts, not away, creeping from their crevices in the night for a chance to be with Nightmare Mother. If I could, I'd hang every one, snap their necks with rope. I have tried.

Elijah and I don't have long before we need to leave for the airport. I take out the rubbish and wash the dishes. I empty the leak buckets and return them to their places. There are clothes moldering in the laundry machine, way past saving, so I bin them. Next comes emptying the fridge of perishables, half of them already gone to rot.

These chores have needed doing for weeks, and now I do them with ease. I whistle while I work. I sing "Heigh-Ho" from *Snow White*. This Ezri, joyful to do and to make and to work, is so different from the Ezri who can't answer their daughter when she asks for money for food.

How pleasing it is when I can become this best self. They're nothing like the usual me, who spends the better portion of a week hardly leaving bed, only pulling themselves together just as Elijah arrives home from school.

Until. After a string of bad weeks, I open the windows, do a load of laundry, take the dishes downstairs to the kitchen. I hum. I speak in a voice that I don't realize is different—higher pitched, almost babyish—until someone points it out, usually Eve. Why the fuck are you talking like that?

I'll have an hour, two hours, sometimes even three, of cheery productivity, before this version of me, flighty and unrealized, leaves me again.

Every day, everyone is a hundred different people: who they are when they are alone and feeling fuckable, who they are when they are alone and feeling unfuckable, who they are when they are grief wrecked, when they are joy smacked.

There's the sobbing woman who pulls herself together for her husband, her children. She sinks like an anvil into the part, until she is the part. The other hers disappear, phased-out software.

No version of me ever gets phased out. My selves are ghosts, clinging to me with their unfinished business. The me who's always tidying—who harvested and dried and jarred the herbs that I use for my tea—is called Elspeth.

When the house is more or less clean, I rummage through the cupboard under the stairs and pull out a canvas backpack. There's room for three shirts, one pair of trousers, some underwear and socks, trainers, and three books.

"You ready?" I ask my daughter.

"I don't even know what I need to be ready for."

"I don't know, either." I told Elijah there was trouble at home, that Eve and Emmanuelle needed me back, but even if they hadn't, I would've gone.

I am at Nightmare Mother's beck and call.

★ ★ ★

Elijah and I have a row of five seats to ourselves in the middle section of the plane, but she sits right next to me, raises the armrest between us so our hips touch and our fat rolls join. Her locs, each one the thickness of a finger, are bound into a large elastic, and the bundle falls onto my shoulders.

The flight attendant brings us our rectangular tray of scalding-hot food. It's disgusting. It's delicious. I devour it like a last meal, the way I do all airplane food.

My phone buzzes in the seatback pocket. I paid for in-flight Wi-Fi specifically to be reachable, and now I have to live with it.

Eve messages me her admin concerns: whether I remembered to get travel health insurance for Elijah and me, whether we still keep vaguely kosher, whether there are any new dietary restrictions she needs to know about, whether Elijah will be okay to sleep on the sofa just for tonight because the air mattress has a hole, whether I've arranged transport to Mama and Pop's house, whether I'm really okay to go back there alone after all these years because if not she can hire someone on TaskRabbit to go with me.

There's one text from my youngest sister, Emmanuelle, letting me know she'll meet Elijah and me at the airport, and no messages from Pop when I check, even though I've sent him six since last night.

I lick my lips but not from nervousness. The plane air has dried my body into dead plant matter. Someone could steep me and make tea. A scant store of spit is the last holdout against total dehydration, and I deplete the dregs of it to uncrack the skin of my lips. I taste blood.

"You okay?" asks Elijah. Dressed in Docs, bike shorts, and an oversized Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles T-shirt that used to be mine, she looks like the ghost of eighth-grade me. Circa 2000, I wore a similar outfit, and twenty years before that, my mother did, too—all-black Chucks and an Uncanny X-Men tee, which she'd stolen from her brother's dresser after he killed himself in 1979.

Half white, Elijah is lighter than me, but all her other features were mine first, and before that, features of my mother, my grandmother. Our family line is one of arrow-eyed, fat-cheeked twins, and despite the obvious differences in photography tech separating the quality of our childhood pictures, people still confuse which of us is which in photo albums.

Your phone sounds like a deranged vibrator. Who's texting you? asks Elijah.

You know how Eve gets, I say.

Is she worried? Should I be worried?

I tell her no, but she knows better. I wonder which of my lies she'll remember, which she'll cry about to her therapist, a decade or two from now.

After landing, after immigration, after the toilet, I leave the interstitial domain that is airport as portal and enter the do main that is airport as return home. In front of me, finally, is my baby sister. When I see her, I wish to be a fetus in her womb. I hasten my walk so we can touch. I need her skin.

“Missed you so much, sib,” she says, and squeezes me. I’m a dead fly wrapped in a silk cocoon of Emmanuelle’s making. Please, God, let her eat me up.

She kisses my cheeks, then we rest our foreheads against each other, her fingers on my scalp, scratching softly with her nails. Involuntarily, I groan, purr. “You been okay? You taking care of yourself?” she asks, the both of us still forehead to forehead.

I grunt.

“You look good.”

“That’s a lie.”

“You know I do not lie,” she says, taking my cheeks in her palms. “You are beautiful, handsome, strange, ethereal, professorial, dark, an ocean. Rugged, dangerous.”

“Stop,” I say.

“I will not stop,” she says. “You’re the ancestors’ greatest dreams realized.”

Mama always said that to us growing up. Once, I replied, Mama, did the ancestors really dream of me? Didn’t they have dreams for their own lives?

Mama looked at me like I was dumb, said: Their dreams for themselves were their dreams for you, because we’re all connected.

“Mama,” I say out loud, not with longing, or resolution, but with—and it takes me a moment to pin down the sensation—clinical memory. She is why I am here. Her phone. The messages from not-her.

Emmanuelle sucks in a breath, pulling herself into shape, but I already see her seams strain against velvety rolls of adipose emotion. She dabs at the tears collecting in the corners of her eyes with the knuckle of her index finger. “She’s not gone. I can feel her,” Emmanuelle says. “You just have to go and find her. Okay? I know she’s here.”

Emmanuelle’s intuition about Mama’s aliveness means nothing to me. Still, I nod perfunctorily. I’ve found no other peaceful way of dealing with her particular brand of spirituality.

She thinks the ghosts I have inside of me are objective, material phenomena. They're ancestors, she says, trying to help. Given our childhood home, I can't blame her for her belief in haints, curses, juju, hoodoo. These things are no more made up than my host of diagnoses—which change with whatever clinician I see. BPD (borderline personality disorder), OSDD (other specified dissociative disorder), NPD (narcissistic personality disorder), C(omplex)-PTSD, and GAD (generalized anxiety disorder). All those letters, but they spell only one thing: *hole*. That word gets to the muscle and bone of it. I am something no one wants to fall down.

"Do you feel her?" Emmanuelle asks me.

"Always," I say, because it's both an answer that will placate her and an answer that's true.

After she's done with me, Emmanuelle turns her attention to Elijah. "Bring it in, niecey," she says. Similarly plump and made of curves, they share an even stronger likeness than Elijah and I do.

Emmanuelle takes a selfie of the both of them. "You're not going to post that, are you?" asks Elijah. "I don't want my debut to your three hundred thousand followers to be after I just got off a ten-hour flight."

"Of course not. Never without your permission." Emmanuelle examines the photo she's taken with approval. She's dressed in a black cowboy hat, black cowboy boots, and a short black bodycon dress, a leather belt with a large scorpion buckle around her waist. "I might get it printed out. Frame it. We look good, don't we, Elijah?"

Elijah looks baffled to be considered in a *we* that looks good. Emmanuelle is made up like a model. Standing next to her leaves anyone feeling inadequate.

"I got you both smoothies," says Emmanuelle. "Ginger. Ashwagandha. Carrot juice." I take her offering and slurp it down thankfully. It wakes me up after a sleepless night. It's the most nutritive substance I've consumed in a week.

"Thank you, needed that."

Elijah waits until we're in the car to drink hers so that she can dig out her insulin from her bag. She's responsible, sensible. Sometimes I think this is enough to make her turn out okay. The kids who grow up fine do so because of us, or despite us.

That's what I see when I look at my baby sister. It takes a few millimeters of digging beneath the surface to find she's an emotional clusterfuck, but she's functioning—something I've only ever aspired to. That's my dream for Elijah.

"So, the plan is to head to Eve's. She's at the twins' dress rehearsal right now but she left the key in the usual spot. I haven't been out this car since I left Houston, so I'll unpack, unwind, chill with you, Elijah. And Ezri-my-love, you will get a car to Mama and Pop's. Okay?"

She tries to say all of this casually, but her sips of water are too frequent and she sits stiffly.

"You sure you don't want to go with me?" I ask, even though of course she doesn't. The impulse driving the question is an urge to punish. I want to put her in her place, call attention to her cowardice, her weakness, for abandoning me. Any sweetness I have for her or anyone cannot last, can't be depended on.

"I'm going to help Elijah get settled in," says Emmanuelle as she clicks on a podcast.

"Are you going to be all right alone with Aunty?" I ask Elijah. She gazes out the window, taking in the metroplex.

"Yes," says Elijah. "What about you? Are you going to be all right, Yoyo?" she asks.

"Everything will be much clearer in a couple of hours," I say, though I long to tell her no, reveal the full shape of the calamity we've all been born into.

FIVE.

My driver pulls up to the booth by the entry gates of the Oak Creek Estates and rolls down the window. "Code, please," says the security guard. The driver looks back at me expectantly.

"I don't have the code," I say, poking my head between the two front seats to speak to the guard. I was hoping he'd be someone I recognized, Tom or Horace, but I've never seen this guy before. It's been eighteen years.

I'm sure he's as useless as his predecessors. What's the point of a job like this? To keep the bad people out? Every guard will fail at that because the bad people are already inside. This is their fort.

"My parents live here. I should be a registered visitor. I have my ID," I say.

"Name?" asks the security guard.

"Ezri. Ezri Washington Maxwell."

"I don't see you on here," he says. The visitors list is updated regularly for safety. My mother must've stopped putting my or my sisters' names on it when it became clear we were never coming back. "You could try calling them," the security guard offers.

"I've been calling them. They aren't picking up. That's why I'm here. I'm worried."

The guard's caught between not wanting to break the rules and not giving a shit about who comes and goes. "Their names are Eudora Washington and Edward Maxwell. At 677 Acacia Drive." I even think about showing him the texts from Nightmare Mother. *Look, Mr. Guard Man, the ghost of 677 misses my screams.*

"All right," he says eventually, but takes a photo of my ID. The wrought iron gates crawl open with a pronounced whine.

The driver, his name is Jason, I think, pulls forward. "Damn," he says. "This where you grew up?"

"Yeah."

“Shit.”

“Yeah.”

He pulls onto Acacia and then to the curb. “You want me to stick around?” he asks. “In case something’s wrong? Or were you just saying that stuff about your folks to get in?”

“I was telling the truth.”

In my years away, the small trees have grown into abundance. They cast shade where once the glare of the sun heated the concrete so hot you could fry earthworms.

“You should go,” I say to the driver, overwhelmed with desire to save him from proximity to my childhood home.

I stare up at 677, a kid again. The only difference between now and then is that my keys are no longer on a lanyard hung around my neck.

A woman and a leashed dog run in the street. She has on a visor and a sports bra, short shorts. Her ponytail bounces with each stride. Instinctively, I wait for her to call out to me, to say, Hi, Ezri, with false joviality. She doesn’t, because she’s too young to be any of the adult neighbors I grew up with.

To the left of 677 is a tall, rectangular stucco house. A gardener goes at a bush with some clippers. I take a look at his large pickup truck, parked out front, see a name and phone number emblazoned there. *Grant and Sons*. Their number hasn’t changed since I was a kid. Grant and Sons are on the recommended list of workers the HOA provided. They mowed, landscaped, did Christmas lights, cleaned private pools.

This is how we make sure everything’s aboveboard. No illegals. That’s what our neighbor Mike would say when he explained the list to newcomers to the Oak Creek Estates.

Once, my dad asked if the whole concept of the list wasn’t a conflict of interest, since most of the businesses on it belonged to people in the Estates or their family members. Grant of Grant and Sons was Mike’s brother.

Mike had laughed at the question, and Dad, ever good-natured, smiled. He was a sports fan, an occasional card player. Knew games. Knew when to call or fold. With white people, you always fold.

I wonder if Mike’s still here, three houses down from ours. The neighborhood kids used to play ding dong ditch at his place because the riskiness of it made it feel like playing extreme sports. The path from his

door to the street was long, and his lawn was flat and unadorned—no bushes to hide behind.

A couple of kids started a lawn-mowing business once. My mother brought it to the HOA. None of these kids were on the official recommended list, which had over time been codified into a binding part of the rules and regulations—after my mother and father had chosen outsiders a few times.

My mother's complaint against the enterprising neighborhood kids was seen as unnecessarily combative by everyone in the Oak Creek Estates. My mama, the joy destroyer. Killer of kids' entrepreneurial spirits.

She'd never say so, not to me or to anyone, but it hurt her. Not that people saw her this way, but because she couldn't make good sense of their rules. How was it that none of them were considered cruel for making these ridiculous, arbitrary rules in the first place, but *she* was cruel for taking said rules to their conclusion to point out the hypocrisy of it all?

Mother forgot her own advice. She'd told me that white supremacy operates under a logic in which everything whiteness does can be rationalized as good, and everything Blackness does can be rationalized as preternaturally evil.

These were her words when I came home crying a few days after Columbine, one of my classmates telling me that if he had a kill list, I'd be on it because I was Black. I said he sounded like he was in the Ku Klux Klan, which got me in trouble with our teacher for defaming the other kid's character.

Mama opted to provide facts over comfort, theory over sentiment.

After everything that's happened to me in this place, I don't know why it's the memory of that teacher that brings tears. I blink my eyes hard and suck the water back into my body. If somehow Mama is inside, I don't want to greet her crying. Don't want to return to her weaker than when I left her.

I walk up the driveway, ring the doorbell even though I don't expect an answer. After fifteen seconds, I ring again. There's still no answer, so I jam the key into the lock, twist it, startle at the click because it feels like it shouldn't work, not after so much time.

The foyer greets me coolly, the AC on at its usual sixty-five degrees Fahrenheit. I shiver and swallow back a trickle of throw-up.

"Mama? Pop?"

Mama is here—if not in the house, in me. I feel her in the way that right now, stomach growling, I am sickened by my desire to eat: a vestige of her constant dieting, alive within me.

She's present in my shoes sprawled on the floor, which I seconds ago kicked off. In her voice that has become my voice, I chasten myself: What's wrong with you? How is it possible for a person to be this lazy? How many times do you have to be told something for it to stick in that nappy-ass head of yours? Hang up that goddamn jacket. And were you really outside playing with your little white friends dressed like that, ashy as a fireplace? No child of mine is going to roam these streets looking like they just got emancipated. It's not 1865. Have you seen where we are? Seen this house? Baby, I will never understand why you insist on looking like an urchin ghetto rat when you've never known that life and, thanks to me, never will.

How cruel that our parents, unexorcisable, go on inside of us. How cruel that we cannot disimbricate their ghosts from our being.

"Mama? Pop?" I call out again. There is no smell of death, no puddles of blood. "Mama? Are you here? It's Ezri." Stupidly, I add on, "I'm back."

They're not downstairs. Not in Mama's study or Pop's office. Not in the garage or the laundry room. Not in the media room. Not in the garden room.

Upstairs, I check Emmanuelle's old bedroom, then Eve's, then Mama and Pop's. The guest rooms. When I reach my room, I give it a knock. I crack open the door and peek inside, shut it again quickly when there's no immediate sign of them. If Nightmare Mother is anywhere, this is where she'd be, at the foot of my bed, her hands open to me like the jaws of a bear trap.

"Mama? Daddy?"

I head to the kitchen. Desperately, like when you start looking for your keys or your wallet in the toilet or under a rug or in a plant pot because you've run out of the places that make sense, I check the fridge, like there could be a clue there. Maybe it will be empty, and I'll know they've cleared it out ahead of a trip, or maybe next to the butter I'll see their decapitated heads.

Inside, neatly stacked, are labeled boxes of leftovers. Ribs, macaroni, green beans, curry roasted cauli. Dad's favorite meal.

It was their anniversary yesterday.

There's corn bread in a cast-iron skillet on the six-burner gas range, top covered with a piece of foil. A last meal before a vacation? Pop threw Mama a surprise, and they'd had to go right away, leaving Mama no time to fastidiously clean? His love for her came like that, in grand gestures, a way to make up for his absence in the everyday.

Six seventy-seven—tidy, blank, ordinary—is decidedly absent traces of malevolence. The smells are the smells of my family, of my mother. Plants and dried flowers. Brownd butter. Roasting potatoes. Lemon disinfectant.

Maybe the texts are a prank. Maybe Mama got hacked. Maybe she's in Barbados and forgot her phone at home. Someone broke in, stole it, and is having a little fun. When they saw my parents were leaving for a trip, they decided this would be good payback for a childhood grievance they had with me. It was accepted fact that my sisters and I spoke about ghosts in our house. I assumed the texts were from Nightmare Mother but they could as easily have been from a generic ghost invented by an old enemy. This house has always been a hotbed of intruders my family and I could never quite locate, prove were real.

Six seventy-seven, vindicated. Six seventy-seven, innocent after all. Surrounded by a house that is nothing but a house, I am embarrassed by my childish fear that mistakenly painted her into something violent. Was it me all along, deluded and deranged, who made her something sinister? Is it me who haunts, me who is the ghost? This, I've never denied. A kid as fucked up as I was could make no claim to blamelessness. People saw me and smelled the malformity. Saw through to the very bad girl. I cannot say everything, cannot say the whole truth, cannot confess every little sin. To look yourself in the eye and face up to what you've done—it is not a task you can survive, not when you have done the things I have done.

Me, I am always playing hide-and-seek with my own damn self.

Last night I called my aunts, uncles, and cousins to see if they'd heard from Mama and Pop, but I only tried everyone once. I'll do it again now. Grandpa Hank and Granny O. Madear and Big Pop Pop. Someone will know where my parents are.

I relax and fix myself a plate, hungry for real food. While it heats in the microwave, I lean my elbows on the counter, like I did so many hundreds of times as a child.

The microwave dings and I get my food, head out to the back patio to eat it in the warm Texas sun, something I always forget I miss. When I left England, the sky was gray and hocking loogies.

I open the French double doors that lead out to the back. I take a step down and inhale the delicious air, fragrant with sawdust from a nearby construction site and someone grilling Nathan's franks.

Then I see Daddy.

There's a crash—my plate, I think, smashing against the concrete. I see Daddy. I see him stiff. I see him gray. I see him dead-eyed.

"Pop?" I say, trembling, barreling toward him. I am seven years old. I'm Simba. *Wake up! Wake up!*

I press my thumb over his eyelids to force his eyes shut. They don't go down. They stare at me. They resist. They get stuck halfway down, then pop back open. "Where's Mama?" I ask him. "Where is she?"

I run to the pool shed, but it's empty.

"Mama, where are you?"

I scan the backyard for any sign of her, see a shadow in the pool. I dive in and swim down, down. Even through the blur of water, even though my eyes sting with chlorine, I see it's her. "Mama," I call out, my voice distorted and broken by the pool.

When I can no longer hold my breath, I swim back to the surface. I hear birds tweeting and lawns being mowed, a motorboat sputtering in the man-made lake enclosed in our community, all punctuated by my gasps for air.

SIX.

Mama and Pop were the last family of the original set to buy a house in the Oak Creek Estates, a sprawling development of McMansions in Dallas's far-north suburbs. My parents had spent the last five years in New York City and had hoped to raise cool city children who took the subway to get to school, but 220K, which was their budget, didn't go far there.

No, sirree, my father said when he told the story. It was a choice between a modest two-bedroom, one-bathroom fifth-floor walkup or a six-bedroom, four-bathroom house with back and front yards—and closer to our people.

The idea of being the only Black family in the Oak Creek Estates didn't frighten them. Mama and Pop had a sense of humor. It would be like a costume party. Dad would convert from wearing Knicks jerseys to wearing pastel polos. Mom would embrace the ivory pantsuit and go to horse races and rodeos, and her kids would go to private schools named after deplorable white men. I was four at the time and she'd planned to enroll me in one of the metroplex's most prestigious kindergartens.

You know, you guys got in here just in time, said the estate agent. Another family was about to put in an offer, but they were hesitant because of some of the details of the property—you know, little things, certainly nothing to worry about, mostly stemming from the fact that it was used as the model home for the neighborhood and is a little more lived in as a result. You were right to be decisive and just go for it. When you see something you want, get it. Why ask questions, you know? That's what I always say. You two are my kind of people.

A few months later, when my parents moved in, their dream began. They'd paid cleaners to come before the official move-in date so it would be spotless on their arrival, and it was.

What did they see when they walked in? What did I see, four years old and only ever having known one home?

Space.

Compared to the one-bedroom apartment we'd been living in in Brooklyn—where, after Eve was born, I slept in the large closet Mama had made up into a room for me—677 Acacia Drive felt like breathing after a bout of pneumonia.

That first night, Mama and Pop ordered pizza for dinner, like back when they were in school together. Damn, baby, what about plates? said Mama.

Let's just eat out the box.

Eve and I were already sleeping, she in the crib in her nursery and me in a sleeping bag in my new bedroom, but I can imagine the eye roll Mama must've given Pop to have suggested eating out of the box.

It's our first night. We're eating on some real goddamn plates. And drinking from real wineglasses, too. Don't ever mention a plastic red cup to me again.

All right, Weezy, said Pop, because, like the Jeffersons, they had moved up, gotten a piece of the pie.

George and Louise could afford Manhattan, Mama said.

Mm, said Pop. Puts the rise in real estate prices in perspective. But this is better anyway. You got family here. Dallas and Fort Worth are great cities to be so near. A short drive to your people in Arkansas.

Pop tracked down the boxes with the dishes and unpacked them, grabbing two plates and two wineglasses. It's time for the first decision: Which is the plate cabinet and which is the wineglass cabinet?

Mama made a big to-do about the pros and cons of the layout, finally pointing at the far-left cabinet in the massive open kitchen for plates.

Shall I do the honors, or you? asked Pop.

Are you kidding? This is my kitchen. She took the stack of plates from Pop and carried them to their new home. This is when the doorbell rang, which woke Eve. Her sobs woke me, and I bolted downstairs toward Mama and Pop, crashing into my father's chest.

He carried me against his hip to the front door, where we were greeted by our first new neighbor, Laurie Mackleson.

I'm sorry to disturb you. I just noticed your moving truck today and wanted to come over, say hi, especially to this little one.

Mama joined once Eve was back down. I'm Eudora, she said. So good to meet you.

Eudora. That's beautiful. Is it African?

It's Greek, I said. She was a water nymph.

Ohhh, of course. Aren't you a smarty-pants. And so articulate. I've got a little present just for you. I hope you don't mind. Here.

She handed me a boxed Barbie, and in her defense, it was a Black one.

Mama? I asked. I wasn't allowed to keep gifts like that. Barbies weren't feminist, even though I loved them, the way their limbs moved, the way their parts could be popped off and on.

Mama didn't answer me, just nodded thank you to Laurie.

I bought petits fours from a nearby bakery called Madelief's. Just my way of saying welcome to the Estates. They're from all of us on the board of the homeowners' association.

Oh, how perfect, thank you. I've heard of this place. You really didn't have to, said Mama.

Uh, puh-lease. What are neighbors for? Y'all moved from New York City, is that right? An apartment?

I have no memory of this, but whenever Mama retold this story, she noted how impossible it would be to describe the level of disdain Laurie imbued into the word *apartment*.

Yes, Brooklyn, to be precise, said my mama.

Well, this is certainly a change of pace, isn't it? I think you'll find life here to be really safe, really calm, great for raising kids.

Laurie looked at me with a gentle smile. I love your braids, she said, then reached out to touch them. Mama stopped her.

They're actually twists. And he doesn't like to be touched.

But I wouldn't have minded in that moment if Laurie had touched me. I found her sweetness alluring. Mama had none of that. All business and discipline and honoring the ancestors by achieving as many dreams as possible.

He? asked Laurie.

I am in boy pajamas, faded light blue cotton shorts and a tank top with a print of great white sharks, but my hair, in twists, hangs down to my shoulders and my lashes are long.

Even my chub gives the slightest suggestion of what could be curves, the beginning mosquito bites of breasts.

For today, said Mama obliquely, not prepared. She hadn't had time yet to make up a story about who I was, to explain the way my gender shifted

and changed. Gifted, she wasn't used to confronting things she didn't understand.

He's beautiful, said Laurie.

Thank you so much for stopping by, but we were actually just about to sit down for dinner. These petits fours will make a great dessert.

Of course, said Laurie. Please let me know if you need anything. And again, welcome to the neighborhood, and to your beautiful new home. It truly is stunning. I don't know if you know this, but my husband and I were going to put an offer in on this place, too, but in the end, we decided it was just a little too much for us, you know? So we went with something a little more modest down on Creek Lane.

Feeling petty, Mama said, Oh, really? That must've been more affordable.

This level of hostility was likely not warranted, as it was long before any real rivalry between her and Laurie began. In years to come, Laurie, HOA queen, visited our house frequently to drop off notices related to my parents' violations of the HOA agreement they'd signed. One rule forbade ostentatious cars parked in the front driveway. Dark and neutral-colored BMWs, Mercedes, Bentleys, Range Rovers, and Audis were acceptable, as long as they didn't have flamboyant rims. They considered Dad's white Porsche with a custom-painted black race stripe a transgression.

There were also the pennants once staked in the lawn announcing my father's alumnus status at Howard. Only American and Texan flags were allowed on front lawns, as well as pennants and banners from a preapproved list of colleges: the Ivies, a selection of the Little Ivies, Stanford, any Texas state schools, Oberlin (the Reynoldses campaigned for its inclusion), Rice, Emory, Vanderbilt, and Duke. For a brief period Notre Dame had been allowed, but after the Colsons left, the HOA decided it was too Catholic and too French. Everyone always hated that the Colsons had pronounced "Notre Dame" like the cathedral.

Mama regarded Laurie as the enemy from the beginning, said to me, Stay away from her, you hear me, Ez? Of course, I did not listen. All our neighbors became adversaries, as hostile to us as the house we lived in.

SEVEN.

Mother has left the curtains open, their velvet middles cinched with silk-rope ties. The bound silhouettes give the impression of two women in dresses, two women in dresses who've been hanged. Limp, they regard each other from across an eight-foot divide.

"We're going to eventually need to get individual statements, but right now I just want to get the shape of things. We can always go back to the station if you prefer. I know this is a lot," says the detective to my sisters and me.

"A police station's the one place in the world less safe than this house," I say, making myself mean, biting, big, curious to see how a half degenerate half pit bull fares in a dogfight.

The detective shifts in his seat across from us. "Would you say that's generally true, that this house is unsafe?" he asks, ignoring the anti-cop jibe, turning it back on me. "Did your parents ever hurt you?" He says this gently but with a trace of gruffness in his voice so we know his job is to solve crimes, not be a shoulder to cry on.

I try to remember if I've met him before. My sisters and I—especially me and Eve—have dealt with detectives before. A house like ours gives scars, and people ask about them.

"No," I say. "They never hurt us." It's not true, but it's true the way the cop is asking it. They never laid hands. Never laid hands hard.

"Okay," he says, unsure he believes me. His name is Detective Ben Harvey, and he's that mix of fat, tall, and ripped that brings to mind a retired Viking. Dressed casually in a forest-green T-shirt, dark-wash blue jeans, and brown lace-up boots, he'd been off duty before he was called here.

I want to fuck him. I always want to fuck people who aren't immediately available to me.

Forties, white, and Texan, Detective Harvey is married, for sure. A father, a Little League coach. But in the fantasy unfolding in my head right now, he gives it all up for one messy, desperate night with me, against a

wall, him saying, fuck, fuck, fuck, hating himself, knowing he shouldn't but finding my allure irresistible. When his wife finds out—and in the fantasy she does find out because the sex will have been good enough to disorient him—he'll show up like a sorry sinner to my door, begging for my love, but I'll be long gone because I'm not interested in people once the spark of newness has faded. Maybe if he says something violent like wanting to kill me, the novelty will be restored and I'll go for it. Something interesting enough to brace me inside my body. People like me, people who are nothing, people who are empty shells, balloons—any old thing can carry us away. It takes a forceful hand to pull us back to earth.

“And would you two agree?” Detective Harvey asks my sisters with a look of concern. “Did your folks have a temper?”

“No,” say Emmanuelle and Eve in unison. “And that's not us trying to protect them,” Eve carries on. “We've been estranged for years. There's no love lost between us. But not because of anything like that.”

My sisters and I know what it looks like—Pop dead in the lounge, Mama weighted with bricks at the bottom of the pool. The investigators sweeping the house whisper *murder-suicide*.

The bricks that Mama used to sink herself were from the path Dad had been paving through the raised beds going on six months now. It's difficult to believe my mother would kill my father and then herself over an unfinished garden project, but the symbolism of the bricks dragging her to her underwater death seems apparent.

She always had words about Pop starting but not finishing things. She'd wanted to hire a landscaper. She wanted it done right. So much awfulness and pain had happened here, couldn't she have one nice thing? The garden of her dreams? Couldn't she salvage that blessing from the wreckage of her broken-apart family? But no, no, no, Edward wanted to be Mr. Frugal. Well, it was a real Jekyll/Hyde-type situation. Mr. Frugal came out to play only some of the time, when it was something Eudora wanted. Where was Mr. Frugal when Edward wanted a home theater with a 292-inch TV that cost more than some very well-off people make in a year? Over a hundred thousand dollars for a television? Come now. But the truth was, it was a very beautiful TV, so of course Eudora said yes. But then why couldn't she also have professional landscapers? She didn't make it out of the hood and into the Oak Creek Estates to have her husband do her landscaping.

She told me all this herself on the phone. That was the only way we ever spoke, on her birthday or mine.

Mama and Pop were retired, enjoying their old age as far as I could tell from our infrequent conversations. Mama rarely talked about the house, instead discussing her array of projects. Writing, volunteering to help poor kids from the hood learn to read, doing some work at a pop-up Dallas Black history museum. It made me seethe, hang up the phone, to know her life was going on as normal without her children—like we'd never been born, like the house never touched her the way it touched us.

My parents were living a life of leisure, though I still cannot fathom it, their choice to stay. Violence aside, the sheer size of 677 looked to me more like burden than pleasure.

The bigness of 677 Acacia Drive can unsteady you, make you feel like Hansel and Gretel in that unknowable wood. I hated growing up in a house where, if something happened on the other side of it, and you heard, no matter how fast you ran, all evidence of its occurrence could be erased by the time you made it there. Six seventy-seven would've been a burglar's paradise. Intruders we had—they just didn't steal. They were fixtures of our home. Part of the furniture.

Even now, as an adult, I'm reduced by 677's grandeur. I sit on the sofa between my younger sisters, wondering, if I walked out back right now, would the bodies still be there by the time I arrived, or would the house have squirreled them away into one of her infinite secret cubbies? We would wonder if we imagined it all, conjured up their gray-brown corpses from the ether of our fears.

"I know y'all must be going through an awful lot, but answering these questions as honestly as you can will help us make a little more sense of this," says Detective Harvey. "What about *between* your parents? Did they ever fight?"

Emmanuelle shakes her head with grief-streaked conviction. "No, absolutely not," she says, her eyes red and slimy with rheum.

"Not any more than anyone," Eve clarifies. More composed than Emmanuelle, she dabs a tissue daintily at her nostrils.

I'm drinking the coffee that Eve made me, dressed up with sweetened condensed milk she'd found in the pantry because I'd had the iced version once at a Vietnamese restaurant and insisted on this preparation ever since.

She's been making these for me since high school, when I needed to pull all-nighters to study for AP Chem, AP Physics, and so on. It used to make me feel sophisticated and international. Someone like me, more imagination than can fit into one body, you can die inside a fantasy of yourself.

"Is there anything you can tell me about what could've precipitated the act?"

Emmanuelle yelps a shrill sob when he says *the act*, and both Eve and I jump. The two of us tend toward coldness, but Emmanuelle, the forever baby, lives every moment on the edge of a breakdown. The constant terror of our home turned Eve into a machine of efficiency, me, a person detached from their body, and Emmanuelle neurotic.

"Mama didn't do this," says Emmanuelle. I squeeze her thigh, and she closes her eyes. "I'm sorry, but you're on the wrong track, Detective. Ezri, tell him. Tell him about—"

I give her a look.

"Tell me about what?" asks the cop.

I take my time with a sip of coffee. "Nothing," I say. Even as a child, Emmanuelle had been the motormouth of the three of us. After she almost died, she told the tennis coach that our neighborhood was a demon and that our house was its belly. It's digesting us, she said, referring to the bath I'd run her a month or two before that had been tainted with sulfuric acid.

I whisked her out when she screamed, but most of the damage had been done, her body from belly down permanently puckered and scarred. Mama ran to us when she heard the noise, and I explained the acid must've come out of the faucet.

Mama looked at me, then at the bath. She turned on the tap, sniffed it, then put the plastic jug she used to wash our hair under it.

Ezri, it's water. It's just water, she said, dipping her hand inside once she was sure it was safe. Did you do this?

The house must have changed it, I said.

Mama didn't take Emmanuelle to the hospital. She wasn't stupid. Didn't want doctors asking *how*. What would she say?

Mama took Emmanuelle to her cousin Nora, who was a nurse.

"Doesn't sound like nothing," says the detective.

"It's—"

“Emmanuelle, I love you, girl, but I’ma ask you to be quiet for once in your damn life.” After reprimanding our sister Eve returns her attention to the cop. “If you have any more questions, Detective Harvey, you can reach out to our lawyers and we can do this more formally.”

“It’s really important that—”

“Thank you, Detective.”

Outside, neighbors have gathered. Under the flashing lights of police cars, no single face is discernible. The chorus of neighbors gawks at our suffering.

I scan the sidewalk, the street, entranced by the rubberneckers.

“You okay?” Eve asks me. “Who do you see?”

I wouldn’t recognize anyone even if it was daytime, with all the time that has passed. Bodies grow old, sicken, like bread. Worse, time is like water. Dilutes the image, blots the ink.

“Ezri?” Eve grips my wrist. “Who is it you’re looking for?” she asks again. I examine each face in the mass of onlookers. “She’s not here, Ezri.”

“Who?” I ask.

The look she gives me could’ve come from Mama’s own face.

“I’m just curious who still lives here,” I say, choosing not to shrug because it would be overselling my fake nonchalance.

Eve shakes her head, casts judgment. I don’t care. It reminds me of Mama to be looked at and found wanting. For a second I can pretend she’s not dead.

“Let’s just go. Okay?” says Eve, dropping it. “I know Elijah has had enough of watching my wild-ass kids. We don’t need to be here anymore. You don’t need to be here. We never need to be here ever again.”

I’m still looking.

“Please, Ezri,” says Eve. “Let’s go to the car. Don’t you get it? We never have to come back to this place again.”

“Okay,” I say. “Fine.”

A police officer escorts us to Eve’s car, shoos away anyone who tries to get too close. I wish he’d invite them closer. I wouldn’t mind being vivisected. The attention delights me.

“Who were you looking for back there?” asks Emmanuelle.

“An old friend,” I say. To her, I can admit it in a way I can’t to Eve. Emmanuelle doesn’t know what to do with the information, won’t know

how to use it against me. But Eve knows all my tender meat parts. She can poke enough to make me want to self-murder, the way Mama could.

“What old friend? Bowie? Carson?” she asks.

“Those guys were dicks. I’m talking about the only person in this neighborhood who ever fucking liked me or was nice to me. She was a grown-up. Remember Laurie?”

Emmanuelle snuffles, still overcome about our dead folks. “It was a long time ago,” she says.

“Mama hated her,” I say.

“For good reason,” says Eve.

“Mama hated everyone,” says Emmanuelle. “Except us.”

I sit in the back seat as Eve pulls away, my head turned toward the house. It’s large enough that it takes a moment to disappear from the horizon, only truly going once Eve turns the corner.

Goodbye, Mama. Goodbye, Pop. Goodbye, 677.

It doesn’t feel right to say 677 is haunted—I can’t bring myself to believe in such things, to forgo all reason—but yes, of course it’s violent. Its hate for us is so personal, we sometimes weren’t sure we hadn’t wronged it and just forgot about what we’d done. That this is its revenge. Only a serious violation on our part could explain this level of calculated fury.

Emmanuelle wants to tell the cop all this. The youngest, she doesn’t remember that telling leads to social service investigations and involuntary hospitalizations. She doesn’t know about the eight months Eve and I lived in an array of foster homes or with extended family.

Emmanuelle looks back at me from the front seat as we drive. “You could show them your phone. Even if they can’t decrypt Mama’s, you could show them the messages on your phone. That would prove it.”

I shake my head. “I don’t think those messages are going to help Mama’s case,” I say.

I don’t blame Emmanuelle. She wants her pain acknowledged. She still thinks the truth carries weight.

Oh, baby sister, poor little thing. You can’t say it, you can’t just say it out loud that it was the house. It was the house that killed Mama and Pop.

EIGHT.

When I am thirteen years old, I write a poem using ink I made from a dead dog's blood. After turning it in to Mr. Dolan for my final English project, he has concerns and invites my parents in for a conversation. *Parents* is always my mother. She arrives wearing a tracksuit because she's come directly from a hair appointment.

When she has settled and apologized for her lateness and her casual appearance, Mr. Dolan removes my poem from a manila folder and shows it to my mother. He watches her eyes for a reaction, but when none comes, he pushes on.

What concerns me is not the content of the poem, per se—I mean, it does ... but we'll get to that later. The main issue is that—

And because Mama is ready for what he is about to say, she straightens up and interrupts him. The issue is the blood, she says.

Mr. Dolan bites the knuckle of his left index finger. I'm sorry?

The blood she used to write it.

I'm not sure I understand, says Mr. Dolan.

The blood ink.

Blood ink?

Mama crosses her legs, frustrated. The ink made from blood, she says. The ink that is not ink but blood.

I'm sorry, but you're going to need to explain what's going on to me, says Mr. Dolan.

Did you think I would buy one of my children ink that writes that poorly? Then Mama removes one of her Montblancs from her purse, the one with the oxblood-colored ink, and writes on a Post-it note, *this is how ink not made from blood writes*.

I didn't realize, says Mr. Dolan, taken aback by Mama. Everyone always is.

So why am I even here if not because my child wrote a daring, arresting protest poem in the blood of the dead dog she was accused of killing?

Mr. Dolan continues to look perplexed. Mother explains: It was the neighbors' dog Bentley. A Labradoodle.

I just need a moment to catch up here. Did she—did she kill Bentley, Mrs. Maxwell? Because if that's the case—

First of all, it's Ms. Ms. Washington.

I'm sorr—

Second of all, did you even read the poem, Gregory?

Mrs.—Ms. Max—Washington. Yes. I did.

So how are you even asking me if she killed that damn dog? You're the English teacher, right? You're supposed to be teaching my daughter literary analysis, but you can't read this poem and figure out whether or not she killed that damn dog?

Mother snatches her purse off the desk and slings it over her shoulder and tells me to come on, that we don't have time for this nonsense, that she'd hoped for better from a school that costs as much as this one.

I feel sorry, however briefly, for Mr. Dolan. This is his first time meeting my mother, because I'm new here. (I am always new to whatever school I'm at inside my memory because of how often I was expelled. Or because whenever I changed genders or presentations, Mother couldn't deal with the awkwardness and enrolled me somewhere new where no one knew my past.)

So if not the fact that it was written in blood, what the hell did he call me in for? Mama asks as we walk to the car. I'm used to her heels clicking on the tile floors of whatever hallway of whatever school we're in, but today she's in tennis shoes that match her tracksuit.

Because of the length, I say. He says it's too short to be a final project.

Okay, so what, he wanted you to write a hundred bad poems instead of one good one?

Yes.

Maybe you were right, says Mama, shaking her head.

My original project idea had been to dry the dog's pelt into parchment and write the poem on that, which would have taken more time and effort and would've been more appropriate for a final project. Mother said she didn't want a stinky dead dog drying over a wooden frame in the backyard but that if I wanted to harvest Bentley's blood before she returned the corpse to the Allen family to bury, I could.

I will say this of my mother: no amount of blood on my hands, animals in my closet, could have swayed her from the truth of my perfection.

I could and often did disappoint, yes, but only by not living up to my very obvious, divine potential. My lovers are similar. They want me to be innocent.

I want me to be innocent, too. I want it more than anything. But I am not even an *I* or a *me*.

Can the cellar that a kidnapper throws a child into be guilty or innocent? The lake that a killer drowns his women in? I'm not a person but a place where bad things happen.

After the meeting with Mr. Dolan we head to my sisters' school, Seton Hall Prep, the K-12 that I was asked to leave in second grade. My mother always says it's a lucky thing that my younger sister Eve was already beloved and well-known in the kindergarten there; otherwise, my expulsion might have marked our family in such a way that she and later Emmanuelle wouldn't have been accepted. And then, instead of having at least two of her children at the top private school in the state, she'd have zero there.

I am at the Huntley School at this time, a newer prep school that isn't particularly rigorous academically but seems designed for parents who have a pathological need for their kids to attend somewhere expensive.

I've made a name for myself as the weird girl who wears dark gray slacks instead of the forest-green-and-blue-plaid skirt. With sensible, wide, brown loafers instead of black patent leather Mary Janes.

Acne pocks my dark skin, and I'm fat. My hair is in straight-back cornrows and everyone says it looks like I just got out of jail. I say that I did. They believe me.

Mama pulls into Seton Hall Prep's parking lot, and as she presses her foot over the brake, I ask her if she really thinks my poem is good.

I do. You know I don't bullshit, honey, not to anyone, certainly not to you.

Only to yourself, I say, and slump back in the passenger seat.

I expect her to say *excuse me*, *miss* in that tone, that awful tone, but she is thoughtfully silent for a few moments before she says, As we all do, Ezri. Baby, you're wise beyond your years. A brilliant, fierce thinker. But don't let that fool you into thinking that you know the truth of things. You don't even know if your poem is good or not. I think it's good. Do you? Where

does it fall short in your eyes? Or do you not even know? Are you simply desperate for my approval? An outside voice to tell you that you are good and worthy? Well, you are good and worthy. I will tell you that. But who am I? Why should I be your arbitrator? Am I God, Ezri? What does it matter what I think?

I don't know. The poem just feels too obvious. It feels like a hammer.

I think about what Laurie thought of the poem. She'd said it was very teenagery of me, her tone unusually cruel, her act coming undone. I was used to getting approval from her when I couldn't get it from Mama. I hated to feel small in the presence of grown-ups, but always did.

You're thirteen, says Mama, reaching over to the passenger seat to squeeze my shoulder. You don't have to be subtle. Will you write better poems one day? Of course you will. But I like your poem. I like it a lot.

Yeah?

Yes. The line about the silences we must hold that make us like dead dogs. I think about it still.

I can't imagine my mother ever staying silent about anything. Knowing she likes my stupid poem, I feel like I might die at peace, and I wish I could, right in this moment, be struck dead. Before Eve and Emmanuelle are in the car and I am forced again into that suspended place, where I am always dying but never yet gone.



Eve asks if I was expelled for writing my sicko blood poem, and Mama says, Honey, would you believe that man didn't even know that it was blood?

What? So he thought that was ink? Hasn't he ever seen what ink writes like?

I *know*. I don't know where they found him, says Mama.

Eve is sweaty from cross-country practice but not in an unappealing way. In a way that girls in post-apocalypse movies are "sweaty" or "dirty" or "unshaved" or "not wearing makeup." I love her but hate her effortless beauty. We look just alike but nothing alike. I'm a rough draft of her.

She's better than me at school, too. Perfect marks on every essay, essays that surprise her teachers with their maturity and depth of thought. Essays

that make teachers question whether or not she wrote them. She's studying Latin and Spanish, as is required at Seton Hall for all students in K-8, but she also studies Japanese and French with a private tutor.

She's going places. I'm going to die.

I exude an air of wasted potential that saddens teachers and administrators. If I think an assignment is stupid, which I usually do, I'll either refuse to do it or go off in my own way.

So what did he say when he found out about the blood? asks Eve.

He asked if she killed Bentley.

Oh my God. Did he even read the poem?

Exactly. This is apparently what I pay ten grand a year for. Anyway. How was your day, superstar?

Fine. We had a pop quiz to check if we did the reading in *Animal Farm*, which I aced, obviously. Even got the extra credit.

I roll my eyes, but I'm in the front seat and Eve is in the back, so she can't see. She stayed up late to finish the book way past the first chapter she was assigned, then hogged the computer room all night doing research on George Orwell and the Russian Revolution and Communist Russia, on Trotsky's exile in Mexico.

Eve doesn't like to sleep. Of course not, not in our house. Neither do I, but I can't help it the way she can.

And how about you, Emmanuelle? asks Mama. How was your day?

Extraordinary, says Emmanuelle, elongating all her vowels. We had art today.

Are y'all still working on your weaving project? asks Mama.

We finished that last week. The showcase is at the end of the month, so today was a free day and I decided to draw.

Oo, did you draw anything interesting?

Yes, a lot of different things because Mrs. Grundy let me use the charcoals and I love the charcoals, but mostly I drew pictures of the woman without a face who lives in our attic. Mrs. Grundy said it was very abstract. Abstract is very good, isn't it?

Isn't it? she asks again, when Mama, Eve, and I have only silence to offer.

I reach into my backpack and take out the pack of SnackWell's devil's food cookie cakes I didn't eat at lunch. I nibble at the chocolate fudge

coating, unable to take a real bite. My chest is too clogged to think of swallowing, too full up with my heart.

Mama turns on the radio, but when every station is playing ads, she slides a CD in. I can't see what Eve is doing in the back seat, but I'm guessing she's pulling a homework assignment that isn't due for several weeks out of her backpack to start.

Isn't it? asks Emmanuelle once more.

She just wants to know she's good, but we can't tell her that, not when we hate her right now for reminding us of terrors we are better than she is at compartmentalizing away when we are not at home. She is five and chronicles all. We are old and weathered and have stopped keeping track of all the serpents that live in our garden.

Isn't it? asks Emmanuelle.

It is, baby, Mama forces out.

Also, says Emmanuelle, unperturbed by the change of mood she's ushered in, I've been chosen to be our representative at the geography bee.

Mama's disposition doesn't change all at once into a happy one, but after a pause, I see her make the decision to turn the energy of the car. She's going to erase whatever blah blah woman-without-a-face unpleasantness Emmanuelle brought in. The world is Mama's to transform. She says let there be light and there is light.

Mama puts on a smile.

Now I thought I just heard you say you've been chosen to be your school's representative at the geography bee, but surely that can't be right, says Mama to Emmanuelle, teasing.

It is right!

Say what? says Mama joyously.

I'm going to represent our school at the geography bee.

Louder!

I said I'm going to represent our school at the geography bee.

You know what? That deserves celebration. Congratulations, Emmanuelle. Let's eat out for dinner tonight, says Mama, turning right on Meadow Park Drive instead of left.

Heck, yeah, says Eve.

What do you think, Ezri? asks Mama.

I shrug, unable to move on like the others from Emmanuelle's drawings of the woman without a face. I am thinking of the house now and how a meal out doesn't last long enough to save me from it. One can't sleep at a restaurant and wake up at a restaurant and live at a restaurant.

All right, well, never mind then, let's go home, says Mama.

What? No, says Eve.

If we go out, can I get dessert? Emmanuelle asks.

We're not going out, says Mama. Because Miss Ezri is too good for such things and doesn't care to. We're going to go home.

I take a bite of my snack cake and swallow it without chewing, making room inside myself for it.

Fine, I say. Let's just go.

I wouldn't want to force you, baby, says Mama.

I said *fine*, didn't I? Can't that just be that?

A meal out costs money, says Mama, suddenly frugal. I'm not tryna pay for all that without everyone's enthusiastic participation. Maybe I could drop you off at home if you don't want to go with us, and we'll go out without you.

Mama knows she is being cruel, and I know that she knows that she's being cruel, and she knows that I know, and she wants to stop, but she also wants to not stop because it feels too good to make her point.

She wants me to say: Mother! You are so good and kind to offer to take us out! How grateful I am to you for saving us! From our home!

But I am grateful. I'm a coward, giving away information to a torturer for just a moment, a single moment, of peace. It's stupid to run from pain instead of to it because pain always comes, and if I could just accept that, life would not be a constant fluctuation between numbness and fear.

With all my heart and soul, I say sarcastically, I want to go! I want to go more than I've ever wanted to go anywhere in my entire life! I have dreamed about going to a restaurant on a Wednesday night since I was a wee child. A wee sick Victorian child!

It is the best I can do and Mama accepts. This is our truce.

We decide to go to the restaurant in the ball at the top of Reunion Tower in Dallas proper. We are not appropriately dressed, so we go to NorthPark mall and shop for the perfect outfits. For makeup at the MAC store. New shoes. Facials. Manicures. Pedicures.

We are in a fantasy. At the salon, I get my fingernails and toenails painted black. At the makeup counter, my mother gives me a lovely smoky eye and winged black eyeliner. Emmanuelle gets lip gloss. Eve is in a makeup-isn't-feminist phase but does get pastel-pink polish on her nails.

Everything sparkles. It's a warm day and we let the sunshine glide over us as we stroll back to the Range Rover, all dolled up.

Can we go ice-skating at the Galleria after dinner? asks Emmanuelle.

Of course, says Mama. We'll buy new ice skates.

Eve squeals, and I smile. I hate ice-skating, but I love the coldness of the rink. I will sit on the sidelines bundled in a thick, oversized cable-knit sweater that I'll get my mother to buy me from Nordstrom. I'll read Robin Hobb's new book, which I will also get Mama to buy me.

We gorge ourselves at dinner. Mama drinks wine and we drink virgin strawberry daiquiris. We share a dessert, then order more because it's not enough. We let spoonfuls of ice cream linger in our mouths and melt lovingly onto our tongues.

Eve says something witty. Mama spits out wine. Emmanuelle doesn't get the joke and asks what it means, and Eve, Mama, and I laugh more.

I am smiling so wide. My cheeks hurt. My stomach hurts. My chest hurts. Bloated with happiness. A happiness that grows and grows, and I grow in order to accommodate it.

Don't think me small. If I am ever fragile, it is only because I prefer to be.

Children, *girls. Daughters*, says Mama. Don't you know that we have survived everything? Did you know that you have been alive for millions of years? That the whole history of the earth is inside of you? We are ocean people. We are field people. We fought and we are here. We are here at the top of this building. On the top of the world.

We are all entranced by Mama. Eve rolls her eyes but it is because she is embarrassed by how much love she feels. It is pouring out of her just like it's pouring out of me, just like it's pouring out of little Emmanuelle, itty-bitty chub-faced Em manuelle. Mother's spell holds us and we are eggs in the nest of it.

Mother lets me drive us to the Galleria while she recovers from her buzz in the passenger seat. She comes from rural folk. Grew up in Arkansas. She learned to drive when she was ten and taught me last year when I was

twelve. She's teaching Eve now. Mother needs us to be armored. That's the word she uses for the skills she teaches us. It's like the game Magic: The Gathering. A creature, soft and pulsing, can be made hard and still with the right artifact equipped to its form. Its toughness bolstered.

Later, when my sisters and mother drag me onto the ice, we are holding hands. We are a quartet. What could ever break us apart?

Sweetheart, says Mama to me after helping me up from a fall. You are so perfect. With your weird little blood poems. My darling, my darling! How sweet it is to have made you.

NINE.

What's it feel like inside your body right now? As you talk about your mother?

There're all these springs inside me that are about to pop. Enough to crack bone.

Where is that feeling inside you? Which bones are going to break?

My ribs. My heart's all heavy, an anvil, and my rib cage feels like it's made of peanut brittle. It can't carry the weight.

See what happens if you wrap your hands around yourself. Can your arms hold your anvil-heart even if your chest can't?

Squeeze whatever amount feels right.

Maybe try to use your breath to hold your heart, too. Inhale, then let the air sit in your belly and chest, a little wave for your heart to float on. Then release, and do it again. Maybe, if you keep doing it, you'll notice your heart bobbing up and down, like a buoy.

Okay, I say.

Are you feeling any more settled? How was that for you?

I don't know. I maybe feel better.

I can hear Max lighting a cigarette with the pilot light of xer cooker. It's un-therapist-like, but we're not in one of our official sessions.

You've never called in the middle of the night before. Did something happen? xe asks.

It's not the middle of the night here, I say.

Where are you?

Home.

Did something happen?

The world doesn't make a lick of sense, does it?

Tell me more.

Do you know who John Balcerzak is?

The name isn't immediately familiar, no.

He's this cop. A piece-of-shit cop. That's redundant. There was this little boy, this fourteen-year-old boy named Konerak Sinthasomphone. He'd, despite incredible odds against him, escaped from serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer. Beaten, drugged, bloody, bruised. These Black women, they call the police to help the boy. And you know what this piece of shit John Balcerzak does? He hands Konerak back to Dahmer. If the cops had bothered to even check anything, they'd have found out he was a registered sex offender. Because he'd raped Konerak's older brother years before when he was a child.

The women are basically begging the cop not to hand this boy to this man. They know something is obviously wrong here. But Balcerzak and crew threaten to arrest the women if they don't stop kicking up a fuss.

And of course, after getting him back, Dahmer murders that little boy. That precious little boy. That boy who escaped! Who fought so hard to live. And if those women had never called the cops he would still be here. Konerak would still be here. John Balcerzak was fired but reinstated just three years later. With back pay of fifty-five thousand. There are recordings of the racist, homophobic shit he was saying and still, still, still. Of course, the judge who made the decision to reinstate him lived to be ninety-eight, and Konerak was fourteen! Fourteen! Even when you fight with everything you have to escape the house, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter because outside the house is just as bad as inside the house.

Anyway. It's my mother. And my father, too. They're dead.

Oh, Ezri.

It's not even them being gone that's rattled me. That hasn't truly hit me yet, I don't think. What's getting me is knowing that what got them will get me, too. That I fled all the way to England, but the house found me, it found me. It always does. It knows I'm bad. Nightmare Mother knows I'm not a sliver and never could be.

TEN.

Eve's house is a dream. It's a two-bedroom bungalow in South-South-South Dallas with affordable rent. My daughter, Elijah, and I live in a renovation project, but Eve has built a home.

Trinkets from her world travels decorate the living room. A black-and-white poster advertising an avant-garde play she went to is framed and sits over the mantel of what used to be a fireplace but now is a cozy nook with floor cushions and poufs that she upcycled or made. Her bookshelves are brick and planks of scavenged wood. It makes me tired seeing how good her life is. An old, searing jealousy roils through me. Look at her. Look at her. She is better. She is so much better. Marcia, Marcia, Marcia.

I sound like I'm three years old. Sometimes, I am three years old. I can't tolerate a single emotion. Every upset is a disaster. Every inconvenience proof of my nothingness when I don't have a mother to grab onto to give me shape. And now, I have no mother, will never have a mother again.

Allow me to digress/regress. Allow me my smallness. Allow me an adolescent fury, expressible only via bad poetry. Gore. Skulls. Chains. Bones.

"Should I order pizza?" Eve asks, and I am far away enough in my head that I don't know if she and the others were discussing dinner before or if we were all in our various silences. Eve has already pulled up the delivery app on her phone. "Lord knows I'm not cooking tonight."

"Have they got vegan stuff?" asks Elijah.

"You're vegan now?" asks Eve, and her face makes it clear she's trying ever so tactfully to leave unsaid the next part of her thought: *that's not cute*.

"I guess so," says Elijah, a loc in her mouth. She's always sucking on them for dear life. I want to tell her it doesn't matter how hard she sucks, milk won't come, but it's something Mama would say, and the central tenet of my parenting philosophy is not saying what Mama would say, even though now I wish Mama were here to say anything at all.

"You guess so? What does that mean?" says Eve.

“Yeah, I mean. I don’t know. I guess there are some circumstances where I’d eat animal products. I’m not sure about honey. I don’t know. When we go to the Chabad house for Shabbos dinner, I eat their challah. It’s got egg. I don’t know. I just don’t want people to think I’m one of those vegans, you know?”

“You don’t have to worry about what people think,” says Emmanuelle. “It’s all right to hold a principled stance and be open about it.”

“Well,” says Elijah, holding her own, not buckling under the weight of her two aunts, “I know it’s not an option everybody’s got. I’m doing it for my own peace of mind and it’s not a demand of anyone else.”

I don’t know when she became a girl with opinions, a girl who could voice her arguments clearly and concisely. Elijah had been the type of child adults always wanted to “come out of her shell.” Labeled shy, anxious, nervous, she’d been prone to whining, to inconsolable crying fits. Every morning before school, she’d vomit and weep.

Now she’s a vegan. Now she wants people to understand this is a personal choice, and not a moral expectation of others.

I want to watch TV. Want to turn off my brain. Want to be inside someone else’s family, and not a family that’s so clearly Mama’s.

My sisters and I did our best to flee our childhoods but have managed only to replicate them. Me, with my stuckness, my emotional stuntedness. Mama couldn’t leave the Oak Creek Estates—and I can’t, either, not really. The parts of me that are greedy for pain clamor to go back there. Eighteen years away hasn’t weakened their need.

Emmanuelle is an exact copy of Mama and Pop. Her drive for fame, success.

Eve has replicated our childhood most literally of all of us, by attempting to create the perfect family, the perfect home. Like Mama, she has a vision of what life should be. For Mama, that meant wealth and respectability. For Eve, it’s meant a reluctant but full embrace of a hippie life in pursuit of moral and ethical purity.

Partly influenced by what she once in a heated moment called my “gender dysfunction,” she has raised her kids without assigning them any gender, never sharing their sex assigned at birth to any of the family and using “they” pronouns for both.

Her children, twins, Echo and Eden, don't go to school. Eve doesn't believe in it. Eden, like their mother Eve, is an artist. Eden can't do multiplication or division but paints and does theater. Echo, the wild one, still can't read, and while this concerns Eve, she says things like, They'll learn when they're ready, and she tries very hard to believe it.

Both of the twins are obsessed with Elijah and copy whatever she does.

"What's vegan, Elijah?" asks Eden as they take turns doing front rolls on a yoga mat with Echo. "Like next-level vegetarian?"

"Basically. No animal products at all. In addition to excluding meat, you don't eat anything that comes from animals or specifically that requires the exploitation of animals," says Elijah.

"That makes sense," says Eden, and I see Eve inhaling a breath so as not to comment. She wants to say, No, it actually doesn't make sense. That individual abstinence from animal products does everything to ease one's own sense of moral responsibility but does nothing to challenge the system. It eases guilt, not animal suffering. An argument would ensue between everyone here if she were to speak. Eve, an excellent articulator and quick processor, a superior logician, would dominate. At the end of it all, everyone would be left feeling small, even Eve herself, except for that brief moment when she felt big.

This was our childhood. She's done all she can to make her own home less hostile, to let her children know her love is eternal, regardless of how impressive their arguments.

I see her take *opposite action*. She is angry, angry at Elijah for being vegan, which she thinks is stupid, and angry at Eden for seeing any good sense in it. Angry that everyone does not have the correct opinion. But she has checked the facts swiftly in her mind, knows that the degree of anger is not justified. There is no great injustice here. Just two people exploring and finding out how to exist in a world in which we are all automatically collaborators in global suffering. And so, given the urge she feels in relation to that anger—to lash out, to humiliate with the power of her words—she does the exact opposite.

"Is veganism something you're interested in exploring, baby?" she asks Eden, with a gentleness that is not feigned but that has been mined from the depths of her inner resources.

"Nah," says Eden.

And that is that. Eve has done “the work.” The work of contorting herself into a passable human after our childhoods left us more petrol than person. We’ve both done rounds of DBT, and I watch her and see it working.

God, is that all life is, checking the facts, finding yourself wrong, then doing the opposite of what it’s your nature to do?

“Okay, so I’m not seeing vegan pizza per se, but they got vegan flatbreads and vegan minestrone soup? And a vegan spaghetti option.”

“That’s perfect,” says Elijah, a sweeter teenager than any of us ever were.

“Everybody else cool with Giovanni’s?” asks Eve.

“Yeah,” I say, ravenous now for American pizza, American food in general. With four locations in the Dallas metroplex, Giovanni’s is the same pizza place we ordered from growing up. We used to eat the pies by the Oak Creek Estates lake. Some semblance of safety. Mama made pitchers of margaritas. Dad would bring a cooler of beers and Cokes for us kids. Despite the rigidity of life in a gated community, the lake offered freedom. Even man-made, it gave off the impression it could not be tamed. One could easily get lost beneath its surface.

“Minestrone soup and vegan flatbreads for Elijah. Everybody else good with the usual?”

I nod along with Emmanuelle, and so do the kids. Mushroom, fennel, mozzarella, and a smattering of goat cheese. It’s been our order for multiple decades. We used to get Italian sausage on it, too, till I went kosher. For months, I’d pick off the chunks of meat, till Mama confronted me.

What, are you vegetarian now or something?

She’s trying to be Jewish, said Eve, betraying me.

Jewish?

Yeah, I said. No pork. And no mixing meat and cheese.

Is this because we watched *Yentl*? asked Mama.

No, I said, even though the answer was yes. We’d rented it from Blockbuster. I wanted to be a little yeshiva boy. Wanted to make my *chevruta* fall in gay love with me. Wanted God to be a mystery you studied like the cosmos, like a worm you decapitate whose head grows back.

You should’ve said something. I can order the pizza without sausage, said Mama. It’s not a big deal.

I could never know how Mama was going to react to anything, though. I hated tossing the coin. I preferred to keep secrets. If I didn't show her who I was, she couldn't disapprove.

ELEVEN.

I want to be a horse, I tell Mama. A girl horse, a horse girl, a girl with the head of a horse, a horse with the body of a girl.

There's Horus with his falcon head, Sekhmet with her lion head, and Ezri, Ezri Washington Maxwell, with her horse head.

In olden times, they'd pay five pennies to see me in my cage, my girlskull slid into the hollowed-out head of a black mare, the tanned hide of its neck sutured to the skin of my shoulders.

Behold, a new Egyptian god made flesh! That's what the boss carny would say upon drawing back the burgundy velvet veil to reveal my inhuman form. To sell the ruse, I'd pace my stall, a length of rope or chain around my neck. We've enslaved a god, the boss man would say.

Mama finishes a sum in her checkbook after I finish my impromptu presentation and speaks without looking up.

So you want to be a slave for Halloween, she says. You know, she goes on, you wouldn't need to be half girl half horse or a fake Egyptian god or whatever some such nonsense to be worthy of display at a five-penny show back then, Mama says. What about Joice Heth? All she ever did was be eighty years old, Black, and blind. P. T. Barnum bought her, starved her, ripped out her teeth, and white folks were glad to pay to marvel at her visage—until she died, of course, after less than a year under his neglectful care. Then folks paid to see her corpse. Be a corpse for Halloween, baby. People love to see those.

Eve shuts the refrigerator and carries a jug of milk to the table. Joice Heth sounds like Sarah Baartman, she says, nothing like a middle daughter should be, forgotten and awkward. She remembers Baartman's name from another of Mama's lessons. I do, too, but she was faster to say it, and for that I hate her.

Mmm, in fact, says Mama, Barnum advertised a sixteen-year-old girl he'd acquired—Flora, remember her name, children—as the so-called

missing link. She, like Sarah Baartman, was native to the Kalahari. And she wasn't the only one with origins there that he'd bought for his shows.

Maybe we should all go as half girls half animals as a statement on how Black women are treated like animals, says Eve, the Abel to my Cain, sucking up.

But girls are animals, I counter. You can't be half girl half animal because a girl is already full animal.

Yeah, okay, sure, says Eve, rolling her eyes, but you know what I mean.

Both of us look at Mama to see which of the two of us will be praised and which of the two of us will be discarded, to see if she'll say, No one likes a pedant, Ezri, to me or to Eve, Specificity matters. I expect more rigor from you.

You have a point, Ezri, says Mama.

Victorious, I nod my head. It's strange, so strange, that my thirteen-year-old self could ever have been this smug, her condition what it was. Stranger still, how, after everything, I could long for Mama's approval. Bask in it. Get drunk on it. Want to fuck it. Her sycophant to the very end.

Mama tilts her head, picks a fleck of dried skin from the corner of her lip. I would argue, she says, that to frame the animalization of Black women as an inherently subjugating process cedes territory to the white colonialist assumption that humankind is separate from and above the rest of animal kind, justifying human dominion over it. How powerful it would be for us to be called animals and say, Yes, yes, of course. And what does that make you? Not animal? Not flesh? Not alive? Dead? Whiteness is deadness.

When Mama gave up her life as an academic to raise us, she turned our home into her personal Black studies department, complete with assigned readings, lectures, field trips, one-thousand-word essays.

My own approach to child-rearing has been more haphazard. Those early days, Elijah lived against my chest, her feet constantly kneading my belly. Newborns have a way of leaving casualties in their wake, but I found baby Elijah easy to be around, grounding. Her needs were basic. Food. Warmth. Skin.

When it became clear Elijah was different than other kids in our friend group, Elijah's mother, Caroline, turned agitated, cruel. Why doesn't she speak? She has no words. That's not normal. And why did she walk so late? Twenty months?

I had no answer, and no real care to find any. Perhaps it was not nobility on my part to let Elijah grow as she would, but distance, detachment. Those were years without sleep. I drank coffee and Red Bull to survive the days and drank whiskey to sleep at night.

Elijah was two and a half when Caroline and I broke up. We couldn't remember ever loving each other by the time it was over.

She said to me once that I wasn't a real person. I was a paper doll. I wasn't offended. I felt seen.

For years, she had primary custody. I saw my daughter sporadically, when it was convenient for Caroline. I was fine with this. Fighting for my daughter would've required belief that I was somehow good for her.

When I found out Caroline was giving Elijah chlorine dioxide to bleach the autism out of her, my sisters convinced me to get my act together and take Caroline to court. I never got my act together, but I quit drinking, at least.

I had no real concept of what it meant to show love when Elijah, at eight, moved in with me full time. I still don't. Mama's love was a knife.

I adopted a cat for Elijah's tenth birthday because it seemed like what a loving parent would do. She liked animals, I thought, and frequently doodled cats on the back of her left hand, wrist, forearm, biceps. I remembered a drawing she'd done of a beheaded cat. Bursting forth from the cat's severed neck was a litter of kittens, their little faces the heads of a hydra.

That's neat, I said. Does it mean anything?

I just thought it would look cool.

The cat I found, like Elijah, was ten years old and diabetic. It seemed meant to be. Kismet. His name was Wallace. Each of his front paws had extra toes, giving his feet the look of tiny human hands, the kind of deformity I would have been accused of inflicting on some stray animal or another when I was a child.

It's easier to care for a cat than a person, for a pet than a daughter. I'd researched the best diet for her, which was to be composed of three-quarters "human-grade" wet food, all meat, no grain. I'd bought her stimulating toys. I'd made a cat forest filled with different cat-friendly plants. Cat trees. Even though she was defined as medically fragile, her needs were small.

While Elijah was at school, I tidied the house ahead of the birthday celebration that would be just us two.

Wallace followed me up to Elijah's room, which was, and still is, blank and simple. English bedrooms, to my relief, don't often come with closets. I've never bought my daughter a chest of drawers, either, or a wardrobe. There's only a clear plastic tub where I neatly fold her clothes. Her bedside table is an actual table, no drawers, no cabinet. A lamp on top. Her bed frame is one that sits directly on the floor, with no underneath. In her room, then and today, there is nowhere anyone might hide.

There are no possessions of real comfort, items that Elijah might be deceived into thinking can save her. No stuffies to hold while disintegrating. No night-light offering false security.

Elijah's room was spotless by the time she arrived home, far from the state it was in when she'd left it: clothes thrown everywhere, sketchbooks and notebooks and book books strewn here, there. Empty crisp bags. Half-eaten bowls of cereal.

My mother never would've stood for such mess.

I led Elijah upstairs to her bedroom, opened the door to her clean room, where Wallace, her new cat, sat at the foot of the bed.

Elijah loved that cat, doted on him. When he passed last year, we buried him in the back garden.

Now that Elijah's fourteen, I expect that to make her understand that I love her, it's no longer as simple as adopting her a pet.

TWELVE.

Emmanuelle and I sleep in the bed with Eve, and Elijah sleeps in the bedroom with her cousins. There's space on the couch, but no one wants to be alone. We are all tangled up in each other and see no sense denying it. We're in a three-way spoon, me the biggest spoon, Eve the middle, Emmanuelle the little edge. I kiss Eve on the back of her bonnet-clad head.

The only easy intimacy I've ever had in this life is with my sisters. Only when I'm touching them can I convince myself my hands are not blades.

Eve is crying. I can hear her quiet sobs, can feel the water of her body drip from her chin onto the side of my thumb. "Turn around," I tell her, and she does. I peck each of her eyes with my lips.

"Girl, why are your kisses literally always so fucking feral? Like that goddamn blackbird in the nursery rhyme, swooping down to pluck out my eyes." I nuzzle her face, the wetness there spreading onto me.

"What nursery rhyme? The one with the magpies?" I ask. One for sorrow. Two for joy. Three for a girl. Four for a boy.

Or, one for sorrow. Two for joy. Three to create. Four to destroy. That's the revised version I made up for myself as a child.

"No, 'Sing a Song of Sixpence,'" says Eve.

Right. Four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie.

"In the rhyme, doesn't the bird peck off the maid's nose? Not her eyes."

"Whatever," says Eve, leaning back onto her head.

"I wish I understood how y'all could be acting like this," says Emmanuelle. "They're dead. You get that? Dead. Forever. Like aren't you fucked up over this?" The Emmanuelle from the airport overjoyed to see me earlier is gone. "Do y'all have hearts? That's a serious question. Not rhetorical. Are you even my siblings anymore? Are you straight-up fucking possessed by demons? Ezri, you came all the way here and I'm wondering, why did you bother? Why did I even ask you to come? How did I convince myself you were worth jack shit? And don't get me started on you, Eve. Yeah, you're crying. Okay, a bitch is sad, but you don't have any right to be

sad. You left them. You abandoned them. Ezri, you left the whole fucking country. What happened to us being family?"

Emmanuelle is sitting up now. Rocking. If she's trying to contain herself, it's not working.

"I'ma go outside. Fuck y'all," she says, and stomps out, pulling the sheet half off the bed as she goes.

I sigh and grab hold of the pillow. "Can you go get her?" I ask Eve.

"No," says Eve, wiping snot from her nose. "You go."

I groan but get up. Slide the pair of jeans I discarded on the carpet back on.

All three of us live for being chased, desperate for some assurance that if we disappeared, someone might mourn our loss or reach into the walls and grab us if a ghost claimed us. We used to run away as kids, staying gone long enough that Mama might call the police. Days. But she never once did. Such was her stubbornness and her belief in our independence.

When one of us would come back, having lost the battle of wills once again (Mama was undefeated), she'd say, There you are. Was that satisfying?

"Hey," I say to Emmanuelle once I've caught up to her outside in the backyard.

"Fuck off," she says. She's staring at the sky, at satellites and planes, at the emptiness. "I hate you." I hate me, too, but that wouldn't be helpful to say. I kick my foot into a patch of dead grass.

"I'm sorry we're not responding the way you want us to respond. I am sad, though. For what it's worth. I loved them."

"And they sure did love you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know what it means."

"They loved all of us. They loved you, too. Of course they did." Emmanuelle is the baby of the family. Probably got loved on the most. At nine, she'd been sent to boarding school because Mama actually wanted to protect her from our home.

"God, y'all are so condescending." She's scratching herself hard on her exposed upper arms. "Mama sent me away because I was the one she could bear sending away. I was never brilliant."

Jarring, the different versions of events we all have.

“I don’t think that’s true.” I’m too tired to even give her the comfort of a full-on *that’s not true*. I have to qualify it with *I think*. I sit down on the grass, dry, hard, and spiky. I rest myself back on my palms. “What do you want me to do? What do you want me to say? It’s a fucked situation.”

“A fucked situation? A house killed our parents.”

“I guess we know why the Wicked Witch of the West was so pissed now.”

She doesn’t laugh, but she doesn’t rebuff the joke, either, and I’m gratified for that small thaw in her. “I mean, that’s what I’m getting at. This is some *Wizard of Oz*–level shit. This is make-believe. This is fantasy. We can’t just have a funeral and move on. Can’t you get that?”

I can already see the true crime docuseries Emmanuelle wants made, where investigators and audiences, experts, professors, get to the bottom of what happened. Baby, there is no bottom. “It’s not like we can call Ed and Lorraine Warren,” I say.

“Who?”

“Never mind. I just mean, have you ever considered that Eve and I have let it rest because what other choice is there?”

“Is that really what you think you’ve done? Let it rest? Is your life what rest looks like?”

“It looks more like rest than whatever it is you’re doing right now out here. Let’s go inside. Come to bed. I bet Eve will even let you be middle spoon. Even if you do want to solve this, we can’t right now, yeah? Come on. I’ll give you a massage.”

“I don’t want a massage. Fuck a massage. I’m all sweaty and gross.”

“Then come in up outta this heat. Join us in the land of air-conditioning.” I grab her hand and pull her toward me, toward the sliding back door. She resists, mildly, then lets me pull her. Inside, she slumps on the sofa. I go to the bathroom and turn on the shower for her, get out a towel.

Emmanuelle’s rage has left her by the time I return to the living room. She is back to shaking, but this time with sobs. “Come,” I say. She’s out of it. I loop my elbow through hers and lead her to the bath, help her in. As she stands in the shower, under the flow of water, I wash her. Massage all her scars. She tenses up. “Too much?” I ask. She shakes her head and lets her head drop back. I lift her tummy to get to the thick, hard scar on her lower

abdomen. It's from her hysterectomy, which she'd had when she got cervical cancer at twenty-four.

"Hair?" I ask.

She doesn't answer but doesn't explicitly protest. I wet and shampoo it, scrub and rub her scalp until I see all the tension leave her body.

"I love the smell," she says. "Of the products." She's crying again, though in a way I can only call dignified.

Once she's out of the shower and I've dried her off, we return to the bedroom together. Eve has her laptop out, her reading glasses on. There's a glass of wine on the bedside table. She'd gotten up, then, while we were outside, but hadn't joined us in the backyard.

"So did y'all have fun?" she says. I pity her that she can't help but try to keep the conflict alive with a sarcastic quip. Fire loves itself. Wants to keep burning. I'm like that, too, most days, but I'm too emptied out for it now. Not enough fuel in me to sustain a tea light.

Emmanuelle and I crawl back into bed with Eve, who has no choice but to accept the peace. Without an opponent, her fury fizzles.

Eve unpauses what she'd been watching on her laptop, old reruns of *Living Single* that she's downloaded. Emmanuelle squishes herself into the middle, and she rests her head on my shoulder, the water from her locs spreading to my T-shirt and then to my skin.

THIRTEEN.

In the weeping eyes of a wounded child, a mother's helplessness is a belt to the back.

Mama, dear, don't make promises you can't keep. Mama, dear, do not, under any circumstances, birth a child like me, dykey and Black and trans and a faggot, then raise them in a gated community in the North Dallas suburbs. Do not bring xem/them/her up in a house made of barbed wire. Do not bring xem/them/her up in a house with talking walls, where the walls say only one thing: cease. Do not bring xem/them/her up in a house that's not a house but a puppeteer who ties strings to kids and pulls and bounces their frail, floppy forms.

I wanted to spit in your face when I woke up in Cedar Falls Memorial Hospital at twelve and you said, How dare you, baby? How dare you let the world win? Don't you ever try to kill yourself again. If something were to happen to you, I would die. Do you hear me? I'd die.

If something were to happen to you, you said. If something were to happen to you. I wondered, then, if that meant that everything up to that point was stuff not happening to me.

But, Mama, I pleaded, it wasn't me, I didn't do anything, it was—

Recognition lights your eyes. Shh, you say. Not while— A nurse was putting fresh compression socks over my feet, and I wanted to say it right then, say it to Mama in front of that nurse, not caring about the consequences, say, I didn't try to kill myself. It was the house, I swear it, who lifted my sleeping body from my bed and laid me on the roof. Or, not the house exactly, that it was a ghost, the woman without a face, Nightmare Mother, who went inside me and walked me outside, and got Pop's ladder out the shed, and leaned it against the house, and walked me up to the roof, and sat me on the edge. I could feel her, Mama. I felt her! You'd ask, Who did you feel? Who? But when I try to explain, there's no memory where there should be. I was in my room drinking a Coke and then—

And, Mama, you've lived in this house too long to say with any kind of conviction, *there's no such thing as ghosts*.

Years ago we might have laughed, like when blood pooled up from the sink drain. Pop said an animal got into the garbage disposal, then looked at me pointedly, like I'd done it, and maybe, maybe I had. I remember an obsession with the macabre blooming up inside me. I was desperate, see, to understand the breaking apart of bodies. But, Mama, you were the one to say it out loud for the first time—*maybe this place really is haunted*.

Like ghosts? Pop asked with a snort.

If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, you said.

Pop shook his head furiously, but he was smiling. Honey, the only people we have to worry about draped in white sheets in the Oak Creek Estates is the KKK.

And what of my father? Where is my ire for him?

Okay, but like, what of anyone's father. Goodness, we can't be disappointed by men we never once believed in.

FOURTEEN.

Eve and Emmanuelle, soft and vital and pulsing like organs, snore softly beside me. It's 2:03 a.m., but my body clock is on English time. It's morning, in my mind, and the need to get up and have coffee before procrastinating on every single one of my tasks for the day pulls at me.

Stomach growling, I head to the kitchen, but even the task of microwaving a slice of leftover pizza, or having it at all, even cold, feels like too much. I'd only managed a few bites of food at dinner. I check my blood sugar: 4.7/83. It's harder still to motivate myself to eat when my levels are so good, knowing that pizza will spike them, even if I manage to get the insulin dose just right.

I get out my phone and download the hookup apps that I swore off months ago. If now's not the time for indulging in terrible coping mechanisms, I fear the day will never come, and God (Mother), I can't have that.

I change the radius to twenty-five miles when I see no one of interest nearby. It's a wide enough area that it stretches north to my hometown and the surrounding cities. While searching, I scan for familiar faces, wondering who from my youth grew up to be a queer. It's a small enough set of suburbs—all of us knowing each other from the same basketball and soccer and baseball leagues, Girl Scout and Boy Scout troops, YMCA camps, and so on—that it's possible I'd know someone.

I think I recognize someone called "RyanAvailableNow" when someone else messages.

Hey, you're fucking cute. What you into?

I go to the person's profile. *Xavier. He/Him, They/Them. Vers bottom. A very good boy. ACAB.*

I don't usually fuck white bottoms. Last thing I want to be is some cracker's fantasy of animal Black manhood—much more willing to be their sissy boy fucktoy. But I am more in a mood to tell someone what to do. To

make a person mine. Let them beg. Let them obsess over what only I can give them.

I want to make you beg, I type.

Do you want to meet up?

Can you host?

Yes, they say.

I check the time. Traffic at this hour will be nonexistent, five-o not very active. I could speed. I could be from South Dallas to his in thirty minutes. Maybe twenty-five.

It's really late, I say.

It is. You'd be welcome to stay the night. And I've got 420.

Address?

After he gives it, I leave my family a note. I plan to be back early morning, no one any the wiser I've left—but just in case. Grief makes sleep difficult. I probably won't be the only one up at ungodly hours. I fist through Eve's purse and grab her keys.

★ ★ ★

This city is a wasteland. What goodness there once was—in the earth and in the people who inhabited that earth—has been paved over with highways named after genocidists. White-owned Tex-Mex chains serving mediocre fajitas mark the graves of the dead. Housing development after housing development passes by in my periphery.

If you lived here, you'd be home right now, reads a billboard. I used to look upon these signs with maniacal lust. I'd say, Mama, look at that place. It's nice, isn't it? They've got a pool. They've got three-bedroom apartments. Brand-new. Mama would say nothing, foot on the accelerator. I bet it's cheaper than where we live now, I'd go on. Maybe we could sell all our stuff? I'd recently learned the term *downsize* and used it. A garage sale would be kind of fun. We could use the profits to help pay for movers.

Ezri, Mama would say with a weariness so heavy that it spread to me and left me deflated, too tired to breathe. I need you to shut the fuck up, she'd finish.

She wasn't angry. I know this, now, about Mama. She was sleep-deprived and exhausted. She was always down to her very last nerve

because it's hard to raise three kids with an often-absent father in a racist neighborhood, isolated from family, friends.

I step on the gas pedal, speeding past the billboard. The highways here in Dallas are as wide as fields of wildflowers. Nothing like Oxford, and even large parts of London, where every street requires squeezing through. All alone, here on this stretch of freeway, I could lose control of the vehicle, and who would know? How long before anyone discovered? It could be hours before a mother, dashing her kids to summer day camp, would see the car denting the railing.

I pass by signs advertising personal injury lawyers; churches, mega and mini; McDonald's, Whataburger, Burger King. The fast food signs are the only beacons of light at this hour, giving them a distorted and exaggerated aliveness. I worry they might awake. Rise up off the ground. Grow metal spider legs and stomp toward me.

I pass the Ross Dress for Less. The Marshalls. The T.J. Maxx. The cube slabs serving up your perfect life.

The buildings are only one or two stories high but tower over me despite this material fact. Each one of them grows a mouth, mechanical and robotic, the opening of a fun house. Little girl, they say, in a sweet rasp that is oh so familiar, on the edge of feeling like home. You're such a cute, chubby little slut. Like a bad puppy. But I have found you, my little stray, and I will take care of you.

★ ★ ★

I miss the exit for Xavier's and it's not an accident. Instead I get off for Oak Creek, wind through the empty streets of this lifeless suburb. It's one that, due to delusions of grandeur, is cuter than most. Instead of strip malls, there are "shopping villages" with cupcake shops and stationery shops and restaurants that aren't chains and are actually really good. I get a text from Xavier. Hey, updated ETA? Want me to order food or anything?

I close my phone, pull into the Estates. This time, I have the code.

I am trying to find the beauty here, the appeal. People exploit, torture, and maim to live in houses like these.

The houses in the Oak Creek Estates are a mix of styles. Some stone faced. Some stucco. Some red brick, white brick, caramel brick. The streets

curve like the sloppy, curling tongue of a panting dog. It's an easy development to get lost in. The streets intentionally don't make sense. This is to give it a sense of authenticity. Anti-grid. Like somehow the houses just cropped up in this pattern.

On West Elm, I see a parked car a few yards up ahead. Unusual. Houses here all have at least double garages, circular driveways. I slow down, and a man stares at me. Every white face to me is a mask. I never know what's behind it. I look at him, he at me. Is he embarrassed to be caught at this hour as he waits? For drugs? A lover? Just a moment to himself? Or is he angry at me for interrupting his hard-won peace?

He gestures for me to roll the car window down. I do, after slowing to a stop.

"Hey, kiddo," he says familiarly. We must know each other. A dad or uncle of a schoolmate. "You probably don't remember me, and here I am accosting you." He's nervous, caught in the act, though I don't know which act. "I'm Caleb's stepdad, Keith."

I don't remember Caleb, or have known too many to know which one he means. "I'm really sorry about your folks. It's all over the news. Terrible, terrible thing."

"It is a terrible thing," I say. This is a trick I picked up as a kid. If I didn't know what words to offer back, I'd just repeat whatever was said to me.

"Your mother was something else."

"She was."

"Not a woman to mess with."

I wondered if they'd ever fought, this guy—Keith—and my mother. Maybe Caleb threw a birthday party in their backyard pool that I wasn't invited to. Or maybe I'd invited Caleb to one of mine, but Keith had conspired so none of the other kids in the neighborhood would come. Incidents like that were frequent, if not from Keith, from other parents.

"I guess I'll be seeing more of you now," he says.

"I don't know about that."

He smiles, his manner changing from nervous to curious. He takes off his ball cap, wipes his hand across his thinning hair. "Yeah, y'all never really liked it much here, did you?" he asks. Even in the dark, I can see how

bright his eyes are. A yellowy green that sometimes gets called hazel, but no no, look closely, he would say, they're green.

"I can't say I blame you," he says. "This place"—he makes a sweeping motion with his arms—"wasn't really y'all's bag."

"The Oak Creek Estates, you mean?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know," I say.

"Ah, come on, now. You don't belong here. You know that. And I mean absolutely no offense by that, it's just, I think about it the same way with the Mexicans. They don't actually want to be here, in America, do they? They come here because they have to. Or they would respect its laws. They'd learn the language. Eat the food. Adapt. They're here because they have to be here. There's no love. There's no belief in the purpose of this country."

"Eat the food? What specific food, Keith?" I ask. And I'm wondering now if I do remember him. If we had this same exact conversation when I was twelve. "What is the true American food that the Mexicans should be eating?"

He smiles at me, his teeth showing. "That's fair. That's fair," he says. There's resignation in his words but fight in his posture.

"The question still stands. I want to know what was going through your parents' minds moving here, to this god-awful fucking place?" He's cradling something in his lap. A beer? I hear a click. A gun. "Because I don't get it. I truly don't get why your family would choose to live here. Why they would stay and stay. We know you all hated us."

He's drunk. "Don't you want to be around people who share your values? Your way of life?"

"What's my way of life?" I ask. I've gone crazy. My instinct is to nod, to agree, to avoid making myself known as an upstart, and to retreat from any and all instances of discomfort, but I don't.

His face tides through anger, sadness, confusion, consternation, frustration. I think he might be holding back tears. "Ah, shit," he says. "What the fuck? What the fuck? Please pretend I didn't say any of that. That's not who I am."

I don't feel sorry for him, not exactly, but I know the pain of realizing what you're capable of, knowing that if there is a god, you are fucked.

Every good thing you've done is for show, in the hope that people don't see through to your core, your rotten, non-sliver core.

"I'm so sorry," he says.

"For being racist?" I ask. The me I am now, who names his insult, is not one I'm very familiar with. Adulthood has placed a strip of duct tape over her lips. She comes out only to be inconvenient in a crisis.

"I actually meant about your folks," he says. "What you saw, that's some fucking scarred-for-life shit. You aren't going to be okay. You know that, right?"

"I was never going to be okay," I tell him honestly.

"You had it rough. Growing up," he says.

I shrug, revert to a past teenage self whose main form of communication is dismissive gestures interspersed with rabid defiance.

"You did, kiddo. I have eyes. I saw the way you got treated, for being, you know—I'm sorry about that. And now this. Now fucking this." His voice breaks, and I wonder, does he feel guilt? Shame? Knowing that he and the rest of the Oak Creek residents were absolute racist cunts to us? "Do you ever think about ending it?" he asks.

"Yes," I answer.

"You ever want help?" he asks.

"What?"

"To do it. Like your mom and dad. A suicide pact, right? I'll do it for you. Right here, right fucking now. That's what I came out here for, you know. To end my glorious fucking life. Feeling sorry for myself. And then you just showed up. Kind of like fate, right?"

"Keith," I say.

"We could do it like this. I kill you. I do you a favor, right, put you out of your misery. Then I wait here, wait for the cops to come. Confess all. Confess all my sins—and there are many. Get electrocuted." Keith raises the pistol. He grips it with both hands. A semiautomatic. Big. He points the gun at me, one eye closed.

"Or maybe you're a fucking coward," I say. "You kill me. Shoot me point blank. Then, losing your nerve, you clean up the evidence. You drive my car just down the block to my parents' house. Make it look like a suicide."

"Well, if you want to die, and you say you do, it is a suicide, isn't it?"

The me I am right now, cocky and invincible, falters. I wonder if Keith has already done it, has shot me, and I missed it before I came back to myself—because my chest feels like a missile has exploded inside of it.

I touch my palm over my heart. There's no hole.

"Please don't fucking shoot me," I say, ashamed to beg. The teenager-me who got into a game of chicken with Keith spits at me, wants us to fucking die because look at how pathetic we are, begging this racist white man not to kill us, when we should be grabbing the pistol from him.

"Of course not," says Keith, lowering the gun. "Shit, I was just joshing."

"Yeah," I say, knowing he wasn't. Does he know he wasn't, or has he already rewritten this interaction in his head?

I should go home, put an end to whatever madness brought me here. But there is a charge here I can't let go of.

I open the car door and walk around to meet him where he is. "Maybe you shouldn't be alone right now," I say, head leaning into the open driver's side window.

He flicks the lock open.

He doesn't want the moment to end, either. I know this because fucked-up recognizes fucked-up.

I've got to get into the back seat of his four-door truck. It's been a while since I've done anything like this. My therapist asked once if I thought it was a form of self-harm, but I told xem I didn't know if there was a meaningful distinction for me between self-harm and self-pleasure. If it's something that we are seeking out, to get some kind of rush of relief, isn't that the pursuit of pleasure? And who decides what harm is? Xe nodded, said, I actually don't have an immediate response to that; but what I'd challenge you to consider is, are the actions aligned with your values, with a view of yourself that honors your worth? Or is it something you pursue not for the erotic high of being debased—which, hey, valid, this is a kink-affirming space—but for the purpose of further internalizing your debased place within society?

"Do you want me to suck you off?" I ask Keith.

He gets out and joins me in the back seat. He unbuttons. Unzips. He's hard. Other people's arousal always does it for me. All this show of heat, of

desire, of want, for me. Just for me. I am alive. Touch me, touch me, touch me, I'm yours, and you're mine, and let us not ever let each other go.

I start by teasing him, my tongue circling the head of his penis, which is already salty with pre-come. He relaxes into the seat, his knees falling open. He puts his palm on my cheek. It slides up my jaw, thumb lingering over my coarse sideburns, which I know he's reading as male. I know this pleases him.

"You like that?" he asks. I groan. "You like my cock?" I remove my mouth from him to speak.

"Yes."

"Don't you fucking take your lips off me, faggot," he says. I return to him with a moan. He presses his palm against the back of my head and pushes me down over his length, until I'm taking him in fully. He yanks my head up and down forcefully, bucks his hips up, too, until he suddenly stops. He pushes me off him.

"All fours," he says. The extent to which this is not his first rodeo is abundantly clear. "Get undressed."

I'm afraid of what he'll feel like inside me. I've been more or less celibate for going on a year. This was part of one of my many attempts over the last half decade to get my life together for Elijah. Excise every shitty, fucked-up part of myself I could. Repress, repress, repress. Hold the fucked-up me's under the water till they drown, their bodies lifeless shells in the water, looking like floaties.

He pulls down my trousers. Slaps my ass. He squeezes one of the cheeks.

For so long, it's been hidden from him, from everyone here, the shape of my body beneath clothing.

My mother refused to humor their curiosities with an answer. I was the type of child who forced her to become open-minded. An easygoing daughter/son might have responded to her attempts at enforcing conformity. Many children, despite what is said of their willfulness, know the order of the world. Adults rule. Our lives are in their hands. Their loving us, liking us, finding us convenient, is absolutely crucial for our survival. We bend and bend until we mold ourselves as closely as we can into their images. Mother is God.

But some kids do not get the memo, and I was one such child, impervious to intervention. Maybe it was the autism. An excellent strategist, my mother recognized a fight she would not win and became, instead of my enemy, a crusader for my expression. It fit into an image of herself she liked. Rebel mother. This was easy enough to work into her ethos, which was flamboyance for its own sake. Pissing people off for the lols. She thrived and felt loved, purposeful, when she was the center of attention, and by advocating for me, she got that.

People waited impatiently for my puberty, and certainly, they speculated when my body moved into adolescence, but there was never consensus.

Now, Keith knows truly what I am, and if he had any doubt before, he has come around to my way of thinking—that I can be and am anything.

I assumed that he was going to use spit as lubricant, but he reaches into a backpack on the floor of the back seat and pulls out a bottle of lube, as well as a glass vial of poppers. He undoes the cap and reaches around to shove the bottle under my nose. I breathe in, embracing the chemical burn.

Keith spreads lubricant on my rectum, focusing first on the outside, massaging it in, and I moan. When he enters me with heavily wetted fingers, I stiffen. “Shhh,” he says. “Shhh.” Calming me like I’m a baby. I inhale and exhale, relaxing. “That’s it,” he says. “Fucking faggot. You know you need this.” He spreads lube over his penis, then presses inside all at once. I wonder for a moment about his disease status, but I don’t care enough to ask him. I’m desperate for him to ejaculate into me, and despite the burn, I rock my hips back into him fast and steady like my asshole’s a goddamn infant and I need it to sleep right fucking now. What else could I ever want in the entire world but this.

★ ★ ★

Sometimes when you’re a littleboyfag you fall asleep front to front next to another littleboyfag. Your noses are smashed together and so are your lips, which are ajar. You breathe in his exhalations and he breathes in yours—until at half past two in the morning you snap awake, anxious, as littleboyfags tend to be, and start to panic about the mathematics of the respiratory system: if you’re breathing in what he’s breathing out, your lungs are filling with CO₂. You’re suffocating. You’re going to die at

Evercreek Baptist's annual youth lock-in inside a Batman sleeping bag, with the other littleboyfag's genitals in your palm and yours in his, and everyone will know the truth of your littleboyfagness. Your mother will be SO embarrassed. Had her littleboyfagson died in a respectable way, such as by being beaten to death for his littleboyfagness, that could've been salvaged into a suitable, even good, post-littleboyfagson life. She'd be the mother of a martyr. She'd go on talk shows. She'd start an organization. She'd write a book on the whole ordeal. Celebrities would endorse her cause. LITTLEBOYFAGS ARE PEOPLE TOO, Mark Ruffalo would say.

No, Mark Ruffalo. We are NOT. We are littleboyfags and that's IT.

And sometimes, you're a littlegirldyke, rough and hulked out and sprouting fur around your cunt even though you are eight and the between of your legs should be smooth and soft like the peel of an apple. Sometimes you are talking to someone from an AOL chat room who asks you to stick the handle of a brush inside of yourself and to take a picture of it. You understand this person is a pedophile. You know and understand pedophiles very well by now. This man will not appreciate your girl fur. You shave it as best you can but what remains is a demonic, mutated peach rind.

What to do, what to do? You cannot lose Carl4Christ1949's devotion. No one can make you feel like the center of the universe the way a pedophile can.

Sometimes you're a twisted child. Sometimes you are a wrong sort of boy and an even wronger sort of girl. Sometimes your body is a transgression.

Mother is God. You're the unformed void.

FIFTEEN.

Everyone believes in haunted houses. Ghosts are a function of the movement of time. Places become marked by the things that have happened to them, the things they've done. Rings in the trunk of a tree.

As children, Eve and I aren't sure if other kids aren't allowed over because we are Black or because their parents know that the house is something putrid. The line between the two options isn't solid. We understand there is a connection between the two, that one doesn't exist without the other. If the house is haunted, it is to punish us for our difference, our non-sliveness.

Jordan Hewitt is a neighborhood kid who makes money daring kids to stay inside my house for half an hour. If they don't succeed, the kids have to pay five dollars. I get 50 percent of the profits.

One day, a new kid we've never seen before takes the dare. Somebody's visiting cousin or something. His name is Hogan and he's eleven, freckled, and dark haired.

Wow, he says as he enters the house. This is hella nice.

My mother did have impeccable taste, much of our furniture imported from Europe.

This is like *MTV Cribs* levels, says Hogan.

Shoes off, I tell him.

What if I need to make a break for it?

So you're already pussying out?

I'm not. Shut up.

Hogan takes off his shoes, black Vans. He stares up at the chandelier, an amber art deco number. It looks like the hazel center of an animal eye. It's hypnotizing, the way light catches it, easy to freeze beneath her crystals. All goes quiet when arms are upon her. Like the tiger, what could frame her fearful symmetry?

I let Hogan get lost in the chandelier. I don't like to look up at her anymore. It's too much like one of those optical illusions that disorient your

notion of what's real. I flick my eyes toward it, then quickly away toward the floor, like that's safer, but there's nowhere safe to look. The house does not like to be gazed upon, like a 1950s white southern woman.

A door slams shut.

What was that? says Hogan, pulled from his reverie. Is there anybody else here?

I shrug. The ghosts, I guess, I say, my nonchalance both real and feigned. I am used to it. I will never be used to it. Do you want to hold my hand? I ask.

That's gay.

Yeah, I say. True.

So what, I just have to sit in here? That's the deal, right?

Yeah, I say. Want me to get you a snack or anything?

Nah, I'm cool.

Okay, I'll see you when you come out, then. Good luck lasting the full thirty.

You aren't staying?

No.

I go outside with a Capri-Sun, stand with Jordan and a crew of neighborhood boys I've been reluctantly allowed to hang with. They've started listening to Blink-182 and System of a Down and watching *South Park*. I help them be edgy.

How long do you think he'll last in there? asks Jordan.

Not long, I say. He jumped at the sound of a door slamming.

That's baby shit.

Right? Like, that actually probably was just the wind or something. I say that to sound chill, but it's never the wind.

Jamie, Austin, and Matt do tricks on their skateboards. Jordan and I are talking about 007, which we sometimes play at his house.

Damn, says Jordan, checking his sports watch. The timer is at twenty-three minutes. He might actually make it.

No one ever has. I don't know what the house does when I'm not inside it, but kids describe loud noises. Whispering. One kid went to the bathroom, flushed, and felt a hand, he swore it, coming out of the toilet to grab his ass. Nothing like that has ever happened to me, and sometimes I wonder if any

of it is real, or if it's their imaginations, sparked by the mystique of the house, of me, my family.

So you were sitting on the toilet of the haunted house? You sat down to piss? Are you that gay? said Jordan to that kid. The alternative was for the kid to admit that he'd had to take a shit, which was worse than being a faggot, just slightly.

Another kid once said he'd followed a noise upstairs, to Mama's room. He'd heard someone in the shower. He'd gone in to check it out, since the house was supposed to be empty. Only no one was in there. The shower was running.

The tub was filling up, like something was blocking the drain, he said. So I pulled out this.

It was a wad of dark, matted hair, slick with mud and grime. Not a little wad, but a whole head's worth. He'd seen the strands of it floating in the water.

What the hell? What the hell? What the hell? the neighborhood kids said.

Maybe your house isn't haunted. Your parents are just serial killers.

Give that here, I said.

Maybe you're the serial killer. You kill dogs, don't you?

No I don't, I said. They just die around me. Anyway, we should take it to the cops, I said. That's why I want it.

Matt threw the wad of hair into my face. It smelled and tasted like sewage, like the sinew of the house's heart.

I wonder what Hogan will find inside, what terrors await him. How beautiful it must be to simply visit 677 for a slight and brief fright. How luscious to be a voyeur rather than the inhabitant of pain.

Twenty-eight minutes. Shit, he's going to make it, says Jordan.

Holy hell, I say when it's been a half hour. We wait at the sidewalk in front of my house for him to come out. Matt does some flippy trick off our fountain but doesn't land it right.

Wipeout, we all say, laughing.

I don't like boys that much. I find them boring. They do fun things, which is all right I guess, but they don't talk about interesting things. Just *South Park*, or other shows that don't matter. They repeat the jokes from the shows and laugh all over again.

They talk about farts, too, and boners. Right now, Jordan and I discuss 007, but I'd rather we talk about whether God is real, or who he loves more than anyone, or what he would die for, or whether he's a horse girl or a dog/wolf girl, but boys don't have that. They don't obsess over animals at all, which doesn't make sense to me.

Maybe someone should go get him, says Austin. It's been forty-five minutes.

Fine, I say, and go in, bored of Jordan but also obsessed with him. Yo, you made it, I call out through the open front door. Congratulations. Come get your prize.

When there's no answer, I call out again. Yo, Hogan.

I wait on the sofa for Hogan to come down. He doesn't. My friends leave, Jordan happy not to have to cough up the five dollars.

I get bored of waiting for him to reappear so go to the neighbor Laurie's house. Usually, I do this only after I've accidentally locked myself out, but I don't want to be in 677 alone.

I ring her doorbell, and she answers, like she always does. I smile up at her, and she smiles down at me. This has been our way since we first met, that night my folks and I moved into the Oak Creek Estates and she came by to welcome us with petits fours.

Ezri, she says with a smile. I can smell she's baking something nice even from outside. She doesn't have kids, but she's the perfect mother. More perfect than mine. I was actually just leaving, she says.

Oh, right, sure, I say. Of course.

Can I hang out just until you go? I ask, no ability to take a hint. It has never been a problem before, so I start to walk inside before she answers.

Laurie blocks me with her body. Another time, sweetie.

I wander the streets of the Oak Creek Estates bereft. I return home only when I see Mama's Range Rover pull onto our block.

There was a boy, I say to her, and now he's gone. After I explain what has happened, Mama searches the house. Every violent inch of it. Hogan is gone, gone, gone, gone.

Though later, police find his CD Walkman in the attic. All our alibis are solid as can be—the only one without one, the house, and houses do not kill, cannot kill.

No one can find Hogan—not in the house, but not in the system, either. No parents have reported a boy of his description missing. No one's heard of a Hogan, anyway.

Several days later, the police conclude we kids were playing a prank and made it all up.

Emmanuelle said, Maybe he was a ghost all along, Ezri.

I wondered if the house's powers extended far beyond anything I ever realized before. It could erase not just a body but everything about a person, make it so he was never there at all.

There are no prints on the portable CD player. No little hairs to identify him. The house ate him good and proper.

Regarding the wad of hair, I did give it to my mother and father, who discussed what to do with it after they thought my sisters and I were asleep. Pop was like, Let's take it somewhere and burn it. No way some honkies letting us get away with whatever this is.

But those kids saw it, Mama argued. It's going to get out there. So how does it look if we try to bury the truth?

I don't give a damn how it looks if they don't actually have any evidence to tie us to the crime, if there even is a crime here. It was probably just one of Ezri's morbid experiments.

Mama and Pop did go to the police. They got a warning for wasting the cops' time when the hair was revealed to be fake, the blood on it that of a deer. It was many weeks later that I opened my trunk full of dolls, noting their heads all shorn of hair.

SIXTEEN.

Parked in the driveway, I've come as close to 677 as I should. If I go inside, she'll eat me like that boy Hogan.

I walk 677's perimeter, search for traces of her hunger: a dead boy looking upon me from a window or a haze of mist and fog rising from her grounds. I seek, I find. My bedroom lamp is on, only just visible through the closed blinds.

My heart beats fast, running for its life, but I'm still. The last time I was here, the time before finding Mama and Pop dead, I was sixteen. Perhaps it's not even right to say I fled. I'd graduated high school early. I'd received a place at Oxford University. I was doing what young people do. Flying the coop.

Only my sisters could be said to have fled in the proper meaning of the word, because Eve left when I did, rotating between various family members. Emmanuelle, when on breaks from boarding school, flew to England to visit me or stayed with other family.

I never came back, but it was inevitable that one day I would. I never turned my back on her the way Eve and Emmanuelle did.

I limbo under the police tape blocking the front door of 677 and step, after a breath, inside. Why am I here? Why did I pass up a wholesome lay with a stranger to return to the Oak Creek Estates, only to get fucked by some heinous redneck I hate?

I flip on the flashlight on my phone and shine it across the vestibule into the living room straight ahead of me, then shine it to the right, toward the dining room, then to the left, toward the curved staircase. Back through the living room is a doorway to a second living room, and off that living room is a hall that leads to two rooms used once as my parents' studies. On the left side of the main living room there's a doorway to the nursery where Mother keeps her plants.

Nothing is out of place here but me. In this house, and this life.

I remember my last night here. My mother was planning to throw me a graduation party with all my family. It was in a week, and she was making me give a speech.

To get me out of my head, Mama dragged us all to the movies that night. We came home braced for disaster like we often were. Maybe the electricity would inexplicably be out. Maybe the furniture would be rearranged, or all of Mama's most precious items smashed. Her china.

Mama exhaled loudly when she saw that everything was fine. We laughed, ordered Chinese, and drank Dr Pepper from the fridge. We watched Nick at Nite until we all fell asleep on the leather sectional in the main living room. We, especially Eve and I, often slept together in the living room, unable to bear the aloneness that was a bedroom to ourselves. My sisters and I each had our own room, but when Emmanuelle was home from school, we'd sleep in her room with her to convince her it was okay to close her eyes.

It was never okay to close our eyes.

I awoke in the backyard close to dawn drowsy and sore, naked and wet from a swim, smelling of chlorine. Hazy, half-formed flashes of the ghost who had done this to me came but then quickly went.

I did not go back upstairs to my room to pack a bag. I didn't tell my family I was leaving. I pulled on my clothes, folded neatly on one of the loungers. I walked past my sisters, Pop, and Mama, still passed out in the living room, like creatures who were dead, drugged.

Six seventy-seven is not a house to come back to, but here I am, back anyway. After I scan the first floor, I head up the staircase toward my bedroom. Alone in the long hallway, outside the closed doors, my body a slack shadow. Against the house, I am nothing. I drag the flat palm of my hand along the doorframe. The rigid bumps of texture give the impression of bone. The glassy silk—slightly sticky with age—of the finish reminds me of veneer. I put my hand on the knob. Cool. A tiny skull.

I see no light under the door. The lamp is off.

My body knows things before I do. This is according to my therapist. There is a tendency among trauma survivors to focus outward, xe says. I'm supposed to figure out how to turn inward, toward my body. Bodies are a portal to pools of knowing, if you can learn to read them, feel their experience, reconnect your spirit, your consciousness with your nervous

system. I've always thought Max's advice about such things tends toward the woo, but right now, I feel the truth of xer words.

I take a breath and feel. Feel the million catastrophes inside me. Cascades of warm and cold, of tension, of nausea, of numbness. The whole house is a memory. I can't distinguish between one tragedy that took place here and another.

I feel a hand on my shoulder, but there is no hand. A voice telling me all will be well, but it won't. Who is the voice? Whose hand is the hand?

I open the door, but I don't turn on the light. If I do, I will see her, the woman without a face. In a satin floral-printed dressing gown. I inhale. Nightmare Mother, you said you missed me. Here I am. You called, and I came. I always have.

My room has not changed in my decades-long absence. The full-sized bed is in the middle of the wall opposite me, made up in a quilt my great-grandmother sewed by hand. The pattern, a large, dark olive-green diamond over a coral-pink background, the patches made of slightly different fabrics and prints. It was one of the things that had hurt most to leave behind. At the foot of the bed, folded, another quilt, smaller, a rich dark brown with white checks. Linen.

Vintage science posters on the wall: anatomy, dissected animals, birds, plants, all faded with age. On the windowsill, the book I'd been reading the night I left for the last time. Octavia Butler's *Lilith's Brood*. Bexley, my giant frog stuffie, perches next to a cushion. Grace Jones. Sade. Prince. In the dark, they are ghosts. Their sickness is their flatness, their inability to be held.

Sitting on the bed, a shadow. Thin. Tall. Long-haired. I do not know if it's there or if it's a hallucination, a trick of the light. I tiptoe toward it.

The evening catches up to me, the bed's gravity increasing such that I no longer orbit around it but fall right to its center. I pull back the covers. Crawl beneath them. They smell like linen spray. White lily. I drag the covers over me until I'm curled into a claw. Hot on my face—tears. I look up, thinking there's a leak. It's just me. Just me. My own body's water coursing out of me.

"Shhh," says a voice, but it's not there, just a memory from inside of me sidling up. "Don't be afraid."

SEVENTEEN.

There it is. The child. The beautiful child. Not a sliver, but a sight, still. Dark, strange, and sweet, cinnamon bark. Scrape, scrape, scrape my teeth against. Such beauty invites pain, because such beauty invites possession, devouring. Who sees beauty and does not want to experience it? Wolf eyes, wolf heart. And with a gentleness others do not see, but I see! I see! I see it! I see right to its soft, peach heart.

And I can show it such things. Such beautiful, warm things. Such love, a love it does not know.

To think I'd ever want to hurt it is to misunderstand. I want to know its sweetness, not destroy it.

EIGHTEEN.

I am back at Eve's with no real knowledge of how I got here. I've filled the tank. It's 4:45 a.m. Less time has passed than I thought. I usually have the opposite problem.

I shut the car door as quietly as I can and tiptoe into the house, notice blue light under the living room coffee table. I can tell by the legs poking out from beneath that it's Elijah, clad in the knee socks I got her with one of the Care Bears on them. The blue one. The sad one. It's the kind of thing that I would've never been allowed to wear, no matter how much my mother purported to be for my expressive freedom.

There's some cutesy girly-girl inside of me who I will never get to be, so I bought these socks for Elijah, who became obsessed. I bought her a second pair so she'd always have a clean pair to put on.

"Can't sleep?" I ask her.

The blue light goes. She's shut her laptop then. I wouldn't have guessed she was doing anything nefarious until that moment.

"Jet lag," she says, but yawns. "Was talking to a friend."

I didn't know she had friends. She likes to spend most of her free time with me. Somehow, by withholding the type of attention my mother lavished on me, I've created not what I'd intended, the independent-minded daughter who doesn't care what I think, but a girl perpetually anxious to get to know me.

"Which friend?" I ask.

"Um, I don't know if you know her," she says, wiggling out from underneath the coffee table. "Ramona?" she says, a slight question tone, I think, just perceivable. "Ramona Marx."

"What a cool name."

"Yeah," Elijah says. "She's into birds."

"Really?" I say. "Maybe sometime I could take you and her on the trails to do some bird-watching. We could make a camping trip out of it. Maybe when we get back from ... all of this."

I hardly know who it is who's speaking, this good parent who knows how to connect with their child, who thinks of what's going on as "all of this," a tragic inconvenience to be waved aside that will, with certainty, pass. They are the me who emerges when all others have left the building, a pilot, based on a prototype of sitcom parents.

"Yeah," says Elijah. "I'll ask her. Might not be her vibe. She's very, you know, cool."

"Nice," I say.

"But you could take me. We could do it just us, you know," says Elijah.

"Of course. Yes, I'd like that," I say.

Elijah stands and stretches, yawns again. "So what's the plan for tomorrow? Or today I guess."

"Boring grown-up stuff, I'm afraid. Your aunties and I have to start making arrangements. Figuring out what we're going to do. I expect some family will be driving in. This house is going to get pretty crowded."

"If you don't need me, I was wondering if I could go to the mall or something? To shop? I don't know. I'm in America. It seems like the thing to do. Go to Hot Topic or whatever, as is my destiny."

"I'm sure we can find time for that while we're here," I say. "I think there's a crew arriving around midday and we were gonna go out for lunch. Maybe after that, while they're getting settled, I can take you and buy you a few things?"

"Yeah, that works. But also, you could just drop me off whenever. I don't need hand-holding or anything. I am fourteen."

But when I look at her, I see a girl who needs a lot of hand-holding. Such sweetness. Such innocence. Similar to my sisters' kids. We have, to some degree, broken the cycle of endless pain. Haven't we? Mama and Pop had been beaten raw with switches and extension cords, wooden spoons, belts (buckle side); been called useless, ugly, good for nothing; been shouted at till kingdom come. Beyond the occasional few hard slaps and spankings, my sisters and I had not been victims of such violence from our parents. Mama and Pop had escaped that life and were desperate for something different for their kids.

But it lived in them still, that past, the way these things do. Though she did not enforce her expectations with the rod, Mama had her ways, giving and withdrawing love according to a mathematics far beyond our

understanding. She required excellence, demanded it. In her mind, this was because she wanted a good life for her children, but it was also because parents atone for their personal lacks by punishing their offspring.

The childhoods of my parents imbued them with a specific psychology, one that made them stay in 677. I'm never sure if I believe in free will, and if it does exist, it's so difficult to enact as to be mostly irrelevant. The grooves of the predetermined track are quicksand.

Eve and I do not beat our children. We follow accounts on Instagram about gentle parenting, peaceful parenting, consent-based parenting. We know how to rupture repair. We are parents who apologize.

Yet our kids are still of the world.

"It might be cool to explore on my own," says Elijah. "You know? Could be a bit corny to hang around my parent all day."

"Right," I say.

"No offense."

I smile. "Absolutely none taken."

I hesitate to say yes, and I don't know why. "Yeah, you should go, of course you should. You've got your phone, so why not?"

"Cool, thanks."

"Maybe around lunchtime?" I ask her.

"Well, I thought we were doing a family thing then?"

"Sure, I figured you'd want to skip that."

"Why? They're my family, aren't they?"

"Well, the same reason you'd rather me not accompany you to the mall. Teenagers aren't interested in being with their families, right?"

"I don't want to be left out," she says. I can't tell if there's some accusation in her voice.

"Of course, okay."

"The mall opens at eleven," she says, clearly having researched. "Maybe we can meet near there for lunch? Cheesecake Factory?"

"Anywhere but there," says Emmanuelle, emerging from the bedroom with a yawn. She drags her feet toward the kitchen and puts on the kettle. Without concern, apparently, for whom she might wake, she runs coffee beans through the grinder and spoons them into the French press. It's 5:30 a.m. Eve won't be far behind her, to get ready for a six o'clock Peloton

class. Jet lag is in my favor, for once, allowing me to fit into my family of early risers.

“You hungry, Elijah?” asks Emmanuelle.

“A little.”

“But it’s got to be vegan,” says Eve, yawning as she steps into the living room. She rolls her head around her neck.

“Ah, damn, does that mean you’re not gonna make your biscuits?” Emmanuelle asks me. “I been dreaming about those. Chasing after the taste.”

“I can make a vegan version,” I say.

“Additional to, not in place of the normal ones, correct?” says Eve.

“Sure,” I say.

“It’s okay. I’ll have the animal-product kind,” says Elijah. I appreciate her challenge to Eve’s vegan-aggression by refusing to call them the “normal” biscuits. “I’m not very strict. And, Yoyo, I want to try your biscuits as they’re meant to be tried, as you enjoy them. Will you show me how you make them?”

I barely hear her. I think she’s asking me a question.

“Yoyo?”

Who was I fifteen seconds ago when I agreed to make biscuits? I’m too tired to hear, to speak. I stumble where I’m standing. Eve—my big little sister—comes over to catch me, half supporting my weight.

“Where’s your glucose monitor?” she asks, and leads me over to the sofa and sits me down.

This doesn’t feel like a low. There’s no ringing in my ears, no racing heart.

“I’m fine,” I say. “Just tired. Just hollowed out.”

“By grief?” asks Elijah. It’s a reasonable but surprising question in the moment, especially the way she inflects it. Oddly analytical. I expect her to take out a thermometer and read my temperature and examine my reflexes.

But this is all new for her. I wonder what it must be like to experience the loss of someone you know not at all through someone who actively kept you away from that person. Perhaps she is wanting to climb the rope of her lineage all the way back to the tree limb on which it’s tied, to understand the origin point of her own grief.

“I guess,” I answer her pathetically, wishing I didn’t sound so ambivalent, so untethered to her and this crisis.

Eve has located my glucose monitor. She grabs my middle finger and pricks it without my consent. “Two point five? What the fuck does that mean?”

“Low,” says Elijah.

Eve brings me a cup of orange juice, tips it to my lips like I’m a sick baby. The broken, stray wolf cub in me is delighted to be treated with such care. I am something small in the lap of something large. What could be better—a fake, rubber nipple in my mouth, a blanket on my wet, patchy-furred skin? There is a human here so delighted to have found me. I need not worry for anything. My only job is to keep drinking the warm milk trickling into my mouth.

“You should’ve eaten more at dinner,” says Emmanuelle harshly while Eve tips more OJ into my mouth.

Our baby sister is still rough around the edges from last night, her franticness turned mean and judgmental. She needs someone to butt up against, to control and lash out at. Or maybe she wants what I have, a sister putting a cup to her mouth, feeding her nectar. Last night, Emmanuelle needed Eve to chase her, but Eve never came.

So what does it mean that Eve is here right now, chasing me back from the fog of a low?

“They weren’t hungry last night,” says Elijah, defending me. I gesture for her to sit down, to not worry or get involved in “grown folks’ business.” I don’t like to be vulnerable in front of her, for her to think that she needs to spend her precious emotional resources caring for or defending me.

I say that I “gestured” toward her, but what gesture? How does one convey *I don’t want to parentify you any more than I already have* with the wave of a hand? I think I’ve simply dismissed her, because she leaves the room, arms crossed over her chest.

She’s never done that before—her moodiness a type that makes her cling, not walk away.

I blame Mama. I blame Mama for staying in that house and dying because of it. She’s breaking whatever tenuous hold I had on my own daughter.

NINETEEN.

The mall is not a pleasant place. Nothing natural or wholesome or nourishing about it; it made perfect sense to Elijah as the setting for *Dawn of the Dead*: capitalism roving over the land with its ceaseless desire for more, more, more. Elijah had seen both the original Romero and the remake with Yoyo, preferred the newer one. The original bored her to tears, and the racist bits, whether commentary or not, made her feel like she wasn't a person.

Maybe she isn't a person. To be a person, you have to do things, and the world has to move from your touch.

She should probably be on antidepressants or something.

Elijah sits with an oat latte at the cafe. She's trying to learn to like coffee. Not to be cool or interesting, though that is a side effect she's looking forward to. Mostly, she's trying to like it for the volume of caffeine. She's always so tired.

Elijah doesn't feel like reading, but she wants to be reading when Lily gets here, Lily, who'd she met a few months ago on Instagram, Lily, who's flown all the way to Dallas to meet her.

Lily is a professional musician, a violinist. She'd seen Elijah in a concert via her school's Instagram page. Elijah is a pianist, and she'd played some jazz compositions for her secondary school's final show. Lily had complimented her performance and had sent her links to some interesting recordings—some funky jazz violin, piano duets. It was cool to be shown music that actually interested and excited her. She mostly started up piano because Mum insisted before Elijah moved in with Yoyo. She had some natural talent for it and could easily sink into long practice sessions. But she rarely loved the pieces her piano teacher brought to her, which were focused on classics that were technically demanding enough that Elijah's skills would improve. But the music Lily sent her actually intrigued her. It is enjoyable to listen to, and interesting. No one she knows has heard of these

songs, not even her music tutors, and she's gone down an intriguing rabbit hole of musical discovery.

Now, she and Lily send recordings back and forth to one another. Sometimes, Lily sends voice notes. Elijah likes her accent, which is like something out of a film. Brash and raspy. She persuaded Elijah to sing for her. To try her hand at composing songs for piano both purely instrumental and with lyrics.

Elijah puts down her book and flips open her phone to check the time. It's about ten minutes past when they said they'd get together, but Elijah reopens their chat to double-check, smiling as she reads through their chat history.

First, a message from Elijah: This one doesn't have a real name yet but working title is Demon Baby.

Next, an upload of a recording of her playing a minor-key, bluesy song on the piano, and singing: If I was your demon baby, ugly and wrong, would you still lull me to sleep with your sweet little song? If I was your gangrene leg, black and green and nearly dead, would you kiss me soft and raw or hack me off with your daddy's saw? And what if I was an apple with a razor blade in my flesh? Would you take a bite and turn your tongue to a bloody mess?

Oh, Elijah. It's gorgeous. You're a monstrous talent.

It's a bit emo, I know.

It's gorgeous, gorgeous, gorgeous. I won't hear another word about it. Next time you should send a video.

Ugh, no. I look awful.

Nonsense. You forget, I've seen what you look like. I know you're stunning so you can't bullshit me with that modesty bullcrap. God's given you a light. Let it shine.

Um, are you sure you've actually seen me? Maybe you're confusing me with someone else. I look like a potato with hair.

I do love potatoes.

Next, a voice message from Lily: In all seriousness, Elijah, I know it's hard to recognize your full value in the world, but you are—you are so very special. And you are gorgeous. Yes, gorgeous. Not cookie-cutter nonsense. You are something different. For refined palates. I love looking at you.

Elijah feels her cheeks warm as she listens to the message again through her headphones.

“Elijah?”

Elijah slides the headphones off her ears and looks up to see Lily. Elijah knows it's her even though she's never seen a picture of the woman before. Lily worried about the trouble she could get herself in, and Elijah understood and didn't press. She didn't want to nag about it and come off as annoying.

It's better now, seeing her for the first time in the flesh. Lily is beautiful and sophisticated. She's dressed in brown, high-waisted trousers and a tucked-in cream blouse, and wears thick-rimmed glasses. Her hair, a graying blond, is pulled up into a tight bun. She doesn't appear to have makeup on. Her shoes are boots, socks peeking up over the edges.

“Hi,” says Elijah.

“Hi, gorgeous,” she says, her smile warm. “I'm so sorry for your loss. Stand up. Give me a big hug.” Elijah obeys, lets herself sink into the ocean that is this woman, her presence big and tumultuous.

“I didn't even know them,” says Elijah. “I don't even think I ever saw a picture.”

“And now you never will know them, and that's horrendous, isn't it? You deserved to know them. You deserve everything.”

Soon, they are walking, Lily with a hand around Elijah's waist, pulling her in. Elijah looks around, self-conscious, wondering what people might think, but she supposes they are not such a funny pair. They could be mother and daughter, just having a shopping day together.

“Are you hungry?”

“Not really. I had a huge breakfast. Honestly, now that I'm actually here, I kind of want to explore all the American mall experiences.”

Lily laughs.

“What?”

“Your accent. It makes me crazy. I love it to pieces.”

“I like yours, too,” says Elijah.

“Pishposh. I don't have an accent. Now come on. Let's go. The first step of an American mall adventure is getting your ears badly pierced at Claire's.”

“What?” says Elijah.

“Don’t tell me you haven’t been thinking of it. You know you’d look great. Plus, what angsty singer-songwriter doesn’t have her ears pierced?”

“Should I get them double-pierced? Cartilage, too?”

“There she is! There’s Elijah! Yes, and absolutely yes.” Elijah briefly worries if Yoyo will wonder about how she was able to get her ears pierced, but then squashes the thought. It’s unlikely Ezri would notice.

At Macy’s Lily buys Elijah knee-high combat boots and a chunky men’s watch. “I look based,” she says. “Can we do one more thing?”

“Anything.”

“Is there somewhere to get my hair cut around here?” A new hairstyle is something her family would notice, but that would be okay, because haircuts don’t require adult consent.

“Finally going to go for the undercut you’ve been wanting?”

“What do you think?”

“I think I like seeing you finally trying new things and going after what you want.”

“Is that a yes?” Elijah asks.

“That’s most definitely a yes,” says Lily.

They finish off the day at Barnes & Noble, where Lily buys her a few books, inscribing each one with a personal note.

“Were you able to get permission for dinner?” asks Lily.

“Hm?”

“It’s almost six. I don’t want to keep you past time.”

“Oh shit. Six?”

“What time were you supposed to meet your family?”

Over an hour ago. Elijah reaches into her pocket. Her phone has died. “Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit. Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.”

“It’s going to be all right, gorgeous, okay? You lost track of time. They’re going to understand, all right? What you need to do now is get to your meeting spot. You remember where that was? Let’s get there quick as we can.”

“Umm, the entrance by the Nordstrom.”

“Okay, I’m going to walk you halfway there to make sure you know the way, then go my own way. That okay?”

“Yes,” says Elijah, even though she hates it. She’d rather stay with Lily.

Eve and Emmanuelle are waiting when she gets to the designated entrance. “The fuck, Elijah,” says Emmanuelle. Eve simply holds open the back door of the SUV, where her cousins Eden and Echo are, but no Ezri. Maybe they are inside looking for her. Or are talking to the police, filing a missing-person report.

“Where’s Yoyo?”

“With Uncle Frank and Auntie Jacqueline,” says Eve tightly. Elijah slides on her seat belt.

“Don’t worry, we won’t tell them you went completely fucking AWOL,” says Emmanuelle.

“Thank you,” says Elijah, though Yoyo likely wouldn’t care. She hooks the phone cable to the car charger. She hops onto Aunt Emmanuelle’s hotspot. A flood of messages upload. From her yoyo: Hey Elijah. Slight change of plans. Eve and Emmanuelle are going to pick you up and I’m going to pick up Frank and Jacqueline from Nacogdoches. Hope your American mall adventure was fun x.

Several friends ... acquaintances ... schoolmates, have liked her TikTok of her sharing her song, which Lily had encouraged her to do.

There is a message from Lily herself, sent only a minute ago: Everything all right, gorgeous?

Yep. All good.

Didn’t I say it would be? When can I see you again?

I’m not sure. After being late my aunts might try to put me on lockdown.

How do you feel about sneaking out? I could pick you up after everyone’s asleep.

Elijah considers the logistics of such a thing. One problem is that no one has a normal sleeping schedule at the house. She’d already been caught on her laptop last night by Yoyo. And more family would be coming to stay with them.

She could pretend to retire early, set up pillows under the pallet on the floor. The room would be dark. She could sneak out the window. Meet Lily down the street.

Tonight?

Was hoping you’d say that. There’s a midnight screening of Rocky Horror I’d love to take you to.

Ahh! That sounds really cool. Yeah. Let's go for it.
Okay. Can't wait to see you.

TWENTY.

Toldot—“generations”—the section of the Hebrew Bible where eventually Jacob fights God and is renamed Israel, God-wrestler—is one historical record of how the human animal has long concerned itself with unearthing and preserving our roots, of tracing our little thread back to God, so we might know that our griefs are part of a long legacy of griefs. We are a people, and not alone.

As with many a queer churned through the Christian biblical education factory that is the U.S. South, my critique of the family—its mythos the heart of many an evil—is scathing. Let it burn.

But something nestled inside the concepts of kin/kindred still holds beauty in my reckoning. Connectedness. Entanglement. A silk web that might catch you if you tumble. Everything is part of me and I am part of it.

So yes, let us speak of the generations. Let us speak their names and remember they lived and are inside us.

My uncle Frank and aunty Jacqueline are an odd pair—not at all an intuitive couple. As a child, despite them ostensibly being straight, I looked up to them as gay elders.

Jacqueline is the blood relation and Frank the in-law. Jackie is my maw-maw’s—maternal grandmother’s—little sister. Maw-Maw was born in 1934, my mother in 1967. Maw-Maw’s mother, Lorena Martha Hart, née Josephs, was born in 1916, and her mother before her, Mercy Josephs, in 1890. That is where the thread back to God snaps.

Aunty Jacqueline has dark skin and white hair, is slight and petite in stature. When she was a child, folks called her Spider for how thin her limbs moved.

But I had a belly that poked out and a big old forehead, Aunty Jackie always told us.

Jacqueline has worked most of her life selling pickles, peaches, jams, teas, homemade hair remedies, and other this-and-that types of products. Frank is a northern man. Chicago. Came South by way of college. He’s an

accountant, stuffy but kind. Likes to keep to himself, play dominoes and cards. Prefers to have a drink in him when there's an option for it.

I suppose it's their love of cannabis that's brought them together, Mama once said. Frank and Jacqueline's relationship struck me as that between brother and sister rather than lover and lover. Friendly. Warm. Completely platonic, yet they were inseparable.

When I pull up to their little house, Jackie's already on the porch waiting for me. "Oh, my baby," she says after I slide out of the car. Despite her shrunken stature, she wraps me up in a hug as big as Texas. "I am so, so, so sorry. I know you're struggling. You were always such a petal-hearted thing. I can't believe our fiery Eudora is gone." Her face is mangled with the puffiness of sobs.

Frank comes limping out after her in what I've come to think of as his uniform. Khaki green trousers, worn in, a tucked-in white shirt, and dark red suspenders. As a kid, I coveted his look, and I still do. The easiness of it, of him. A cool, boyish, shy masculinity.

"Which one is you again?" he asks, which is always how he greets any one of the three of us. "Ezekiel? Ephraim? Enoch?"

"Endoscopy," I say.

"Oh, yes, that one," he says, patting my lower back with his hand. "Sorry to hear about your mama and pop, Ezri."

"Y'all all packed?" I ask. Their country twang is inside me in seconds, my accent shifting like a changeling that's run out of magic.

I see the suitcases on their front porch, too damn many. Two large ones, a medium-sized one, Frank's guitar, and a large blue cooler no doubt filled with foiled baking trays of food Jacqueline has been up all night cooking.

"Be careful with that one," says Jacqueline. "You know it's got my sex toys in it," she says. "Not *all* mine, but for my business."

I couldn't see how a sex toy party for Jacqueline's latest MLM endeavor was grieving-friendly, but I also had no doubt that she would make it work.

"Even got butt stuff," she says proudly.

"Jacqueline," says Frank, shaking his head, but he's no prude, and the reprimand has more to do with social graces around death than about sex. At its core, this is their relationship, correcting each other's social gaps.

I load all their items into the back of the SUV, joints straining under not just the weight of the bags but also the weight of the last two days, but

Frank and Jacqueline are in their late seventies and have at least as many chronic conditions as I do.

“I made you all your favorites. I know you be missing this food.” I think of the game stew so good Esau sold his birthright for it. That’s how all my family cooks.

Of course, everyone says these things about their families, and that’s what I mean about kinship, kindred, kin. The comfort of a particular history no matter how horrid it might be. It’s ours. A magic that only we can weave.

“Where’s your girl Esophagus at?” asks Frank. “Your sister said she’s here, too.”

“Stop foolin’,” I say, though I love Frank’s lack of reverence for my mother’s naming choices. Giving her children all the same first initials, same as hers, had been her attempt to make us into a unit. So obviously marked as her creations. I love that he directs his humor and urge to tease at this rather than the hundred other things about me he could.

When other family comes, I will hear about my weight, how I need to gain it or lose it, my Jewishness. I will be urged to eat pork ribs and pork belly, and black-eyed peas cooked with ham hock, and greens cooked with ham hock, and pie crust with lard.

On the table for discussion will be my gender strangeness. Sexuality strangeness. My singleness. My accent. Why the hell I’m in England. Why I went and did that to my hair, my body.

“You’ll see Elijah soon,” I say. “But do me a favor and don’t do the whole name bit around her. She’s sensitive. Keen to be taken seriously.”

“Ah, yes. That age. When you think you know a thing or two and are worth a damn. She’ll learn soon enough.”

“But not from you,” I say.

“Not from me.”

★ ★ ★

There are those who dread the company of kin. Jerry Seinfeld said, There’s no such thing as fun for the whole family. A family hurts. It does. We are born in its noose. But for me, it is—okay, it’s like in a horror film.

When the group separates, does the audience not always scream out, why the fuck would you do that, you dumb-ass bitches?

If your heart has ever quickened in fear when a character said, Let's split up, you understand me, my whole psyche, the draw of a family all my own. My life is a dark woods with a slasher in the midst.

Our house was a frequent site of all manner of family function. We rarely needed an excuse to party. Birthdays and anniversaries, Juneteenth, July Fourth, summer, fall, winter, spring, Halloween, Valentine's Day. In droves, relatives would descend upon us, on the house.

At various points, our home was a hostel for all my family's wayward souls. When teenage cousins of mine had fights with their parents or boyfriends, when college didn't work out, we had the extra space to keep them. "We are a couch surfer's dream," Pop would say, annoyed when the coffee ran out because Mama's cousin Juanita and her five kids were staying with us while she was between tragedies.

I mention this to keep the scale of 677 in perspective.

You mean its physical size? asks Max.

I mean the scale of its haunting. Because perhaps, well, I'm not blowing it out of proportion exactly, but for many in my family, it was a refuge, a place to run to, not escape from.

Mm.

And I think that's because, well, when we speak of a house that is haunted, all we are speaking of is a house that is violent, and many houses are violent. Mold-besmirched. Leaded water. Holes in the floor. Windows that let in cold. Heating that doesn't work. Shitty cladding. In its end, Grenfell Tower was a haunted house. Every house in Flint, in so many cities, is a haunted house. So, 677 was a shelter, a space, and everything so awful about it was not so different than many other houses.

Do you not think your experiences were particularly extreme?

I mean, compared to what? Slums? Homelessness and sleeping rough? I'm not trying to downplay what I went through. It's about connectedness, really. To the whole big world and what it's going through. And as much as Mama wanted us to understand pain, to be self-reliant, I think she thought she could separate us from the world. That's what the gates in gated communities are for, aren't they? To ward off the suffering that seems to befall the commoners?

I don't know where I'm going with all this.

How does that feel? Not to know?

It feels all right. I mean. I don't know. It feels really okay, to acknowledge that my brain has pathways that aren't all doom and gloom, but questions, philosophical explorations. I'm reminded of life and death, their intimate interconnectedness, lovers getting off on the movement of their bodies against each other. Maggots feeding on a corpse. Earth feeding on bones. So any death never really ends in death.

Maybe that's what's wrong with me. I can't really live because I don't let things die. Everything inside of me, it freezes. It's natural. That's what's going on with my brain, these fractured bits of me freezing in moments of pain and death. My brain is kind of a dead thing.

I'd like to offer a different perspective, if that's all right with you?

Yeah, sure. You generally have good takes.

Your mind is creative, resilient, fertile, spinning new ways of protecting itself and you—the very definition of aliveness. I understand conceiving of your various selves as frozen, as ghosts. But quite literally, they're alive, aren't they? Buzzing, thinking, feeling, announcing their presence, moving the world and being moved by it.

Many unalive things move the world. Fire. Sickness.

Is that how you see the inside of yourself? As fire? As sickness?

In a way. Like, the ghosts, they're these wild, harmful things that can't be controlled.

And do you believe people need to be controlled? I ask because from what I know of you, that's not my impression of your values, your politics. You have a tendency to talk with such love and compassion for others—even now, how you cannot separate yourself from the plight of others, cannot extricate yourself from the rope of pain we are all encircled within, yet you talk of yourself with such ... hmm, I don't want to use the wrong word, but you seem unable to extend yourself—selves—the same grace you extend to the rest of the world.

I just feel like. I feel like. I feel like.

What's going on inside you right now?

Heart's racing. Can't catch my thoughts or my breath. Something bad rising up in me.

What makes you say it's bad?

It hurts. Fuck, fuck it hurts. Sorry, I'm fucking crying like some goddamn baby.

I'm here with you. Do you feel able to stay with the feeling?

Yeah. I'm kind of somewhere else.

Somewhere the feeling has taken you? How would it feel to take a breath right now, the biggest breath that you can, and let it out, letting it move your lips, like a rudder. Where would that breath take you?

Once, when I'm visiting family in Arkansas, I somehow get left home alone. I can't remember why. Maybe I'm not feeling well and my aunty is at the store to get some Robitussin. No. Cranberry juice. I had a UTI. Real bad one. I used to get them all the time. I'm just sitting on the toilet waiting for her to get home. It's the only position I can tolerate.

I hear a noise. The front door creaking open. I ask Aunty if it's her, but not because I'm afraid. It doesn't occur to me it could be anybody else. This isn't 677. Aunty? I call out, no answer. The door shuts. Aunty? It hurts. It hurts so bad. Did you get me some medicine?

I got UTIs all the time as a kid.

Yeah, you said. You've mentioned it before, too.

I was prone to them. My mother got me supplements. And different teas. Tinctures that my aunt Jacqueline would make. These things would help, but the infections always came back.

Did you ever have antibiotics?

Yes. But. I don't know. Anyway, I'm calling for this aunty I'm staying with. Buck naked on the toilet. Aunty, I moan. What's going on?

I am a crumpled mass of flesh on the toilet. The pain between my legs has shriveled me.

Footsteps approach jaggedly. This is not the sauntering walk of someone arriving to their own home. Doors squeak open, then slam back shut, and whoever's out there moves so fast—runs. For the first time, I begin to think, this is something unnatural. Not a ghost. Ghosts float. But a creature. Something warped and of a different realm.

The bathroom door rattles. The knob moves.

I'm panting on the toilet, drawers around my ankles, legs thrown open wide in a squat like something feral, wondering if this thing in the house has recognized me for what I am. Like it, an animal.

I have learned by this point to close my eyes against the world. My body is a wad of sticky chewed gum, drawing every madness to it. I close my eyes and await the inevitable, open them only in the aftermath to examine what new specks of dirt are a part of me now.

The hell? I hear from the front of the house. Ezri!

The steps, the too-fast steps, shoot through the house away from the bathroom door and then altogether disappear.

Ezri, baby, where you at? It's Aunty's voice and I know the danger has gone, but I'm still on the toilet, naked, eyes closed, can't move, can't say a word.

Can I ask you a question? asks Max. You say that you knew the danger was gone. Why do you say that?

Well, I heard Aunty's voice. I heard the footsteps go.

Yes, but the way you describe yourself, sitting on that toilet, eyes closed, unable to speak, it doesn't sound like a person who knew they were safe now, who believed the danger was gone.

Maybe. I guess. Okay, maybe I'm just projecting from hindsight?

In that moment, are you sure you heard Aunty's voice? And the steps receding?

Yes. I mean, as sure as I can be of any memory, which I know isn't much.

And when you think about that, what's the feeling in your body?

Empty. Bad. Pit in my chest. I'm nothing, a hole, worthless, alone. No one is coming to get me. No one is ever coming to get me.

These are the feelings in your body even as you think about hearing your aunt's voice coming, signaling the end of danger?

Yeah. Fuck. Yeah. I guess it's just, she can't help me. Nobody can. Not her. Not any of my aunts and uncles. Not my mama. Not my pop. Not teachers. Not friends. Not any fucking therapist or psychiatrist. No drug. Not Prozac, not citalopram, not Wellbutrin, not Lexapro, not diazepam, not Latuda. Not my sisters. Not any fucking body or thing.

What a terrible, horrid, unsafe feeling.

But it's not just a feeling. It's true. It's reality. It's life.

I don't believe it's true. I don't believe it one bit. But it's a story that's stuck inside of your body. Like a lodged bread crumb in your trachea.

It is true. I'm worthless. I'm nothing. I'm the fucking child in Omelas. I'm bad and not worth saving or caring for. God, I can't stop sobbing. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Fuck.

Can you keep talking to me? Tell me what's going on.

I feel ... shit. Like there's poison in me. A recalcitrant fungus. I can't get better because I'm fundamentally what's wrong.

I see you feeling that right now. You've gone through a tremendous amount of pain. I see you wanting to make sense of that pain by blaming yourself. But how would it feel, experimentally, just to state, It's not my fault. It's not my fault.

Worse.

Mmm. Why?

Because if it's not my fault, there's truly not a thing I can do. There's all these screaming hosts in my head, possessing me, and I can't—will never—exile them.

Like the Omelas child? Are they in your head?

Yes.

And did you?

Did I what?

Walk away? From Omelas?

I mean, I don't know. I feel like Omelas was my whole childhood. And I'm back there now. Like it's still happening all around me.

But you're with the child. The child's not alone. The child's with you, inside you.

I suppose so.

And how do you feel about the child, this child that's with you that's been the object of so much abuse? Do you hate them? Do you really want to exile them? Back to being alone in Omelas? Back to loneliness?

Of course not. No. I want to hold them. I want to carry them. I want to kiss every dirt smudge off their face. Give them the warmest bath, with sensitive soap. Their skin is so sensitive. Fragile.

I want to try something, and stop me if this is too weird or too much. First of all, I'm going to ask you to stay Ezri. Stay this you who you are right now, the you who seems to hold all these ghosts. And then, I want you to tell me what you'd do next, what would you do next to the poor Omelas child from Le Guin's short story?

I'd wash him, like I said. He's a little boy. A rough-and-tumble wild boy. Not anymore. He's atrophied. He has skin infections. Bones that have healed wrong after fractures. He's in a lot of pain. He's blank. Blank faced. Turned off.

But I pour a pitcher of water over his matted hair. Another. Pour half a bottle of conditioner in it. The same kind I use. Generic fragrance-free, giant bottle. You get your money's worth, you know? I use my fingers to unpick the giant mats and locs. Occasionally, I have to use scissors, but I avoid it where I can. Because this boy's strength is in his hair. It's a testament to all he's been through. It's been with him since he was born. It takes hours and hours to detangle. A clump of hair—casualties to the combs and brushes I've used—big as a small critter—sits next to us.

The boy—

Does he have a name?

No. They never named him in Omelas.

Would you like to?

Maybe, yes. After he's clean, I put him in one of my old T-shirts. He takes the ball of hair and pets it. I've rinsed it out and dried it, tied it into a little ball. He's still not talking. Or reacting. It's okay if he never does. I tell him that, even though I'm not sure he hears me, or understands. I carry him to his bed, which is my bed. I tuck him in. I say, I love you. I say, See you in the morning.

★ ★ ★

By the way. It turned out it was a junkie who broke into the house that day. Not a supernatural beast. And that makes me think maybe none of it was real. I made all of it up.

TWENTY-ONE.

The others are already home by the time I arrive with Aunty Jacqueline and Uncle Frank. Eve's kids are in the backyard, oblivious, largely, to the distress around them. "Where's Elijah?" I ask when the exchange of hugs and kisses and sorries is all done. "In the kids' room," says Eve. "I don't think she's feeling very well."

"What? Why?"

"Think it might have something to do with the fact that you're her motherfucking parent and she wanted to be picked up by you. So yeah, like, maybe check on her."

"I am. That's why I was asking where she was," I say, but my tone is more resigned than defensive.

"All right, you two. None of that. Not a time for petty fighting," says Aunty Jacqueline.

"It's not petty to want them to get their shit together and take proper care of their kid."

Often, I back down from these arguments. Conflict makes me feel suicidal, in no uncertain terms. I want to shrink away and die and never have the experience of a negative emotion again.

But rage sweeps through me like a drunken uncle who's just hit it big at the casino, wanting to shower his kids with love, with proof that he's not the fuckup we thought he was based on the last time we saw him.

"Fuck off, you sanctimonious bitch," I say. "I didn't know it was tantamount to child neglect to ask my sisters to pick up my daughter from the mall. Sorry we can't all be Eve Washington Maxwells, unfeeling bitches who can do it all, all the time. I'm only an animal. Not a god. Not like you. Not like Mama."

My family stares, shocked, unused to this side of me. "It's unfair, I get it," I say. "I'm a fuckup, you're not. You do everything right. But no matter how fucking perfect you are, she'll never love you as much as me. And now she's dead. Now she's fucking dead."

Eve blinks with slow control.

“Get the fuck outta my house,” she says.

“Eve,” says Emmanuelle.

“No. No. I’m not going to let you coddle them. Not in my space, my space I have worked hard to build, to cultivate. Ezri, get your shit, and get out.”

“Fine, wouldn’t want to taint your oasis,” I say. “Your perfect life. Your 677.” Now that I’ve begun, it’s not easy to stop. Anger is a waterslide.

I stomp around the house gathering what I can. “Elijah,” I say, entering the kids’ room. “Pack up, we’re going.”

She slides her earphones off, slams her laptop shut. “What are you talking about?”

“We’re going to a hotel.”

“What’s happening? Is everything okay?”

I don’t know how earnest the question is, or what answer she wants from me. Wearing her headphones, she might have genuinely missed the fight between Eve and me.

No, nothing’s okay, I want to say to her. Stop worrying about grown people’s shit and do what the fuck I say and pack your shit. It’s not your job to ask questions. It’s your job to do what you’re told. And stop whining. Come back to me when you’ve got real problems.

The words seethe under my tongue. Mama’s words and Pop’s.

History repeats and repeats because history is people, and we can reproduce only what we know, and we get what we know from our elders. The same mechanisms that facilitate language facilitate the passing on of pain.

Once, my sisters and I had been staying with family in Arkansas over the summer, a brief reprieve from 677, when suddenly we’d had to leave in the middle of the night, Mama pulling us out of bed and throwing our scattered clothes into our suitcases.

Later, I found out she’d had a fight with her cousin. I still don’t know what about, just that it meant the end of our sanctuary in Texarkana.

Instead of saying what I want to say, I say what I should. “Things are a little hectic right now, but everything is going to be all right,” I tell Elijah. “We all just need some space from each other.”

“Ezri, please don’t go,” says Emmanuelle. This is a role she’s well practiced in. Being the bridge between Eve and me. She utilizes her energy as the baby of the family to save us two from each other. Our desire to protect and love on her wins out over whatever animosity there is between the two of us. “Eve’s in a bad mood. So are you. Because—let’s not forget this—our parents are dead. And they didn’t die from old age or cancer. The shit we’re all going through right now, it’s not a good place to be making decisions from. And straight up, there is bad juju afoot.”

I can’t stop myself from rolling my eyes.

“Okay, I’m going to ignore that blatant disrespect because I know you are at low capacity and none of us are holding it together,” says Emmanuelle.

“We’re all at low capacity,” shouts Eve from the living room. “But somehow people only care when it’s Ezri.”

“Oh, boo-fucking-hoo, Eve,” says Emmanuelle. “First of all, nothing you’re saying is true. This sibling rivalry jealousy shit is old as fuck.”

“How are you defending them after what they just said to me?” Eve yells back.

“I’m not defending them. That shit was out of line, for sure. But you were out of line first because every time some one doesn’t live up to your perfect fucking standards you turn into a raging bitch, which, hey, *is* just like Mama. We’re all in a fucked-up place. Both of you need to apologize to each other. I’m not trying to be one of those families who falls apart when the matriarch dies. That is too cliché. This isn’t *Soul Food*.”

Even Emmanuelle hasn’t escaped the perpetual self-consciousness Mama bred up in us. The racial double consciousness theorized by Du Bois. The sense of being gazed upon. Our image. What we are projecting. Who we are against this mythical standard. Apparently, not a family that falls apart after its matriarch dies. God, just another pressure to live up to.

“Why are you even fighting?” asks Elijah, her voice so very quiet.

“Stupid shit, baby,” says Emmanuelle. “Everybody’s just worked the fuck up.”

“Are we going now?”

“No,” says Emmanuelle, throwing a sharp glance out the door toward Eve, still in the living room. “We’re all staying here, together. Okay?”

“Okay,” says Elijah, but she’s far from okay, and I want so badly for her to be. So, stupidly, the words coming out of my mouth without any real thought are, “Was the mall all you hoped it would be?”

She crosses her arms over her chest, hugging herself, curling herself into something smaller. “Yes. It was pretty good.”

“Did you—?” It looks like she got her ears pierced, but if I’m just now noticing some old update, it’s an embarrassing moment to reveal it, and Eve will say, God, what kind of parent are you? Not noticing your daughter’s pierced ears? “Nice haircut,” I say, keeping myself to safe territory.

I am no kind of parent. I know this. I know this. The Omelas boy in my head, he knows, too.

TWENTY-TWO.

The app boy I flaked on messages me a few days later when I'm at lunch with my sisters, my parents' lawyer, and Elijah. My sisters recognize the specific sound of the notification and give me a look. Elijah, thankfully, is oblivious and busy with her own text conversation, but at least has the good decency to occasionally look up and pretend to be engaged with our conversation.

I switch to social media—go to Laurie's Instagram, which I've never followed but have stalked on and off over the years. She's made a memorial post about Mama and Pop. Apparently, they were pillars of the community, taken before their time. There are ninety-six comments, three times as many likes.

Mama and Pop were “good people,” says homesweetexas.

“A damn shame,” says littlemissdaisychain.

“Does anybody know what's happened to their kids?” asks mikeforever.

Laurie never posts pictures of her face. It's all plates of food at fancy brunch spots. Books she's reading about tackling shame. Inspirational quotes. Mission trips to Haiti.

Emmanuelle shoves my side with her shoulder, and I turn off my phone's screen, set it face down on the table so I'm not tempted to keep looking.

“So,” says the lawyer, stirring a pack of sweetener into coffee, “it's just a question of going through the options, of which there are many. The estate, as I'm sure you're all aware, is quite sizable. Now, most of it has been left to the three of you, split equally, with some of the cash reserves having been distributed to various family.”

“How much are we talking?” asks Eve. Over the last few days her hostility has grown and her togetherness has shrunk. Her hair is in a messy bun, and she's wearing sweatpants. Her makeup is undone, and her eyes are hollow domes, puffy, blue.

“In ballpark terms, roughly, real-estate-wise, an estimated three million dollars’ worth, and then outside of that, one million worth of assets to be distributed among you and your mother’s siblings. Now, that’s held in a number of funds, stocks.”

“I’m sorry?” asks Eve.

I’m thinking loosely the same thing, as far as I’m thinking at all. The lawyer’s words plunge me underwater. Sounds have become muffled.

“You said a million dollars?” says Eve.

“Roughly—that’s not including the real estate holdings. Your childhood home, of course, which is paid off, and a number of properties along the Gulf Coast and in Arkansas. Now, as far as the one million held in funds, about half of that will be going to extended family. We’ll be contacting people separately, so you don’t have to worry about any of that, unless, of course, you want to contest anything.”

“Mama and Pop had that much?” asks Emmanuelle.

The lawyer looks up from his papers, clasps his fingers together like a man in prayer. “I was aware that there wasn’t much communication between all of you these last few years—your parents were honest to me about that—but, given your upbringing, private schools, including boarding school, I assumed you wouldn’t be surprised by your parents’ financial status,” he says. He’s a light-skinned Black man with piercing hazel eyes, softened by a round face, a wide nose, and plump lips. He’s older, and his hair has gone gray. His glasses are pushed up on top of his head.

“I mean, it’s not like we thought they were poor, but in later years, they’d implied things were very tight. I mean, rich-people tight, but still tight. All their money was tied up in the house. Significant debts. Under on the mortgage. Huge hits by the 2008 financial crisis,” says Emmanuelle, the only one of us three siblings able to speak.

I’m stirring a cup of tea that’s gone lukewarm and Eve is staring out the window. She’d scheduled this meeting for when Eden and Echo would be at theater rehearsal, and I gather it’s the time she would usually reserve for errands. Her house is currently host to me, Emmanuelle, Elijah, Jacqueline, Frank, and cousin Georgia, and there are others in town, too, who are at the house during the day even if not staying overnight.

What is she thinking right now? A death in the family is torture for the control freak.

“The house is free and clear, as are many of their other properties. Your parents were very prudent financially and wise with their investments.”

“You keep talking about other properties. What do you even mean?” asks Eve. She’s still staring out the window.

James, the lawyer, explains the entirety of my parents’ finances. The summer apartments we stayed at every summer in Galveston, right on the water, which we’d assumed were vacation rentals, were owned by my parents.

We learn about retirement accounts, trusts. It’s an empire, and not an empire in ruin, in its last days. It’s flourishing. Gleefully in the black.

“This is a lot to process,” says Emmanuelle.

Eve sits wordlessly in the booth, looking as childlike as I’ve ever seen her, more than she ever did as an actual child. She’s always been small, but over-exercise has made her even more petite in adulthood.

For a moment, one moment, I want to hold her, grab her cheeks, lick her tears, kiss her, and say not only is she enough—more enough than Mama ever seemed to find any of us—but she is everything, everything any reasonable, good person could ever want to be.



Mama was big on Denny’s. Waffle House. IHOP. Cheap breakfasts out or late middle-of-the-night runs, at say 1:30 a.m., for steak and eggs, were frequent fixtures of our childhood routine. These were places she rarely got to go to as a kid. Birthday treats, and not even for her own birthday, but for her father, who was mostly away but who would roar back into the home to be doted and loved on before disappearing again.

Despite her usually superior attitude, Mama never felt herself too good for these places, and we’d show up in the night in our pajamas and order a feast.

Mama could eat a half-pound double bacon cheeseburger in the space of minutes, then slurp down Coke after Coke after Coke. Emmanuelle would sleep curled on the booth, her head in Mama’s lap. Eve would drink a milkshake, and I’d settle into a stack of buttery, floppy, salty-sweet pancakes, made more sweet by the syrup I’d tip onto them from the jug.

You okay, Mama? Eve asks once.

I'm spreading butter from the little plastic packet onto the pancakes and waving my hand to the waitress to bring more. I do not look up from my task, though I twitch—slightly startled that Eve would ask such a thing—given that Mama is not okay, and when she is not okay, it is best to leave her to herself when she has made the decision to retreat inward, lest she recall that instead of retreating inward, a withdrawn animal, she can attack.

Mama, too inside herself, does not answer.

I chance a glance at her face, then flick my eyes back toward my food, which I am now ready to cut into little squares, then douse in syrup. Mama is still. Her reddened eyes, as far as I can tell, rest on nothing in particular. On a poster of the Oreo cheesecake, or on the carafe of coffee up on the bar, or out the window, into the dark parking lot, our car beneath the single streetlamp.

Mama? Eve prods.

I inhale, but stifle the breath so that it does not make a loud sighing noise upon exhalation—a sound that might rouse Mama from her state.

Mama?

What, Eve?

I bite into my pancakes, which are perfect. Not too spongy, not too thin.

You okay?

I'm okay, yes, says Mama. She eats one of her french fries.

Thank you for taking us out, Eve says.

God, I hate the way she sucks up sometimes. Doesn't she understand that Mama doesn't like it, either? Not that our mother doesn't appreciate the adulation, the praise, the power—she does, delights in it—but it is not what wins her love. That is something she confers arbitrarily, during those rare moments when she sees something in us that she also sees in herself, something beautiful, something that reminds her we are hers.

The pancakes are really good, I say, because I can't/won't say, Yes, thank you, Mama, even though I am expected to say something now that Eve has.

Yes, darling, I can tell you think so, says Mama.

I can't tell if this is a jab at my zealous hunger, my fatness. It wouldn't make sense given the relish with which she has just eaten, but I am on alert.

The conversation dies out, blissfully. Mama returns to herself, and Eve sulks, denied the jolt of warmth and reassurance she'd been craving from

Mama.

Pardon me, girls, while I go to the bathroom. Watch Emmanuelle, says Mama. She hurries off, and I don't ask questions. Instead, I thank God for the peace of her absence.

Eve, on the other hand.

What's going on with her, do you think? she asks me.

I groan but ask her what she means. Eve should be used to these witching-hour excursions. They happened whenever any of us three children ran to Mama's room, frightened in the night by a ghost, a noise, a sudden hand over our throats, our mouths, our chests, our bellies, our thighs.

She'd run as fast as she could to check on the paranormal intruder, flinging all the switches to saturate the house in light.

Who's there? she'd say. Who the fuck's there, hurting my babies?

She'd rip sheets and blankets off beds, draw back curtains in a frenzy. Open closet doors.

One of us children would be weeping, and she'd come to us and say, What happened? Tell me exactly what happened.

But we were sleep-addled and incomprehensible through fear and sobs.

What did you see? she'd press, shaking our shoulders. Who was it? What did they do?

No answer that could satisfy her came. Afraid of—or angry at—the house, she'd drag us all to the car. Sometimes, pack an overnight bag so we could stay at a motel or hotel.

Other nights, she'd call Pop from her phone, several times before he'd answer, and she'd explain, and she'd beg him, Come home, come home. And he would say over speaker, I will as soon as I can, baby. Y'all stay strong.

But none of us stayed strong, not even Mama. We were wisps.

She's not herself, Eve says, sucking down the dregs of her milkshake.

She's upset about what happened, I explain.

Eve rolls her eyes.

What?

Usually she's just not so ...

Sad? I ask. Down?

Yeah.

I shrug my shoulders. I'm not indifferent, far from it, but I can't explain. I can't explain that I understand Mama completely.

Emotions are little curses, spells. They come over us and take us away, outside ourselves. There is no predictability. At times, one spell trumps another, or multiple spells war at once, and the body becomes a shell in those moments, a shell that does not belong to you.

Mama is far away right now. I am far away all the time.

Are you okay? Eve asks me.

What do you mean?

I mean, she ... she was there, wasn't she? She likes you.

Who likes me?

Eve pauses for a moment, then says, Her. The woman without a face.

I wipe the back of my hand over my syrup-sticky lips. The woman without a face likes to slip inside of me, yes, like I am her shoe.

I'm okay, I tell Eve. I rub my temples, which suddenly feel bruised.

Headache? Eve asks. Me, too.

Back then, we were all plagued with them constantly. Eve had even gone to see a doctor about hers when they began affecting her performance in school. We were impossible to wake up in the mornings, at times, the malaise of the house having infected us like a mold.

An alternative theory, it really was mold, a literal infestation of microbes in our lungs. Fatigue, grogginess, breathlessness, headaches—these were all possible reactions to and symptoms of a mold infestation. But multiple times Mama had had the house checked.

We did discover, once, that we'd been slowly dying from carbon monoxide poisoning. It was one of the things the pediatrician had suggested we try looking into when all of Eve's scans came back normal and the various medications for migraines and chronic headaches made no difference.

But we have a carbon monoxide detector, Mama said, in her responsible homeowner voice.

Yeah, funniest thing, it's not properly installed, said an inspector.

What do you mean it's not properly installed? I paid good money for that.

I'm sorry, ma'am, he said, shrugging, the way you might shrug to a patron arriving to a store just at closing as you lock the door on them.

Do you always wake up with headaches? asks Eve that night at the diner. She's chewing on the plastic tip of her straw. She looks beautiful as she does so, effortless. Like the whole world up to this point was building toward this moment when my little sister would be in a diner chewing on a straw. Her hair pokes out from the scarf she has tied around her head, accidentally, of course, but it looks staged, a fake displacement to give her an air of not trying.

Does your stomach always hurt? she presses when I don't answer the first question. Do you feel drowsy? Do you want to sleep? Do you always want to sleep? Do you want to die?

What I want is to eat my pancakes in peace, I say, not understanding what she's gearing up for, what she's trying to say.

We need to get out of the house, she says. We need to tell somebody.

I sigh, this time audibly because Mama isn't here to hear it.

Don't you want to live somewhere else? she asks. Maybe Mama—I don't know, maybe if she heard it from someone else, like a teacher, she'd listen.

Mama doesn't listen to teachers, or Pop, or her children, or anyone. She is God. She has put us in this place and expects praises for it.

TWENTY-THREE.

The ride home from the meeting at the diner with the lawyer is quiet, each of us a pillar to ourselves, holding up the silence.

A part of me clings dearly to the fragile peace, but another part, more insistent, has to ask. “Do you remember that one night at the diner?” I say.

“Which night? We went all the damn time. You’re going to need to be more specific,” says Emmanuelle.

“You were sleeping, I think. Didn’t even wake up for a brownie sundae. Mama was really fucked up. Shaken.”

Eve sips from her water bottle, then slides it back into the cup holder. She looks through the rearview mirror at me, then back at the road. “The night she disappeared into the bathroom for, like, half an hour?” she asks.

“Yes,” I say.

“What about it?”

“I wonder if that was the night that she was choosing that we would die.”

Eve pulls into the fast lane. Emmanuelle sucks in air. “Don’t,” says Emmanuelle. “Please don’t say that.”

“I think, I think she knew that if we stayed, it could only end in one way, yet knowing that, she still couldn’t bring it upon herself to get out of there. And it was heavy on her. She was sick with it, sick with her failure,” I say.

I turn to Emmanuelle. Tears curl down her face like tumbling locks of hair—Samson’s hair, thick and vital. There is enough water on her cheeks, in the space of seconds, to save a dying man from thirst.

“Why didn’t you realize that then?” asks Eve. “I told you. Told you we needed to leave, right then, right there. And damn, I guess we could have fled to any of Mama and Pop’s many homes, it turns out. Or stayed with family. Or anything. Anything. Why didn’t you want to go with me? Why did you choose her over your own life? Is that how much you hated me? Hate me still?”

I know I have Mama's sickness. Can't let go of something false at the expense of my life, my freedom.

The morning after that night at the diner, Eve made a complaint to a teacher, a complaint that might not have gone anywhere had we not already been known by social services.

But there were police, and the police asked questions, and I didn't answer those questions the way Eve might have liked me to. I didn't say, Please, please, get us out of the house.

Even if they wouldn't have believed my words about the house, if I'd conveyed the true state of things at all, perhaps there would've been somebody who would've done something.

I could've told them about Emmanuelle's legs, the burns, and how there was no hospital record of it because Mama never took her to the hospital.

Or I could've said Mama wakes us in the middle of the night and takes us here, there. And there would've been a record of that. Maybe they'd have thought she was a drug addict.

They did test her for drugs, found her system rife with opiates and benzodiazepines and sleeping pills, but it was not enough to remove us.

Maybe it was devotion to Mama that kept me silent to the investigators, to the social workers, or maybe it was knowing that what was on the other side of life at the house did not offer anything that much different than life in the house.

"None of this is Mama's fault," says Emmanuelle. "Why are y'all blaming her? And now each other? It's that house."

Eve and I understand, though, that at its heart, a house is no more than what is inside of it, and what protects it, and who's built it, and who lives in it or has lived in it. We all had our part. Mama had her part. Of course she did.

"Could the house have been what it was without her?" I ask.

"Yes," says Emmanuelle. "Absolutely."

We are nearly home, but Eve pulls into a gas station, gets out of the car, and slams the door shut. I remain inside with Emmanuelle and Elijah, who's committed to her headphones.

"I know you don't believe the way I believe, but okay, we know the house is bad. Right? Straight-up fucking bad. Doesn't it stand to reason that it poisoned Mama, the way it poisoned all of us? Maybe not literally

poisoned, but what was she supposed to do? She was traumatized and lost and didn't understand. How could she ever understand anything like that? She had a dream and the dream died and she just wanted to keep a piece of it."

"All right, Miss What Happens to a Dream Deferred," says Eve as she slides back into the car.

"Don't make fun," says Emmanuelle. She wipes tears from her eyes, but it's no stopgap against the flow.

"I'm sorry, but the Oak Creek Estates is hardly the Harlem referred to in the title of Langston Hughes's poem," says Eve. "Like, really? She had a dream that died and she wanted to keep a piece of it? Why are you being so unserious right now?"

"I'm just saying, it didn't turn out how she expected, and in the worst possible way. That would break a lot of people." Emmanuelle's defense of Mama is more impassioned than I'd expect from someone so estranged from her in her last years, but maybe it was getting away from the house so young that allowed her to keep such a childish understanding of it. To her, it is a boogeyman house.

"Are y'all okay?" asks Elijah, finally pulling her headphones off.

"Not exactly," I say.

"Right. Your parents are dead," she says. "My grandparents."

I reach over to squeeze her hand, but the gesture feels unnatural and I stop myself before I make things more awkward than they are between us. "Will I get to see the house that you grew up in before you sell it?" Elijah asks.

Eve and I both shake our heads vehemently. "No," I say. "I know it's hard to understand, and I get how you want to be close to it, but I can't let you near that place."

"I'm sorry, but did I miss the part where we decided we're selling it?" asks Emmanuelle.

"I just assumed," says Elijah.

"Which you were wise to do," Eve says.

"Don't," says Emmanuelle.

We finally pull onto Eve's road and come to a stop in front of the bungalow.

I send Elijah inside to put the kettle on, then my sisters and I congregate on the front porch, me leaned up against a post with chipped maroon paint, Emmanuelle sitting on the plastic chair, and Eve in the doorframe.

“Y’all all right out there?” Jacqueline calls.

“Yes, ma’am,” we all say to dismiss her, but she joins anyway, a glass in her hand that I can smell is a brandy and cola, heavier on brandy than cola.

“What’s got that little girl scared shitless?” Jacqueline asks, waving back inside toward Elijah. “Y’all need to get it together.”

“It’s natural that this is a high-conflict time,” says Eve. She closes her eyes as she exhales—some self-regulation exercise. She’s talking sense into herself as much as she’s explaining to Aunt Jacqueline. “Of course emotions are high. Of course everything’s—” Her voice breaks.

“Did you know, Jacqueline?” I ask her.

“Know what, Ez?”

“That we had the means and opportunity to leave 677 at any time?” I say.

“Well, of course you did. At the very least, y’all coulda come stayed with me. I offered that to my niece many times,” she says.

We did stay with Aunt Jacqueline and Uncle Frank sometimes. They turned their den into a private space for us. Mama would sleep on the pullout couch.

“I mean permanently. Did you know they owned other houses?”

Aunt Jacqueline tips her glass back into her mouth and swigs. When the liquid is gone, she sucks an ice cube into her mouth. “That place your folks had out there, it was nice. Magnificent. Not anything the likes I’d ever seen before, and certainly not your mama. I don’t know, honey. I know your mother was not a person who could be reasoned with. She saw the world a certain way and couldn’t be moved from it. She was brilliant. Had been since she was young. Getting scholarships to fancy schools. And she’d been hurt by people who told her the world was one way when she knew it was another, or could be another. People who tried to tell her she couldn’t when she knew she could. Please understand that about her. It’s like that—remember that little play you did, Ez? At that Black youth theater? That me and Frank came and saw? What was it?”

“*A Raisin in the Sun*,” I say, lightning-struck by the coincidence of it all. It hadn’t been more than half an hour since back at the gas station when

Emmanuelle referenced the Langston Hughes poem that the title of Lorraine Hansberry's play was based on. Was that what our lives came down to? The result of a life lived with a dream deferred?

"And remember how, at the end, that white man comes and tries to convince the family not to move to that little white neighborhood? Now, you could say a wise family would've listened, wouldn't have gone ahead to live with folks who clearly didn't want them there. But no, we see the act as brave. Or we're supposed to. That's your mama. She wasn't going to be run out her home."

Emmanuelle sniffles. "Exactly. Thank you, Aunty. Thank you."

But I remember the version of events that never made it into the Broadway performance of the play, or the film version with Sidney Poitier. The part where one of the neighbors in their Chicago building couldn't fathom why the family wanted to move to a neighborhood of white people, because their house would probably get bombed.

There is no understanding Mama, just like there is no understanding God. A yeshiva boy could spend years studying Talmud and never know her.

TWENTY-FOUR.

I should speak of my father. I should speak of him lest he be spared the ire rightly due him. We have a tendency at times to exonerate fathers, seemingly blameless because of their absence or their ambivalence.

This is not every father, but it is mine. It is a sitcom dad trope. An overbearing mother, a dad who sits by, calmly, and says, “Why don’t you go easier on her, hon?”

A father who’s washed his hands of the whole mess, the mess that is his family.

My father was a brilliant inventor and engineer. An innovator. Biotech his specialty, he designed a number of medical devices that improved the lives of those with diabetes and other chronic illnesses.

I understood that he invested in many biotech start-ups, as well as adjacent fields, though I never had an idea of how successful that was until now. His work took him away from home frequently, a week here, two weeks there, a weekend conference, a bid, an international university lecture.

He was dedicated to his job and, in his mind, to his family as well; but to him that meant leaving things in Mama’s capable hands. In the same way that she chose the house’s decor, she chose our schools and what parenting method would be used.

When she explained that they would not, under any circumstances, be beating the kids, he agreed without any fight, having been spared the belt for much of his own youth by luck of being the good child, the accomplished child, in his family of nine.

He was not quick to anger, and he was jovial. He was passionate in his love for Mama, and people loved to be around him.

I noticed a chameleonlike aspect to his personality at times. The type of conversation and manner he offered changed based on the group he was with. He could be dense, theoretical, philosophical, and esoteric; he could

chat the NBA and baseball draft either casually or with an obsessive, mathematical attitude toward records, numbers, stats.

He was not a religious man at all. Went to church with all of us when he was home because Mama made him; it was what strong, united Black families did. He found my desire to convert to Judaism confounding, but he did his best to support me, driving me, when he was in town, to services, to classes at different synagogues in the Dallas metroplex—a job that typically belonged to our neighbor Laurie. Mama point-blank refused. Why don't you get that daft white woman you love so much to take you, she said the first time I asked, so that is what I did.

A couple of days before that conversation, she'd come home to find Laurie in our home. She was sitting with me at the dining room table, helping me with homework I didn't need help with. I hadn't expected Mama home for another couple of hours.

When Mama asked Laurie what she was doing there, I'd butted in, told Mama she was looking over my history paper. Mama looked like I'd stabbed her.

You asked *this* woman for help with a history paper? She was too prideful to say the full sentence she wanted to: *You asked this woman for help with a history paper over me?*

I wanted a different perspective, I'd said.

Later, when Pop came home from a business trip, Mama related the story to him. Defending myself, I told Pop that at least Laurie listened to me. Mama never did.

Pop was heating up a plate of food, half listening to us.

Do you hear what that child just said? asked Mama.

Don't be so hard on her, said Pop.

My father was not a man anyone could fault, and yet, where was he when all this was happening? When our childhood was happening inside of that house? I thought he might leave when we children left, but he stuck by Mama even after retiring, and in the end, died with her.

I am left with a man who was pleasant, but who I cannot say that I know, and a man who I remember fondly, but also remember not at all.

TWENTY-FIVE.

The matter of selling the house should wait until after the funeral, Eve and I say, but to Emmanuelle, that's full admittance that our plan is to sell it. She finds this plan, and these are her words, "antithesis to an ethics of love and justice. We will not sell that trauma to another innocent family."

I'd like to tell her that no family is innocent, not really, that behind every family is a story of harm, that the family itself is a capitalist institution whose definitions and frameworks are imbricated with patriarchy, childism, abuse—but I know it's not what she means and I hold back, the way Mama never could. I use theory the way she did. Not to know the world, but to separate myself from it. To unfeel it.

"We should tear the fucking place down, sell the lot," says Eve. "Would that work for you?"

"Maybe," Emmanuelle says, but I know that it's not a solution that satisfies her desire for some kind of spiritual closure, an ashes to ashes, dust to dust moment with the place that made us, and ruined us.

"Look," says Echo. Eve's kid brings their tablet to the kitchen, where we're all waiting for the peach cobbler Aunt Jacqueline has made to cool down enough to cut slices.

"What is it?" asks Eve, removing a quart of vanilla ice cream from the freezer.

Aunt Jacqueline has removed bowls from the cabinets and lined them up. She's gotten out cinnamon to sprinkle on the top of each serving when it's ready, has cut fresh slices of peaches as garnish. This is the attitude she puts into everything that she makes, from her cannabis skin butters to her relaxation teas.

I see a bit of Mama in Jacqueline's obsessive preparation, the way that I see Mama anywhere, or the way I see everyone inside of everyone. That's the trouble of it all—this oscillation between identification and alienation, camaraderie and war. We are all the same. None of us are the same. People hurt us, and we hurt people, and it's endless. It brings me to the floor,

suppliant, devastated, ready to surrender to anything that might offer peace from the cliché reality that life is pain.

“Ezri, are you seeing this?” asks Emmanuelle.

I am fighting for my life, dear sister, at this very moment, standing in this kitchen, ready to die so I do not have to be intimate again with suffering.

“Ezri?”

“They’re gone,” says Eve, and the condemnation in her voice reaches me midway down the hole into which I’m descending. I can catch my fingers on the well wall, dig nails into stone.

“I’m not gone,” I say. “I’m here.” Where else could I be? I want to show her my body. Take off my top and my trousers. Get naked. I am here and it hurts. I am fighting with all I have to be here.

Emmanuelle pushes Echo’s tablet into my face. It’s the online edition of the city’s newspaper. *Tragic murder-suicide in Dallas’s north suburbs shocks family-oriented community.*

“Is this shit not supposed to be private?” says Eve.

Jacqueline divvies slices of cobbler into scalloped-edge bowls. “It was going to get out,” she says.

“Your great-aunt’s right,” says Uncle Frank, peering up from the crossword he’s been working on over on the couch. “People see police cars and come running. Opportunists. Somebody’s bound to talk. Leak shit. And it’s not like police officers are known for integrity.”

“You know that’s right,” says Jacqueline.

“But it’s still under investigation. To call it a murder-suicide. I mean—they haven’t even completed the autopsy, have they?” asks Emmanuelle.

The word *autopsy* makes me gag, and I lurch toward the sink, making it just in time to be sick into the basin over some dirty dishes. “Sorry,” I say, sputtering.

I feel a hand on my back, but I don’t know which of my loved ones it belongs to. I flinch at the touch—and at once the hand is removed, which makes me believe it must’ve been one of my sisters, not Jacqueline. She’d have leaned into more touch, rather than away, at a sign of my bodily discomfort, the way aunties and grannies and great-aunties demand endless kisses and hugs.

“Here,” says Eve. She hands me a cup of water, which I sip from gratefully. She turns the tap on the sink to wash away my regurgitated stomach contents, squeezes dish liquid onto the besmirched plates, bowls, and glasses. “Better?” she asks me.

“Yeah.”

She looks at me thoughtfully, piercingly, and I shrink beneath her examination. “You’re not usually squeamish,” she says.

The nausea weakens me enough that I have to take a seat at the kitchen table. It’s the thought of Mama and Pop there, everything they were, being violated, with scalpel, with knife, with hands—likely white hands, white hands that would make assumptions, make judgments. I know what it’s like to be dead under someone’s invasive touch, frozen. Wouldn’t wish it on my kin.

I have always been resistant to examination, to the eyes of others upon me, testing, assessing. Perhaps because Mama was the way that she was, obsessed with my difference, my, in her eyes, set-apartness. I spoke early. Read at two and a half, on my own, without any instruction. The world was heavy upon my soul and she found in me a great wonder.

She liked me to perform. I would recite poetry for strangers on her command. “We Real Cool” was the first, which I memorized in a sitting at age three at her beckoning. At five, it was an excerpt from “For My People.”

These things I enjoyed, so it was easy to go along with Mama’s wishes for me, but around six, when my life seemed an unfathomable battery of endless tests, IQ exams, psychosocial educational assessments for ADHD, autism, OCD, ODD, when I did not get along in school, I learned that anyone outside of myself was not to be trusted, and any academic interest they had in me was to be shunned.

Elijah, who’s been watching—always watching—comes to comfort me. She positions her chair across from me, so our knees are touching, but my knees are bouncing uncontrollably, and even the brush of her jeans against mine is sensory death. I pull back.

“Sorry,” I say.

“Don’t be,” she says, with no hurt in her voice, only understanding. “I know you don’t like to be touched very often.” I didn’t know that she knew that. “I love you, Yoyo.”

“I love you, too.”

“Do you still want pie, baby?” asks Jacqueline.

“Absolutely,” I say. Elijah smiles. “Insulin time,” I say, trying to reassert a role of parental care and responsibility.

Elijah does not like cooked fruit, so Aunt Jacqueline makes her a bowl with cinnamon and peach juice–infused flaky pie crust and a few fresh peaches, the way she did for me when I was a child, when I also refused to eat cooked fruit. While we eat, we discuss the news article and what it might mean. It’s on the main page of the news site, with a fair few words of reportage giving it space.

When we search the internet for other mentions, there are more, though most of the material is recycled from that original piece. The news has not spread to any major national or international reporting sites, thankfully, but we suppose there is enough intrigue in the story to hold captive those who need an inconceivable tragedy over which to obsess.

“Maybe this is a good thing,” says Emmanuelle.

“How could it possibly be a good thing?” Eve asks.

The sky darkens outside. I can see the way the day turns to shadow through the glass doors leading out to the small backyard. There is a locked shed, rusted and red, a heavy padlock hanging from the door handles like a single snarled tooth.

Night makes me restless. I try to eat my cobbler, given how much insulin I took to cover it, but it tastes like nothing, and each bite is a stone I have to turn around in my mouth, push down my throat, only for it to sit weighted and burdensome in my stomach.

“It’s not going to be long until people’s questions of why lead them to the stuff that happened there,” says Emmanuelle, impassioned. People finding out what happened is all she’s ever wanted. Sometimes, we want only to tell our story and have someone listen. We must know that on this earth, what happens to us matters; otherwise, what tethers us to the living?

“And what the fuck do you think that’s going to do?” asks Eve, coming in weapons hot. “They’re gonna see the darkness, and then...? See the fucked-up shit, and then...? We’ve all been to therapy. We got to let it the fuck go.”

Eve has read that book that circulates widely, about the children of emotionally immature parents, and knows that if you’re waiting for some

admittance of wrongdoing, of mistake, if you need an apology to move on, it will never come. Never.

The realization that validation of the pain will never come from those who inflicted the pain has the power to obliterate. Did it happen? If they're not apologizing, if they're not admitting they've done it, did they do it? What is real? What is true? Is my life a fantasy? Then let me wake up by dying.

But Emmanuelle is an influencer by profession, and perhaps enough years younger than both of us to be truly an internet child in a way Eve and I aren't. She believes in her voice and what it can accomplish if only she speaks. She believes in the power of hashtags, in the possibility of a campaign going viral and changing the world.

I think of the Omelas boy I am holding in my psyche, of all that has been done to him. How might the story of "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" be different had there been internet? Of course, Le Guin's work is an allegory about the way grand riches depend on the exploitation of the downtrodden. There are no mansions without a torn-down forest.

But perhaps her allegory is worth expanding. A journalist sees the Omelas child, takes a video, and walks away. He posts the video with the comment, Why isn't anybody talking about this?

Perhaps the result would then be everyone talking about it, but still, what of the Omelas child? Justice-minded people know now that he's suffering, but who might mount a rescue? The borders of Omelas are secure. There's a well-trained army ready to defend itself against anyone who threatens the great nation's way of life.

"Talk sense into her, because I clearly can't," Eve says, imploring me, for once, to be on her side. She wants anyone, ever, to be on her side. That is how I know she feels. Peach cobbler bowl in hand, she leaves the kitchen for her bedroom, which is no longer even a proper sanctuary because Jacqueline and Frank have taken it over, us siblings relocated to the pullout couch in the living room.

"I just want to forget about all this," I tell Emmanuelle.

"But don't you get it, Ezri? You never will," Emmanuelle says. "You'll never get over it. Never. Listen to yourself. Does it even make sense to you that that's a reasonable goal? A thing that will happen? That you'll just forget if you want to enough?"

If I cannot forget, what is there? I am always remembering, even when I am not. *Me* is in itself a remembrance. *Me* does not exist without the past that shaped my being. And what is there between memory and forgetting? Today? Today, in this kitchen? Eating a food that I love, but it somehow brings me no joy, no nourishment in this moment? Today, with siblings who I confound? A daughter who struggles? Is this what life is?

"I want to move on," I say. I borrow Eve's turn of expression.

"Like it's a place you can leave? Well, you left the house. And where are you now?" says Emmanuelle. As she senses her rightness, a fire builds up in her. She is her own torch. "Healing is not—"

I turn away from her, sneering, and she cuts her own self off. I hate the word *healing* like I hate the word *crystals*, like I hate the word *manifest*, like I hate the word *self-care*. Social media has turned most language into empty woo.

Healing, in its most traditional sense, describes the post-trauma process of a physical wound. How can it apply to something so dynamic as a whole life? A whole person? A brain? Can you look at a group of people and tell who among them is "healed" and who is "wounded"?

Emmanuelle looks at me like I'm someone she'll never understand. So be it. I can't win anyone's love or approval, and I no longer want to try. Here I am in all my non-sliveness.

Aunt Jacqueline serves Elijah more of her special-prepared cobbler. "I agree with you, Aunty," says Elijah, looking gingerly at me, then back down at her bowl, which she tucks into hungrily. "I think it's always better for the world to know. There is no guarantee of change, but without anyone knowing, change can't happen."

"Mm," says Aunt Jackie, buzzed and glowing with intoxication. "But if they don't know, they also can't dismiss you. As long as the story's inside yourself, you control the narrative. Can't have people saying you a liar, you bad, you wrong."

I am suddenly ravenous for all of Aunt Jackie's secrets.

"That's fear, though," says Emmanuelle. Of the three of us, she's the only one who's inherited Dad's freckles, dark brown specks of melanin over her already dark brown skin. I am drawn to the visual feast of them, and I'm grateful that I can appear to look into her eyes when I am really looking into

her forehead, her cheeks. “Aunt Jacqueline, you can’t really be advocating not speaking up because you’re afraid of what might happen. Surely not.”

“It’s not fear when it’s reality based, honey,” she says, cool and collected, refusing to rise to match Emmanuelle’s emotion. This is old news to her. She is a catalog of fights won and lost; this one does not register as one worth a passionate response.

“Does the squeaky wheel not get the grease?”

“Certainly sometimes. But it also gets the beating, the expulsion, the prison, the death. Not every battle needs fighting. You got to pick and choose. I want my niece laid to rest peacefully, without all this nonsense, because I don’t think an ounce of good can come from it. What do you really want, little girl? Them folks out there can’t give you nothing you need.”

Elijah listens to the debate, enraptured, and I bet if she weren’t too embarrassed to do so, she’d be taking notes. Hungry for guidance, for truth, for words, any words, she watches the conversation unfold between all of us with desperate care.

“Y’all will not make me feel bad for wanting to speak, for wanting the world to know. For fighting. Never. I love you both to pieces. I love Eve. But you are straight-up wrong.”

“How can you know beyond a doubt what’s right? That’s foolishness in its finest.” Jacqueline sits down at the kitchen table, a kitchen towel clutched in one hand and a brandy and Coke in the other.

“I know they want to silence us, and usually, doing the exact opposite of what they want is a pretty good plan of attack. If they want me complicit, I act against. If they want me quiet, I shout,” Emmanuelle says.

I wish I had a guideline so pure and mathematical. There are times when I didn’t speak when I wish I had, it’s true. But there are times when I’ve spoken and it was the worst thing I could’ve possibly done.

Speaking to my thoughts, reading my mind, Emmanuelle says, “I’m not saying that punishment isn’t a real risk. But if we don’t fight back, where does that leave us? They punish and punish, we fight and fight, or we cease to exist. Period.”

“But how we fight matters,” says Aunt Jacqueline. “And what fight is it that you’re actually fighting? We’re not talking about some massive

injustice here. We're talking about your mother and father. A family matter. A private matter."

Now I find myself siding with Emmanuelle, because Jackie's words scare me. Anything anyone describes as a family matter, a private matter, rarely is. It is a phrase used to protect abuse.

"Do you really want their lives shadowed by Nosey Nancys, every Tom, Dick, and Harry having their theory about who they were, what they suffered? No. I say *no* to that. I held your mother when she was a baby," says Aunt Jacqueline.

The image of my mother as a baby disorients me. Mama as small. Mama as weak. Mama as dependent and learning her world.

Night has fallen fast and hard. A chorus of backyard dogs bark and bark. Nerves frayed, I should leave this place. Run to somewhere quiet and safe, but I know there is no such place. I stay. I stay right here in my seat. There is nowhere else to be.

TWENTY-SIX.

Elijah loves living in a house of noise. Her aunties, her cousins, her great-aunt and -uncle, and her yoyo spark like fireworks. The warmth between them heats her up.

Elijah's own home is quiet, lonely. She and her yoyo have their routine. Ramen Monday nights and fixing whatever in the flat is broken. Vegan pizza with jalapeños every Friday. Every once in a while, Chabad. True crime every night or sometimes one of Yoyo's incomprehensible films like *Eraserhead* or *Edward II*.

Elijah will say something, and Yoyo will smile and nod. And Yoyo will listen while Elijah speaks, for sometimes an hour without a break.

This is when Yoyo is there. Sometimes, Yoyo is not there. Sometimes, Yoyo is far, far away in their head. They'll stalk the house, a brooding ghost, or they'll snap at slights that are not slights at all, or they'll sob because they've burned the rice.

None of this bothers Elijah because she understands it. The world doesn't make sense, so why should we, as inhabitants of that world, make sense? Though Yoyo never speaks of it, it is clear their past is one of heartbreak. No one would ask a girl mid-rape why she is screaming. Yoyo is always in the middle of something just as awful in their head, Elijah reckons, and has found a thousand different ways to scream silently.

"I'm sorry for all the fighting," says Yoyo, emerging from Eve's bedroom to find Elijah in the living room. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," says Elijah. Her aunts, great-aunt, and great-uncle are in the backyard smoking a joint and drinking, a reality Elijah's yoyo unsuccessfully tried to hide from her. "Why? What about you? Are you okay? Do you wish you could be out there smoking?"

Yoyo shakes their head. "Weed makes me paranoid."

Elijah would like to ask, But do you miss America? Your family? Do you want to move back here and leave me behind in England? Send me back to Mum? Be free? Unburdened?

But she doesn't want the answer to be yes, and fears that it will be.

Elijah is a clever girl. She doesn't ask stupid questions.

When Elijah's marks were poor in early primary and she was identified as a struggling reader who needed serious intervention with phonics, Mum took this as a personal attack. Every day after school, for an hour, she quizzed, chided, goaded—forced Elijah through worksheet after worksheet after worksheet. All in the name of love, perhaps, and care. This is what mothers are supposed to do for their babies, but Elijah learned early on that there was nothing she could ever do that would be good enough for Caroline.

When Elijah was diagnosed with dyslexia, she hoped there might be some relief, but Mum's strategies for compulsion simply became more specific. They worked daily together through a book aimed at dyslexic children that did turn Elijah into a fluent reader, but she does not feel gratitude. She remembers only Mum's disappointment. Mum's sighs. Mum's ability to turn any moment of joy into a lesson.

Yoyo never cared about Elijah's academic performance. In fact, they actively eschewed all investment in it, except at one point to suggest to Mum a Steiner school, since she could afford it, where early reading was less stressed and there was more time for art, imagination, dancing, and play, the activities Elijah seemed to enjoy and excel at.

Mum said, I'm not sending our daughter to some stupid fucking fairy-worshipping school. You need to talk to her. You need to work with her. She actually likes you, God knows why, maybe she'll listen. She thinks I'm the devil, and I'm tired of being the bad guy.

I do work with her. We read together all the time. It's all we do.

It was true that at that age, when Elijah was around six or seven, Yoyo did very little but make her cheese-and-ketchup toasties and read aloud to her, like if she only stayed reading, she could not mess anything up, say the wrong thing.

Elijah would draw, or play with Playmobil, while Yoyo read book after book after book.

They never went to the playground because Elijah was shy, uncoordinated, and preferred always to be drawing and playing with her imaginary characters. Briefly, Yoyo put Elijah in swim lessons, but those

lasted for two weeks before Elijah's anxiety got the best of her and she cried and cried and cried not to be made to get in the water.

You need to push her out of her comfort zone, Mum would say. She's never going to learn anything if you don't push her.

I heard you and Mum talking, Elijah told Yoyo on the train to Oxford.

Oh?

About a new school.

You were eavesdropping?

Embarrassed, Elijah didn't answer.

It's okay. I wish you hadn't heard that, though. The truth is, your mum's right; I don't know that a Steiner school is right for you anyway.

Why not? asked Elijah. The idea of a place that Mum denigrated as "fairy-worshipping" sounded perfect to her.

Honestly, Steiner was just short of a Nazi, said Yoyo. Fuck it, he was a Nazi, and so much of the roots of his educational philosophy revolves around an idea of a perfect, Aryan childhood that mythologizes European histories, cultures, and lifestyles. I think there are good—great—people in the Steiner world, and it's possible that a Steiner school could give you what you need, but. Yeah.

Yoyo! You said *fuck*. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.

With a smile, Yoyo said, Some days I feel it's the only word that matters.

How do you spell it? asked Elijah, then regretted it immediately, because when she asked her mum, Caroline would painstakingly make her sound it out until Elijah would give up, and Mum still wouldn't tell her how to spell it. This is motivation to learn, she would say.

F-U-C-K, said Yoyo.

F-U-C-K, fuck! F-U-C-K, fuck! F-U-C-K, fuck! Fuck the man! Fuck the police! Fuck you and the horse you rode in on!

Yoyo laughed. You're going to get me in trouble, they said.

Are you fucking with me right now?

Again, a laugh from Yoyo.

Elijah loved repeating phrases over and over again that she'd heard on the street, on telly, from the world around her.

Things are different now that she's older. That day with Yoyo on the train was seven years ago now, and life had become worse in the

intervening time. Life seems to her an ever-expanding gap between what is possible to others and what is possible for her.

Elijah wants to understand everything but knows she never will. She wants to be loved so fully and completely that her heart explodes from the pleasure of it, but knows that she never will. Elijah isn't the sort of girl people fall in love with. Timid, anxious, acne-faced, and fat, she is finding that all life has to offer is not meant for her.

"I think I'm going to go to bed," Elijah tells Yoyo, conscious of the time. Eden and Echo are already sleeping. The rest of the family will be in the backyard smoking until very late, if previous nights were any indication. If she crawled out the bedroom window now, she could have a whole night with Lily.

"Okay, kiddo," says Yoyo. "Love you."

They're hugging themselves where they sit on the couch, mind elsewhere. A part of Elijah wants desperately to stay, to pull Yoyo into now and say, Hello, hello, hello, look at me; but again, she is a clever girl, has learned from the past that that action would bear no fruit for either of them.

TWENTY-SEVEN.

When I am seven, I am accused of killing the class pet. Athena, a black guinea pig with a flamboyant white beard, comes home with me for the weekend, as is dictated by the rotation schedule, and does not make it back Monday morning.

Athena is not my first dead pet. At five, shortly after moving into 677, our tropical fish die, suddenly and all at once, an act of God. We wake up in the morning to find nine of the fish dead in their aquarium.

Fish die. It is a thing that happens with regularity, but it's notable that fish who'd been with us for years have all, in a single bound—like members of a suicide pact—ceased to be. Mama and Pop assume disease, or a problem with the sensors that control the water temperature, or any of the myriad things that kill fish. Still, these fish aren't goldfish, whose deaths come frequently, expectedly, like sunrise. An attitude of suspicion remains.

You didn't do anything, did you? Mama asks. It's okay if you did. I know marine life is a curiosity of yours.

It's true that I'm in the middle of a fish phase at this time. We take trips twice monthly to the Dallas Aquarium. Biology, physiology, and anatomy have always interested me, since the first time I accidentally cut myself open and saw red water from the river of life stream out of me. Recently, Mama and I read a book on evolution and how life emerged from the sea.

Whales, sharks, octopodes, and fish were fantastical in their abilities and their shapes, and they fascinated me more than dinosaurs ever did.

What do you mean, Mama? I ask.

Maybe you were curious about what would happen if you pulled the plug at the wall, then got scared when you saw what happened, plugged it back in before morning?

The fish need the plug, Mama, I explain to her, as she had explained to me many times when I was at an age where pushing and pulling things in and out of their place seemed my life calling.

Right, baby, says Mama.

After the fish, there are the ants from my ant farm. I awake to shattered glass sprinkled around the edges of my bed, splitting each of my feet open against the shards shortly after waking. I scream, and it is Pop, for once, who comes. Later, I put together that he got in late the night before and couldn't sleep upon arriving home.

What is it, Firstborn? It's a name he calls me with tongue in cheek. He comes to give all of us such names. Eve is Monday's Child (fair of face), and Emmanuelle is Baby.

Pop sees the mess of blood and glass as he bursts in, and rescues me from the carnage. He carries me to the bathroom to tend to my feet, and even as I am crying, he is jovial and exuding love. Damn, boo, how your feet get so stinky, he says, and I laugh.

Not too stinky to eat, though, he says.

He wakes Mama and we go to the ER, all of us, with Eve, too, who's a delightfully calm, sweet, and agreeable toddler. It is much later, when we arrive home after the six-hour saga at the hospital, that the question of the glass's origin arises.

Then we find the ants—not crawling freely as one might expect of insects released from their glass cage—but dead on the kitchen floor, their thousands and thousands of corpses arranged to say, *hi*.

I despair over my ants. I'd collected the first several hundred of them and kept them in a jar for over a year, feeding and watering them, watching them expand and grow into the thousands. Pop picks me up, tries to calm me, but I am hysterical. No amount of rocking, shushing, or singing can console me.

The death of Athena the guinea pig is different, because I wake up Monday morning to see that one of my sharpened colored pencils has been stabbed into her eye. Mama and Pop look at me the way you look at the husband who calls the police after his wife has been murdered by an "intruder."

Athena's death calls into question my previous innocence. The ants. The fish. What the—? Pop says when I appear in his and Mama's bedroom in the morning, holding the cage, which has become a coffin in my hand.

Maybe he was sleepwalking or something and did it then, Mama says, defending my honor.

What compels a child to sharpen a pencil to a fine chiseled point, then stab it into an animal's eye, sleepwalking or not, unless that child is seriously disturbed? We need to get him help.

Baby, my mother tells me later, you got to tell me what's going on with you. You can tell me. You can tell me and I will protect you, but I have to know the truth. I can't be in the dark on this.

Mama, I didn't do anything.

She closes her eyes tightly and pinches her lips, frustrated by what she perceives as my lie. It hurts when she grabs my shoulders and tells me to look her in the eye.

I don't know what happened, I try to tell her, which is more of an admission to her than my previous statement, because at least now I'm not swearing complete innocence.

You don't know what happened, or you don't want to tell me what happened?

I woke up and it was like that, I say.

But already, Mama is aware of my awayness—how sometimes I am bright and sweet, and other times wild and angry, and other times an old, toothless witch-woman who speaks in wise riddles. To her, I am always Ezri—what is a person if not their body, no matter how many selves they hold?—but she knows that I am not a being who has perfect memory of everything I've ever done, that I am vast.

Mama takes my hands so my palms are facing up. That's blood, she says. Do you see that?

I'm tearing up now.

Don't cry. It's not necessary. But I need you to try to remember what you did.

But I don't. I don't. I was sleeping.

And what about nightmares? Did you have any last night?

I think for a moment, but there's no need; I do it only to give my answer more credibility. Every night I have nightmares. Yes, I tell Mama. I did.

And what happened in your nightmare?

I groan. I don't know, I say.

I need you to try to remember. This is important.

But when I try to look back onto last night, everything is smoke, disintegrating before I can get any hold of it.

A ghost, I say finally, half making it up, half holding on to a memory.

Okay. A ghost. Tell me about the ghost.

She doesn't have a face. She holds me down.

Mama pulls me close to her. I am remembering, remembering the dream.

She holds me down and gets inside of me.

And she possesses you? This ghost? Does she make you do things?

Yes, she makes me do things, I say.

Mama nods her head, and at school, she tells the teacher that Athena died in her sleep over the weekend.

Oh, dear, says the teacher. That's so very unfortunate.

We are happy to supply the class with a new pet.

No, no, of course, that won't be necessary.

I bet you killed it, says Cole, a boy in my class who hates me because I always beat him when we do Times Tables Speed Wars or History Jeopardy or Geography Jeopardy or Spelling Bees, and when his dog died a couple of months ago, I'd said I was glad because no dog deserved Cole as an owner because he was crusty, ugly, and mean.

The teacher shuts down Cole's accusations, but it's out there now. I am the Pet Killer, according to class 3B, and not to excuse their taunts, but I do not make the most innocent-seeming of defendants. I'm a constant thorn in the teacher's side with my non-sliver antics. Disrupting the class. Not paying attention. My head in dreamland.

Once, for a day, I speak only in Old Timey talk, Old Timey talk as I've come to understand it from the classic books I've read. I refuse to answer to any name but Little Mary. When asked to read aloud, I say, I apologize most profusely, ma'am, but I am a slave, and therefore do not know my letters. I start bringing my lunch in a tied tea towel: a lunch that is merely apple and a hardened, stale roll.

I am crazy, that much is clear, and so I can't say it now, nor could I say it then, that no, of course not, it isn't me, it isn't me who is the ghost, the ghost who kills.

TWENTY-EIGHT.

In the days leading up to the funeral, journalists email and call in droves. They long for a comment or explanation. They want to feast on our grief like we are crawfish, to pick away shell and get to the meat of suffering.

How they get our contact details, we do not know, but each of us three spends as much time talking to reporters as we do to florists, caterers, musicians, relatives. We talk to a sobbing volunteer at the Gallery of Black Texan Art where Mama sometimes worked who wants to know if there's anything she can do, then to a reporter. We speak to Pop's half brother, who Pop hadn't seen in twenty years, then to a reporter. An organist who wants to go over the repertoire, then a reporter.

To accommodate the number of family coming into town, we decide against hosting the wake at Eve's, which would be traditional for our family, something homegrown. Instead, we rent out the basement in the church where the funeral will take place.

For those who know our parents from their lives of affluence—business colleagues, country club companions, holders of season passes for front-row seats at Mavericks and Cowboys games, fellow private school moms and dads—the funeral will likely be unsettling. The location is a traditional Black Baptist church where we often went as children when Mama or Pop got nostalgic for their youths of after-church banquets and creek baptisms and church ladies in giant hats, singing so good you started to dismiss any critiques of Black Christianity as simply not getting it.

We've paid for elaborate flower arrangements and for catering from a local fried-fish and barbecue place for the wake. It's Emmanuelle who suggests that Elijah might want to play something on the piano at the service. I am certain that my shy, anxious daughter will say no, but she nods seriously. "Would an arrangement of 'Will the Circle Be Unbroken?' work?" she asks.

"Perfect," says Emmanuelle.

And then—“Would it be okay if I sang, as well?”

“Obviously, yes, of course,” says Emmanuelle, excitedly clapping her hands together once. “That will be so beautiful. I haven’t heard you sing since your bat mitzvah. I still kick myself for not recording it.” I feel the same as my sister. Elijah’s bat mitzvah was the first time I’d properly heard her singing voice, when she’d chanted her Torah portion—something I never got to do as a convert. I finished my conversion in Oxford, through the ultra-Orthodox Chabad. Some kind of woman at the time, I wasn’t ever going to be let up to the bimah to sing. This never bothered me. Made me feel more like Yentl.

“Would you like to rehearse with the church’s choir as backing, or would you prefer to be completely solo?” asks Emmanuelle.

“Singing with the choir is an option?” Elijah asks.

“At least with a portion of them,” says Eve. “They’re all very musical, and I don’t think it would even take that much time for them to learn an arrangement you put together. Mama and Pop were big donors to the church, and we are well known and liked there. We can make it happen.” Eve seems happy to have a job to do, that the questions of reporters and what to do with the house and our past have been largely supplanted by funeral arrangements.

“Then yeah, I think it’s a song that would be nice to have some backing for.”

“Then it’s done. We’ll arrange it,” says Eve, clapping her hands a single time the way Emmanuelle did only moments ago.

I, myself, am struggling to get with the single-clap energy. I’ve received an email from a representative of a major, nationally syndicated newspaper who wants to speak to us.

Dear Ezri Washington Maxwell,

I’m so sorry to reach out to you at a time when I know you are heavily burdened by grief. I, too, have lost a parent. What you and your sisters are going through is unfathomable, and you have my condolences. I’m sure I’m not the first journalist to reach out to you. In fact, as the story continues to gain attention, it’s my guess that you’ve been swarmed with opportunists. I can’t say that I’m necessarily any different—we are all self-interested beings—but as I’ve learned more of the details of what happened, I feel that I am the person who can do

your story justice. I, too, grew up in an affluent, stifling white neighborhood.

It is nothing short of psychic torture what Black people can endure in these settings, and I wondered if it was an angle worth exploring in a long-form piece about the history of American real estate and housing, desegregation, and Black assimilation. I am deeply interested in who your parents were as people and what led to this devastating tragedy, and the role that race might have played. Does this interest you at all? Would you and your sisters be available for a discussion? I can fly to Dallas at any time, or alternately, we can arrange a virtual or voice meetup.

Maya Gerard
she/her

“What do you think, Yoyo?” asks Elijah.

I shut off my phone and slide it into my pocket. “I love hearing your music,” I say. She so rarely performs publicly, and has at times been so frozen with stage fright as to leave a performance mid-song, that I worry about her at a funeral with an audience of approximately three hundred people, but I do not say that.

“What was that?” asks Eve, having noticed me on my phone. “Another journalist?”

“Yes,” I say. “I’m going to forward it to you and Emmanuelle. It’s interesting. I mean, I know it’s not something we’ll want to do, but this person had a different take, at least.”

“Did you see the article I linked you?” asks Eve. I don’t answer her. “Did you?”

“Yeah, I saw it,” I say. It’s from a local newspaper. In it, they quote Laurie. *As our community deals with this devastating loss, I hold close Eudora and Edward’s children, who grew up in the Oak Creek Estates, whom I regarded as my own family.*

Emmanuelle grabs my phone, reads the article. She snorts as she reads. “How is it possible for people to be this fake?” she asks.

“Easily,” says Eve.

We are four days out from the funeral now. I hold fervently to the notion that when it’s done, it will all be done, that I might say it and finally mean it, goodbye to Mama, to Pop, and to the house.

TWENTY-NINE.

I awake at dawn to claim the world. I am a part of Ezri that stays small and hidden. I come out now so they might remember this frail seed inside of them that needs only a bit of soil and water to grow, a little girl who is fond of beauty and clings to it as a bird beak does to the worm.

I am twelve, but drive miles and miles and miles around the metroplex, collecting bouquets of wildflowers for my parents—Ezri's parents. It's no easy task—most Texas flowers are spring bloomers—but I am expansive in my definition of beauty, and I gather all manner of plant matter, some of which I will weave into wreaths, plait into curled table pieces.

Dallas in late summer is arid and hot, but the dry heat, to me, is a blessing, a kind beast's breath on my skin. Oh, how the beast licks me right up, like my skin is made of sugar. I wear a sun hat I found on a hook in Eve's garage. I wear one of Emmanuelle's short, black, linen dresses—one that I'm sure is handmade and costs more than two hundred pounds, but that was sent to her for free by a company expanding into plus sizes. Under the dress, I have on black tights, taken from Elijah, who wears them with every dress and skirt because she's afraid of what others will think of her legs, thick and soft, darkened with a dense covering of hair. I wear them despite the heat to protect myself from mosquitos and other insects, and to affect some look of modesty.

It is eight when I arrive to the church where Ezri's parents are to be hymned to and eulogized. I do not want to disrupt the sanctuary and the florist's arrangements, so I focus on the basement, where the wake is to be held, turning the large hall into something magical and glorious.

When I'm finished, I look upon my work, satisfied. I am sweating, and I notice only now that I am breathing heavily and my joints are aching. Fatigue sets in—from my early wake-up, but also from the intrusion of Ezri's grieving, or my own. I wonder, taking a seat on the small stage in the church basement, was it I, Elspeth, who wanted to assert herself for Ezri's benefit, or were we both the same and together all along, and it is I, Ezri,

who wanted to do something beautiful for my dear mama, my dear pop, who, despite everything, loved us, loved us so much.



At ten, my sisters, Elijah, and Eden and Echo arrive, along with a small crew of family.

“We weren’t sure you’d be here,” says Eve. Her words are without challenge or hostility. She is as worn down as me.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“Did you lose time?” asks Emmanuelle, but I never lose time truly, not anymore—my dissociative episodes are never so sequestered from my core self. We are always inside dreams of one another. A single shape-shifter rather than disparate entities living separate lives.

“I’m here,” I say.

The choir director pulls Elijah away for a last-minute discussion, and Aunt Jacqueline waves Eden and Echo over to our pew in the front row. It’s still half an hour before the doors open.

“You’re wearing my dress,” says Emmanuelle. She’s heavily made up, and her outfit is dramatic, a sleek black hat on her head with lace netting to cover her mourning. I still see the drama the eyeliner and mascara add to her eyes, the striking allure of her face brought on by contouring.

I look down at myself in comparison.

“You look cute in my clothes,” says Emmanuelle, “though you’ve styled yourself in very *Little House on the Prairie* fashion.”

That’s Elspeth, I want to say, but I’ve learned not to speak about the others with Emmanuelle, who always takes it too far, uses it as fuel for her obsession with the haunting of 677.

“I brought you a change of clothes,” says Eve, handing me a garment bag. Inside, a crisp, white shirt with two columns of buttons, navy trousers, black patent leather brogues, navy socks with a Fair Isle knit, a skinny tie. It’s all very schoolboy, and I’m grateful she understands my singular dress outfit style so well.

“Thank you,” I say, and nod my head. She nods back and looks at me, assessing, eyes sharp and tongue ready to criticize, but holding back for now.

“Come see,” I say to both of my sisters, and lead them down to the basement, slowly, because everything hurts.

Their reactions are what Elspeth hoped for. They gasp, delighted and struck by awe. Emmanuelle tears up, and Eve soon follows.

“You had the florists set this up?” asks Eve, shocked that I might ever be so thoughtful as to step outside of myself enough to show care for another.

“I did it,” I say.

“What?”

“I did it.”

“You didn’t,” says Eve.

“I did.”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “Okay. I see. Showing out.” She reaches her hand out to mine, arm unfurling from the crossed position toward me, and I grab hold for dear life. Simultaneously, we pull each other forward into an envelope made of our bodies.

Next, Emmanuelle and I hug, then we are all three embracing, leaning upon one another, hands together, fingers intertwined. We are rope, plaited fibers woven into one.

We quake with sobs. Is it even us, this welling up of feeling, or has something outside of us, made by our joining, been born?

My eyes burn, but I cannot let go of either Eve’s or Emmanuelle’s hand to wipe them. I drag my face along Emmanuelle’s shoulder. I feel Eve’s wet cheek against mine, her flesh my flesh and mine hers.

“We probably got to go soon,” says Eve, that “probably” so unlike her. Never does she show doubt. Never has there been an attitude of *maybe* in her adult life. So ensnared by this grief animal we’ve awakened—who clutches us in its jaws—she can be certain now only of this feeling, of these tears.

We remain like this for minutes, until a firm hand grabs me on the shoulder, and I awake from the mourning trance. It’s Minister Evans, who’s performing the funeral rites.

“It’s nearly time, sisters,” he says, and I forgive the misgendering not because he is an old man, an old southern Black boy who doesn’t know about these things, but because in this moment we are three sisters, three witches, three Gorgons: Stheno, Medusa, Euryale.

I change into the clothes I prefer, the ones Eve brought for me, and rejoin my sisters up in the lobby when I'm finished. I notice police officers next to where they're standing. "What's going on?" I ask, molding myself instantly into someone who can handle crisis. The effort of competence will exhaust me later, but for now, I am buttressed by the catharsis of my earlier tears, by the shield against the outside world my sisters and I briefly became.

"I'm afraid there's some kerfuffle outside," one of the police officers says. "It's nothing for you to worry about now, we've got it handled, but the minister called us when he saw that not everybody here is necessarily here for the funeral."

"Tons of reporters," Eve says, eyes rolling, and shoots a look at Emmanuelle, who she blames for inviting all of this, even if she hasn't, not really. "This shit is so disrespectful. You happy now, Emmanuelle? That the story's out? Is this the deliverance you wanted?" Eve shakes her head and leaves. I go to chase after her—I am the good sibling now, who goes to comfort their sister—but the number of people gathered in the sanctuary for Mama and Pop overwhelms me, and I let the doors swing back shut on me and remain in the entry hall.

"This isn't my fault," says Emmanuelle.

"I know."

"I haven't told anyone anything, even though I want to, even though I think it's the right thing, trying to respect what y'all two want."

"She just needs somebody to be angry with," I assure her.

She dabs a tissue in the corners of her eyes. Her makeup remains. I don't know how.

"Well, maybe she wouldn't have all that goddamn anger if we—if we didn't have to keep it all a secret."

"Ladies," says the minister. "It's time."

In an attempt to resurrect the energy of our Gorgon shield, I grab Emmanuelle's hand. I gesture toward the doors of the sanctuary. She swallows loudly. Together, we go in. The creaking of the doors draws the attention of everyone in attendance, and heads shift toward us. I am immediately jealous of the black lace veil on Emmanuelle's headpiece.

An usher looks at us sympathetically and hands us each the programs that Eve painstakingly designed, gorgeous and substantial, booklets with a

card cover, with hand-stitched binding by a friend of hers who had worked tirelessly.

I am reminded that both Eve and Emmanuelle have made Dallas a home. They have people here who are attending just for them, not for Mama and Pop. Exes, lovers, friends, colleagues, acquaintances. So much of the funeral is the work of their social network. For Emmanuelle, an influencer with a large reach and a brand built on a reclaimed Texanness, it's obvious why this would be the case, but Eve, too, has her reach: book clubs that she runs, a mutual aid organization she helped root and then flower, parenting friends, community theater contacts.

For the first time in my life, I regret leaving this city, this country. I notice faces, so familiar as to be limbs of my body, loved ones who've held me, who've fed me, who've made jokes with me, who've played cards with me, dominoes, who I am now outside of, who I barely know anymore beyond nostalgic recognition.

The ghosts inside me tremble, frightened as they reckon with being forgotten and unknown, discarded and left out of the familial hold. They know that none of this is theirs.

Elijah is seated at the piano, playing humbly but beautifully, the songs a perfect backdrop to dignified mourning. She looks like she belongs here, and I can believe I've stepped into another world where this is something she does every week on a Sunday at church.

I take a seat next to Eve, and Emmanuelle takes a seat next to me. The minister rises to the pulpit and Elijah finishes playing to join us, taking a saved seat between Uncle Frank and her cousin, Magi, who we haven't seen since she was eight. I notice the two of them holding hands, and I remember how much they used to play together as young things. Magi never minded that Elijah never or barely talked, content to lead my daughter around for hours and talk enough for the both of them.

"Good morning," says the minister. "It is with great grief and sadness, but with complete submission to the will of the universe, which only allows any of us a small taste of this life, that we gather here today to mourn our beloved fellows, Sister Eudora and Brother Edward. Today, we will celebrate their lives as they lived it, together."

I wonder if the minister will mention the circumstances of Mama's and Pop's deaths as he continues, knowing that Eve had worked with him

profusely on what his messaging should be. Eventually, he alludes briefly to “tragedy” and things being “cut short” and how life’s beauties can often be “twisted by pain into something ugly” but otherwise says no more. Of course, everyone here already knows. Given the reporters outside, I wonder if the whole world does, if our agony has been laid bare.

The choir sings, and the music, of course, is stirring, each soloist dazzling in their talent, the harmonies conveying something of the divine.

Everyone who desires so is given a chance to speak, and first up is Pop’s brother, my uncle Del. When he first begins to speak, I’m afraid. He is a man lacking filter. But his words are beautiful. While his focus is on my dad as he was as a child, toward the end, he shifts to speak about my mother, too, how in love the two of them were, and how they were two people made softer, sweeter, and better by their togetherness. “I can’t make sense of none of this,” he says. “But I suppose it’s not mine to make sense of. The Lord do what he do, and why? Why?”

Several attendees shout amen, and I want to join them. The Lord does do what he does, and why? Why?

Though I am functionally an atheist, it still baffles, the way the world has plans for us so out of line with what we could have ever predicted. And it brings no relief to acknowledge that that is because there is no plan.

Mother is God, I’m her baby Job. She has let a devil ruin me—and for no reason but to remind me, nothing in this world is ours.



It’s not until Emmanuelle delivers her eulogy that I understand no peace will ever come. While the minister has had to help a few people down from the pulpit who devolved into sobbing fits during their speeches, that is part and parcel for these events. Emmanuelle is the one to break the seal, to speak the words Eve and I have dreaded she’d speak since the interview with the police.

“You will hear a lot of things about my parents over the next few weeks. In fact, you’ve probably already read things that have left you baffled and confused,” she says. “But I trust that if you are here in this room, you know better. You know who they were, what they believed. You know about their love for each other, and their love for us kids.”

“Oh, Lord,” Eve mutters under her breath. Like many here, she’s fanning herself with her program. The church’s air conditioner cannot live up to its purpose, not in this August heat, not with this number of people.

I take stock of the sanctuary. Many heads bob up and down in agreement with Emmanuelle, but others appear braced for upset. They’d been happy, only moments ago, to ignore any unpleasantness about the realities that brought them here. One can elide *murder-suicide* for only so long at the funeral of the murdered and self-murdered.

“My siblings and I grew up in terror, a terror that my parents tried desperately to protect us from,” Emmanuelle says.

Eve turns to me, eyes wide, mouth open slack in shock. “Okay, now she’s just lying.”

Emmanuelle speaks with conviction and surety. I know that there’s no glance I can throw her from down in the pews that will reach her, not in this state.

“And that same terror killed them.”

A hush descends over the sanctuary. Those who’d grown bored with the service perk up, soldiers at attention.

“What you will hear is a story that the police made up because they needed to make something unfathomable fathomable. They have asked me, and my siblings, to believe them, their words, their narrative, over our own eyes, our own history.” Emmanuelle’s speech is delivered with the care and intonation of someone who has rehearsed. While her career has given her skill in off-the-cuff articulation, I know a soliloquy when I hear one. She’s practiced this speech.

“Why does she got to bring us into this?” asks Eve. I should, perhaps, feel caught between my two sisters, but here, where I physically sit, next to Eve, is also where I metaphorically sit. I am firmly on her side, and decidedly against Emmanuelle, whose every word I cannot help but see as a betrayal. How dare she? How dare she speak upon my truth, a truth that is not hers to speak? She does not know what my eyes saw.

I get up to go—the lights in the chapel shining down on me have the violence of a predator’s eyes—but Eve sets her palm firmly on my thigh. “You are not leaving me.”

I shake. I am an old, sputtering car engine. I am the breast of a dying bird convulsing under the beat of its drumming heart. “Shh, shh,” says Eve,

curling her grip over my thigh to still me. I can't still. What secrets will this woman who calls me sibling reveal up on that pulpit? How naked will she strip me for these onlookers?

"When I was a child, one of my older siblings helped me into the bath," Emmanuelle says. "I must have been three, maybe four. Not yet in preschool or school. This is the result of that bath," she says, lifting up her black silk blouse, stepping away from the pulpit and facing the audience. There are gasps from those who haven't seen the scars before. "These marks, which are not just on my belly, but are over my thighs and buttocks, knees and calves and shins and feet, are not the result of hot water. You know that. They're the result of sulfuric acid, which is what came out of the tap that fateful night. I am open about my scars. Many have seen them on my Instagram and in my TikToks. They have been part of my campaign of body liberation and self-love. But I've never spoken about where the scars came from, believing that it wasn't my place to speak my own truth. Now I break that silence."

My anger should cool in the face of my sister's honest testimony, but it does not. The rage is too comforting to dismiss. It massages my shoulders, rubs my feet, wraps me in blankets, and makes me chicken soup. It is telling me, Sweet dear, poor you.

"You might ask how there came to be sulfuric acid in the pipes at my childhood home, the same childhood home my mother and father passed in, and I can answer only by saying this: the force responsible for it is the same force that killed my beloved mama and pop. The same force who made our lives misery for years and years. That house, 677 Acacia Drive, was—is—haunted."

At those words, the minister walks up the steps of the altar toward the pulpit. Perhaps, he is thinking, she is delusional in her grief. People often are.

"I know that to many of you, I sound crazy," says Emmanuelle, "but Eve and Ezri are able to corroborate what I've just told you." She gestures to us but does not meet our eyes. "And if even their word is not enough to convince you, either, I know that any journalist worth their salt who investigates will be left with the same conclusion as me. There are records of what's been done to us in that place, what has happened in that home."

The minister reaches out an arm to Emmanuelle, but she doesn't take it. He wraps the same arm around her waist and she shoves it off. "Believe me. Please. Please believe me," she says. Her tears come now. "Look up what a haint is. Many of you say you believe in God, so I am asking you to believe in the devil, too. Please."

Emmanuelle leaves the pulpit and takes her seat to the left of me. I do not look at her or acknowledge her in any way. Instead, I look toward Elijah, who's walking up again to take her seat at the piano so that she can play and sing "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?"

Still, I cannot let go of my fury, not even as my daughter sings for hundreds of strangers. I hate Emmanuelle for detracting from this moment with her obsession with—what is it that she is so obsessed with? Justice? Some notion of a wrong being righted? Truth? Transparency? Is this "healing"?

Emmanuelle reaches for me, and I say, "Don't fucking touch me." The hurt on her face is exhilarating.

THIRTY.

I think often about what is possible and what is impossible.

Consider the Holocaust, how it could be so, how such a sad, sad thing could be so—and yet, it is so. Genocide is to humankind like water, air. There is no such thing as never again. For how many decades has Israel tried to snuff out Falestin?

Do not read of the indignities visited upon Black people enslaved in the American South, in the West Indies, unless you are prepared to die of grief.

A child, bound and raped, is a sad thing, but not so rare a thing.

Humans are gods, making worlds, then making miseries of those worlds.

And do not ask how. Don't you dare ask how. Are you fucking stupid? Are you a fucking fool? You dumb piece of shit, thinking that what comes comes for a reason.

This is what I say to the reporter, the reporter who says, "Your sister seems to believe in impossible things. What about you?"

★ ★ ★

A video of Emmanuelle's eulogy, taken surreptitiously at the funeral, goes viral. Emmanuelle herself is back on Instagram, speaking out about each of my family's tragedies. She reaches out to old rootworkers—not the new sort, who might hold a healthy skepticism about the possibility of a true haint, of a house so haunted as to kill, but the old heads who believe, truly, that the future can be read with a toss of bones, that roots and dust and iron nails hold power.

As Eve and I persist in a silent treatment, she persists in her crusade for truth.

I am disappointingly no longer angry. I am tired and anxious to return to my decrepit little life in England, to feign the life of a sliver. One can

disappear into squalor. This—this madness Emmanuelle has wrought—is not so easy to hide from.

The practical concerns are just as much a tether to this life here in Texas. How is it that on the day of the funeral I truly believed I wanted to be here? That I missed this? That family, history, and community are good?

I cannot stop looking for flights back to London, where I can be physically if not mentally distant from the place that made me.

“I see you,” says Eve. She’s making dandelion root tea in the kitchen while I sit at the table on my laptop. Emmanuelle has flown to the East Coast, where she is going to do an interview on live television about the house and what’s happened to my mother and my father.

“You’re not leaving me here alone. I mean that. I will knife a hole in all my tires before I let you drive to the airport and fly away.”

I close the laptop. “Just checking prices,” I say.

“But didn’t you hear? Money is no object for us anymore.”

“Shit,” I say. “I genuinely forgot.”

Eve nods. She’s reached the stage in her mourning where she has fully let herself go. She’s dressed in nothing but a silky black dressing gown, the front loose enough that I can see a significant portion of her breasts, her stomach. Her hair is in a loose twist-out losing curl definition by the day.

No longer bothering to put on makeup, or shower but for once every few days, she looks more casual than I’ve seen her since she was about six years old.

“I don’t really want the money,” she says. “Like, so much of why I left is because I don’t want anything to do with that life, you know?” Of course I know. “Money—that shit rots your fucking brain. It rotted Mama’s brain. She really believed, and taught us to believe—”

“I know,” I say. “That said, I will be taking a portion of it.” It feels good to make her smile. “Not all of it, but like, maybe enough to fix up my flat?”

“Or buy someplace for you and Elijah. Y’all deserve that. She deserves it.”

I try to think of what little home Elijah and I might make ourselves. I think about adopting another cat, or a dog. I think about a vegetable garden. I try to conjure up a vision of home the way my mother must have envisioned the home she would make for her family.

“She needs you so bad,” says Eve. She sits down next to me at the table. “When I lashed out at you that day about the mall, I know that was messed up. But I guess what I was trying to say is, do you get it, that Mama abandoned us? She abandoned us for herself. For her ego. And she had her reasons; boy, did she. Most of what we know of Mama’s childhood is that it wasn’t easy. But I guess abandoning Elijah so you can wallow in the grief of the life we should’ve had, is it so different than how Mama abandoned us? To live in her fantasy of wealth and privilege? I love you more than anything. You’ve been through so much. Don’t think I don’t see that, and don’t think I don’t understand. I know it’s hard. I know it’s so hard.”

She lays her hand on top of mine, and though I want to shove it away, I let it sit there. I take a breath. I make myself be mindful. I notice my anger—how dare she? I notice my shame. I notice the tensing of every muscle in my body, hardening into a shield to fight against anyone who might try to reach me.

I say, voice cracking—fuck—“No one saved us.”

“I know. It’s not fair,” she says.

“It’s not fair at all.”

“Not a bit.”

★ ★ ★

We all tune in for Emmanuelle’s live 9:00 a.m. interview. Though Jacqueline and Frank have left and Emmanuelle is obviously away, Eve’s small house feels at capacity with me, Eve, Elijah, Eden, and Echo crowded into the living room. We squeeze together on the couch, and the air-conditioning is on high enough that we need a blanket to warm us. There doesn’t seem to be a perfect indoor temperature in Texas summers. It is either stiflingly hot or harshest winter. Outside it’s 104 degrees Fahrenheit, 40 Celsius. Inside, it’s 65F/18C.

There is something about this false cold that comforts me. Is it simply the familiarity? Rarely does one find indoor places so cool during English summers, even though the climate has permanently changed to have summers full of heat waves. I wonder if it’s a heat wave if it’s constant, or if by calling them that, there is some attempt to hold on to the notion that this

might pass, that some old England of mild winters and mild summers will return. So much of what we speak is our attempt to make our fantasies real.

Eden, house techie, finds the appropriate inputs and channel and adjusts the volume to our liking.

The show on which Emmanuelle will appear is already on, but her interview slot is not until the end, and we'll have to suffer through nearly forty-five minutes of talk show before we get to the meat of why we are here.

"Do you think she's nervous?" asks Eden.

Echo shakes their head aggressively. "This is her whole life. She's famous." Echo eats a bowl of cinnamon cereal, which, according to Eve, is all they are willing to eat right now. At least it's fortified, she says. At least it requires milk, which has fat and protein. But then she says no more, because she is afraid that doing so will make her Mama.

I find nothing wrong with a phase of eating only cereal, and have been through such times myself, but like all mothers, and perhaps parents more generally, Eve has learned to be perpetually on the defense, against others but also against her own internal critic who would slay her dead for not being perfect.

We try to be a family. Despite the strangeness of the moment, there is a mundanity here—loved ones gathered to see a fellow loved one make their television debut. That it's to talk about the murder-suicide of our parents and our haunted house is incidental. A stranger looking into the window would see nothing odd here.

"Here we go," says Eve.

When the show returns after its commercial break, Emmanuelle is already seated across from her interviewer.

"She's so pretty," Elijah swoons as she chews on a section of blanket, slumps down further into the couch to hide herself.

"It's a fantasy," Eve says sharply. "It's her whole life, looking like that. We don't all got time for that."

"There's more to life than being pretty," says Eden, and I know they're repeating something Eve has told them before.

"An easy thing for pretty people to say," I say.

"You saying I'm pretty?" asks Eden.

“Of course I am,” I tell them. I believe it. I believe each person in my family—each person but me, of course—is a flower, a mountain, a river, a star—whatever beautiful thing of this world you can think of. Elijah, especially, disorients me. A kind of flickering candle that, at times, I cannot stop looking at, prone to stare, and other times looking away from, lest the flame give me spots in my eyes.

“We’re here today with the very brave Emmanuelle Maxwell,” says the interviewer, “who has come to share with us her message of survival in the wake of the tragic and violent deaths of her parents, Eudora Washington and Edward Maxwell. Good morning, Emmanuelle.”

“Good morning. Thank you so much for inviting me here to speak.”

The introductions pass quickly, for which I am thankful. I need to know what she’ll say.

“Now, using your following as an influencer, and in a clip that’s circulated widely of your eulogy for your parents, you’ve made some bold claims. While the police have called it a murder-suicide, with potential for it to have been a suicide pact, you have said that rather, it is the house that killed your parents.”

Emmanuelle does not get flustered when confronted with the topic, despite the interviewer’s incredulous tone. “I’m not sure I’ve spoken those words precisely, but what I have said is that a force in that house has terrorized my family for decades, and I believe that same force killed my parents and made it look like a murder-suicide.”

“But you do believe that force is supernatural.”

A pause. “I believe that things beyond our understanding occur every day in this world. I am not the first to believe in the inexplicable.” I notice that Emmanuelle has on her white voice.

“Why don’t we start by talking about the terror you and your family experienced.”

Emmanuelle starts, again, with the story of her chemical burns, her scars, and, to her credit, focuses on things that happened to her, not to me, not to Eve.

The litany is long. She has no shortage of stories to tell, about mysterious illness, about losing time only to awake in the strangest of places. “To protect me,” says Emmanuelle, “my mother eventually sent me to boarding school. I was only eight years old. In the fourth grade. I believe

if there was any boarding school that accepted children younger than that, she would've sent me earlier."

"And what of your sisters?"

"My siblings," says Emmanuelle, correcting, though it's not enough to make me forgive her for doing this. "I have one sister and a sibling."

"Right, Eve and Ezri. They were never sent to boarding school?"

"They're both older than me, and I don't think it was until I came around that my parents' full awareness of the danger of the house was clear."

"Their full awareness? So in your mind, they discovered the house was haunted? Yet they didn't leave?"

"It isn't easy to leave your home," says Emmanuelle.

"Not even when that home, as you said, terrorizes you?"

I wonder who will break first between the two of them, who will give in and cede territory. "I think to ask that question reveals an attitude of victim blaming." It doesn't look like it will be Emmanuelle. "I know from the outside it can look like we can all leave anywhere at any time, whether that be a bad job or an abusive relationship, but psychological cages are real cages, and we have to ask, who built that psychological cage? The fact of the matter is that my parents should not have had to leave that house. It was their dream home, the place they wanted to settle and have a family."

I wonder if I think it's low of Emmanuelle to compare our parents not leaving 677 to someone unable to escape an abusive relationship, but how can I when all three of us, me down to Emmanuelle, have all been in relationships with physical, verbal, and financial abuse that we did not leave, that we confessed to each other only when we'd managed, after too long, to extricate ourselves from the situations that entombed us?

"Would you, Emmanuelle, in the same situation, make the same decision your parents did?" asks the interviewer. She is not prepared to give ground.

"I don't know. I don't know because I was not in that situation. I don't know because we often talk about what we would do, and then when push comes to shove, we don't. What would you do if only a three-day drive from you, children were locked in cages? Surely, you would rescue them? I'm sure if someone had asked you at one time what you would do in that situation, you might have said, of course. But we know that that's the very

situation we've been living through, and no shade to you, but I know you've not done that."

Emmanuelle is a force. I see Mama in her, and it's one of the first times I have. Emmanuelle has always had a sensitivity, a sweetness. The same naïveté that's made her think something will come out of going public with 677 has been with her since she could speak.

But right now, she is all Mama. Relentless, poised, and right—so right; how could anyone doubt her?

"Let's shift to the deaths of your parents," says the interviewer.

"I'm going to give that round to Emmanuelle," says Eve, who is apparently also keeping score. It's something that poisons our every interaction in this world, a habit picked up from Mama.

"Now, the autopsy report revealed heavy levels of intoxicants in both your parents' systems. Could a house do that?"

Emmanuelle momentarily loses her footing, though I don't know that anyone else watching could spot it.

"No," she answers simply, "I don't think that it could."

"And isn't it true you haven't seen your parents in many years? Essentially estranged? Are you the best judge to say what they are capable of?"

"It's true that they were suffering, I know that. You can't live in that house and not suffer. I wouldn't be surprised if they used substances to ease that suffering."

"They would use drugs to ease the pain, but not kill themselves? You can say that with certainty?"

There is no answer that Emmanuelle could give that would be reasonable. She is caught in a corner and knows it.

The interviewer takes advantage of Emmanuelle's hesitation. "I want to say that I believe you; I believe that you were terrorized in that house. Every story you've told, I believe. But, Emmanuelle, is it the house that did those things, or is it possible that it was your parents themselves?"

Emmanuelle visibly recoils, taken aback. Back in Eve's living room, I do, too. So does Eve next to me. We knew well our parents' sins, but this was not among them.

"I'm sorry, what are you saying?" asks Emmanuelle.

“I’m saying that from an outsider’s perspective, Munchausen by proxy seems like a much more likely accounting of the facts than a mysterious supernatural force.”

I am not breathing.

On-screen, Emmanuelle is blinking rapidly, leaning back into her chair and crossing one leg over the other.

“You’re saying you think my mama did all that to me?” she asks, white voice gone. “My mama, who sent me away to protect me?”

“Protect you from herself, perhaps,” says the interviewer. “Here are the facts. You lived in a home where terrible things happened to you and two other children. You say your parents believed it was the house doing those things, and yet also, despite sizable portfolios and real estate holdings, did not leave that house. My investigations have revealed numerous social service inquiries, including a period when Ezri and Eve were removed from the home for nearly a year as a matter of safeguarding. Your sister jumped from a roof at fifteen years old, trying to kill herself.”

“My sibling,” says Emmanuelle.

“Yes, your sibling.”

“I see the story you’re trying to tell. I get it. I guess—I was warned. That if I spoke, I would not be believed. But I saw it with my own eyes.”

“Saw what, Emmanuelle?”

“Ghosts!” she says, the poise and surety radiating off her gone, very far gone.

“This is the first time I’m hearing specifically of ghosts,” says the interviewer. “Did your parents, who you say also believed in this ‘haint,’ the word I’ve seen you use on social media, ever try to record what was going on? Get evidence or proof? We live in an age of paranormal investigators, after all. And what I have learned from them is that things that appear supernatural are, in fact, natural. Hauntings are debunked every day.”

“We did try to tape it,” says Emmanuelle.

I remember when my parents first placed a camcorder in my room, to watch me, to see what I would do in the night. When they went to check the tape, there was nothing there.

Ezri, my mother asked, what did you do with the tape?

Of course, my answer was nothing. I'd only found out they'd been attempting to record me when she asked me.

Over the years, they tried hidden cameras, too, but the footage was always destroyed, incomprehensible. Tape and film twisted or gone.

"The house always ruined the tape," Emmanuelle says.

"It's a very clever, technology-aware house."

"Even if I don't have it on tape, I have my memory. I have my eyes. I saw her."

"Who? Your mother?"

"The ghosts!" Emmanuelle says again, and the way she says it, like this is so obviously the clear answer, makes her appear even more mad. "One ghost, in particular. The woman without a face."

"Who?"

"The woman without a face. I've been drawing pictures of her since before I can remember. Check my school reports. And you'll see she looked nothing, nothing like my mama."

"Tell me, then, about this woman without a face. Tell me about this ghost," she says.

I don't know how long Emmanuelle has been calling her that, but it is the name that has stuck, and the one that I, too, have used. It is an epithet. It is who she is and how she will be known in any oral history. The woman without a face. The faceless woman. Nightmare Mother.

The TV screen blurs in front of me. I do not know if it's from tears or from confusion. The interviewer, herself, becomes a woman without a face. An arm wraps around my shoulders and pulls me into an embrace.

It feels like her. The ghost. She has manifested from the TV screen, diaphanously formed. "Ezri."

She speaks my name softly, with something that I know is not love but has the feel of love to me. For a non-sliver, a hug is a blade, a razor, mother's milk.

"Ezri. I'm right here. You're right here. You're shaking. Please talk to me."

The ghost's mouth is an ancient cave. I walk in, then it spits me out, and I walk back in. Every day I am eaten, then reborn.

Ezri, my sweet boy, I need you to do this, Nightmare Mother says, for me. For me.



It's over an hour, according to Eve, before I "snap out of it"—Eve's words. The interview is done. "It only got worse," she says, and I see it in her eyes when she looks at me, that when Emmanuelle comes home, we cannot say those words we both long to say. We told you so, dear sister. Did we not? "She's already headed to the airport."

"Are you okay?" I ask Eve, though I know I have no business asking when I have nothing to offer her if the answer is no.

"That was really fucked up," Eve says.

"Fuck that interviewer."

Eve nods and is silent. Her lips are pressed together. "What?" I ask her.

"What do you think about what she said?"

I am still coming out of the haze of whatever breakdown I just had, words and sense returning to me bit by bit. "You mean, what, Mama having Munchausen or something?"

Eve doesn't say the words yet, can't seem to acknowledge aloud that this is what's on her mind, but it's what's on her mind.

"There are a lot of things I don't understand," I say, a non-answer that I regret speaking aloud. Has not the moment for a laying down of all we hold true arrived? Seeing our sister annihilated by what were, at their heart, questions that we've struggled with ourselves has made it clear. We must speak to one another. We must share our clues. "Mama loved attention. Loved control. Loved to be the center of something, even a crisis," I say honestly. "It's hard to believe, but then, it's not so hard to believe."

Eve exhales, relieved. She's glad I'm the one to have said it first. It's not so hard to believe. Pieces of our childhood click into place.

Pop knew but didn't want to know, and dealt with this tension inside of himself with absence. Mama recognized her disease but could not control herself—wanted to save who she could. Save Emmanuelle. Eve and I she could not let go of, and besides, in her mind, we were older, more clued in, more adept, perhaps, at evading her.

"It doesn't explain everything," I say, doubt filling my mind.

"Nothing explains everything," says Eve. "Maybe—" she says, then stops herself.

"Maybe what?"

“Maybe it was many things. Maybe it was Mama. Maybe it was—”

“Me.” I know where she’s going with this.

“And me, too. You know, we all believed in it so hard.”

“We believed in it because it was happening,” I say.

“Sure. And maybe—maybe also we were sick. We had headaches all the time, right? Maybe it’s a hereditary disease. Maybe it’s lots of things in play.”

“What about—” I say. What about the woman without a face? I want to ask, but at the thought of her, my brain swells with pain, bloat bloat bloat, bloom, bloom, bloom, like a balloon. It will pop.

“What about what, Ezri?” she asks.

I shake my head.

“Maybe our problem this whole time was looking for one solid, easy answer. One cause. Like we were in a movie. But in real life, bad things happen over and over and over to people, and it’s only the mind that connects all of those bad things into a single narrative.”

I engage with what she’s saying as earnestly and honestly as I can in the moment, even though I’ve had enough of engaging honestly.

“It’s not unusual for trauma victims to assume that they’re the problem, that the common denominator in all of their suffering is themselves, because, hey, they’re the ones consistently being shat upon. This time, maybe instead of blaming ourselves, we turned our blame toward the house.”

I am hungry, thirsty, tired, and sick—all of those animal mundanities that remind me that I’m alive but that I don’t want to be.

“You should lie down, Ezri,” says Eve. The journey from the sofa to Eve’s bedroom lies before me mountainous and long, so I tip over to my side on the sofa instead, tuck my legs up.

“While you were out of it, Elijah asked if she could go out.”

“Go out?”

“Yes. To Oak Lawn. Check out the gays.”

I smile. “Hasn’t she had her fill of that here?”

“She wants new, interesting, hip gays. Cute shops. Cute restaurants.”

“She should go. I’ve dragged her all the way to Dallas. The least I can do is let her do something fun and local.”

“I could call her an Uber?” Eve asks.

“No. No, don’t do that. I’ll go with her. Later. Later, after I’ve slept.”

“She specifically asked not to go with you,” says Eve.

“Ouch.”

“She’s fourteen.”

“I wish Magi was still in town so Elijah didn’t have to be alone when she doesn’t want to do stuff with me. It’s strange, leaving her to her own devices. I don’t know, she never used to be this independent. Have I been so fucked in my head that I missed her growing up?”

“It was crazy seeing those two together at the wake, talking and laughing together, thick as thieves. All teenagery, wanting nothing to do with their amazing aunty.”

I laugh but am drifting.

“I’m scared,” I say, or think I say. Dream thoughts and waking thoughts mash.

“Of what?”

I hug a sofa cushion tightly, clutching it to my gut, willing images from my mind as my insides tense and spasm, as my heartbeat picks up ever-increasing speed.

“You’re safe,” says Eve.

I am taken as if by fever, lucid and not lucid, asleep but not peacefully so.

“She can’t hurt you anymore.”

The humming, humming, humming of a sweet tune, but is it Eve? Is it me? Or is it the woman without a face?

She does have a face. I remember it.

THIRTY-ONE.

Emmanuelle doesn't text us when she lands. When Eve said she'd meet her at the airport to pick her up, Emmanuelle texted that she'd use a car service. We check her flight status and see that it got in over an hour ago.

"She's probably just going through it," I say. "Why would she want to speak to either of us?" But Eve is lost in worry and pacing.

She hasn't exercised for the better part of a week, and what would usually be dispelled through those pounding, punishing movements has caught up with her.

The way she has taken care of me, I try to take care of her. I let the sweet parts of me, the fragments who know how to love, make her chamomile tea. I cook dinner for the kids, pasta for Eden and Elijah, cereal for Echo, then set up Echo and Eden with a film on my laptop in their room as Elijah disappears under the covers on her fold-out bed to be on her phone.

I wash the stack of dishes that have accumulated by and in the sink.

"Can you try calling her again?" Eve asks me.

I nod and fish my phone out my pocket, call Emmanuelle twice. "No dice," I say.

Eve flips on the TV and surfs through channels, finding nothing of interest. She watches five minutes of an episode of *SVU*, but gets annoyed and changes to a different procedural.

The evening passes in a restless haze, and still no word from our baby sister.

"Maybe we should call someone?" I offer up uselessly. Who would we call? I wonder if maybe she missed her flight and stayed in Boston, is still licking her wounds and doesn't want to speak to us. Perhaps she wants to make us worry, wants us to feel afraid for her. She wants and needs to be chased, but where even to start?

Face tight, Eve stares at her phone.

"What is it?"

“Look at Emmanuelle’s Insta.”

I take Eve’s phone and look. No new posts, but several stories.

The first one is before the interview this morning. Nervous excitement. Pride. The second story, a share of someone’s post about a protest in Toronto. The third story, a share of a post from a tattoo artist she likes. The fourth, after the interview, simply white font over black background: *can’t*. The fifth, the same white font over black background, more words: *I’m so tired*. The sixth story is the Langston Hughes poem about the fatigue of waiting for the world to become someplace good and kind, and then, as a result, splitting the world open to see what’s causing the rot of it, like it’s an old piece of fruit. The seventh story: *I will never stop fighting*. The eighth story: *And if I die, know that it is not me who killed me, but this world*. The ninth story: a missing child. The tenth story: fundraiser. The eleventh story: *old problems require old solutions. enter crossroad dirt*, captioned over a picture of dirt.

I struggle to parse information in this format, and it all swirls in my head, but it coheres, finally, into a knowing. “She’s going back to the house.”

“Alone,” says Eve, sweeping her keys off the bar counter into her pocket, sliding her feet out of her slippers and into some flip-flops.

It’s after ten. I go to check on the kids and find them all asleep. I consider waking Elijah, calling her name a couple of times quietly, but when she doesn’t answer, I give it up and resolve to leave a note and text her to keep watch over the little ones if she awakes and we’re not here. “Elijah,” I call one last time, but Eve is shouting for me to come.

“I asked Ms. Randall to keep an eye on the house,” she says. “Gave her a key.”

I nod and join Eve in the car. We are off, off to chase our sister.

THIRTY-TWO.

The woman and the girl have exclusive seats at a newly opened restaurant in Bishop Arts. The chef is known for modern twists on old southern classics, using fresh, local ingredients grown on his family's farm. Truly farm to table, the menu boasts. It's called Tin Cup.

"This all sounds so good," says Elijah, as she reads the menu. She has to squint. The restaurant is mostly candlelit.

"Shall we start with the mixed bread bowl?" asks Lily.

A mix of cornbread, buttermilk biscuits, and sourdough served up fresh and hot with house-churned butter, local bluebonnet honey, spicy black-eyed pea spread, and mustard-green pesto.

"Yes, please," says Elijah, and does a loose calculation of the carbs in the meal she's about to eat before injecting herself with her insulin pen. According to her phone, which connects to her continuous blood glucose monitor, her sugars are a little low, which is probably for the best given how laden with starch and sugar this meal will be. She's already had a glance at the dessert menu, which includes a pecan tartlet served with a cinnamon-maple ice cream. After checking her glucose, Elijah checks for any new messages or calls—any indication that her aunties or her yoyo know that she's not back at the house, asleep next to Eden and Echo, but here, about to eat a most delicious meal.

"You sure? There are some vegan options as well," says Lily.

Earlier, Lily had bought Elijah two cookbooks. *Afro-Vegan* and *Vegan Soul Food*.

"Tonight, I'm a carnivore," says Elijah, bowing her head in embarrassment, her cheeks burning with heat.

"No shame, darling. Perfect is the enemy of good."

"Tell that to my piano teacher," says Elijah.

Elijah is nervous and unable to fully appreciate the food. She understands that it is delicious, but in the same way that she understands that the area of a circle is pi times the radius squared: as a fact, not a feeling.

There is, though she doesn't like to admit it, a large part of her that would like to go back home, to Eve's. This part surprises her, because Lily is great, and this restaurant is nice, and this—everything that's happening—spells possibility, excitement. A future. Lily has said that studying music at the university level in America is where her future is, and she'd listed off schools that Elijah had never heard of or thought much about because Elijah hadn't thought of the future much until very recently.

Lily has asked Elijah back to her hotel room, so that she doesn't have to drive all the way to Arlington to drop Elijah back, and while Elijah knew this was coming, had hoped for this moment, in fact, she doesn't fully know what to do with it now that it is here.

She washed herself thoroughly this morning, and brushed her teeth before sneaking away from Aunty Eve's, but those preparations are inadequate given the task in front of her, the giving and receiving of *it*, pleasure, a thing that still eludes her.

Masturbation is only a recent discovery, and she has not yet learned to bring herself to finish, does not know if that fabled end is even possible for her.

And while Lily calls her beautiful, Lily has not seen Elijah fully in the flesh. Has not seen the rolls, the acne on her back, the stretch marks on her tummy and thighs, the scars on her legs where she nicked herself shaving before giving up on ever shaving her legs again.

"You all right, sweetheart?" asks Lily.

Elijah nods automatically. "I am a little tired."

"Me, too. Should we skip dessert and head to the hotel?"

Perhaps Elijah could go to the bathroom and call herself a ride. Or call Eve. Or Emmanuelle. They would understand, pick her up and only give her a gentle lecture.

Yet she has come so far. It seems foolish to turn back, toward what her life has always been, and away from this new path. She does not know for sure where it will lead, but it will be somewhere different, someplace where there is perhaps some kind of life.

"Elijah?"

"Sorry," she says. She slurps up the remainder of her Diet Coke so she has time to think. "I need the toilet."

In the bathroom, Elijah decides to call Emmanuelle. She's not at home, and there's a chance that wherever she is, she can come pick Elijah up and get her back to Eve's with no one being the wiser. And Emmanuelle, perhaps being the black sheep of the siblings at the moment, will have only love and understanding for Elijah. Eve has a strict streak.

Elijah dials. Three rings.

"Hello? Elijah? What's up?" Emmanuelle answers, and Elijah is surprised. She'd not actually expected her aunty to answer, given she'd been ignoring her siblings' calls all afternoon and evening.

But she picked up for Elijah.

"Aunty," says Elijah. "Can you—can you come pick me up?"

"Are you back at Eve's house? You want to go somewhere? It's late," she says, "and I'm in the middle of something really important. Eve or Yoyo can't take you?"

"Well," says Elijah. She doesn't know what else to say.

The bathroom door creaks open and Elijah hears Lily. "Elijah? Sweetie? Are you in here?"

"Sorry, got to go," Elijah whispers to Emmanuelle, then hangs up. Turns off her phone.

"Yeah, one minute."

She flushes, then leaves the stall to wash her hands, where Lily is leaning on the wall next to the hand dryer. She looks disturbingly cool, her hair done up in a slick, high bun, the hair in the bun itself messy and wild. Her olive-green ankle boots have a chunky heel, myriad nonfunctional buckles, a pointy toe. Her black straight-legged jeans are rolled up to reveal her socks, the very bottoms of her calves. Tucked-in black tee.

Elijah specifically avoids looking at herself in the mirror as she washes her hands. She's wearing the same outfit that she wore to the funeral, as it's the only thing she packed that's vaguely fashionable. Black-and-gray-plaid peg-leg trousers, her shiny oxblood Doc Martens gifted by Lily, and a short-sleeve black button-up with a white Peter Pan collar. She tried to style her locs into some sort of something but gave up and settled on what she usually did, pulling them back into a loose, messy ponytail.

"You ready, cutie?" asks Lily.

Elijah breathes in, then smiles. "Yeah." She heads over to the dryer and lets her hands linger under the heat for as long as she can. "I'm ready."

THIRTY-THREE.

It's been fifteen days since I was here, fifteen days since I blew—I don't remember his name, or how I supposedly knew him as a kid, and I wonder if I'd hallucinated the entire interaction. My mind likes to play tricks on me in new ways every day.

As Eve pulls up to the house, I dread the sight of cop cars, news crews—suicidal closeted middle-aged faggots in their Humvees—but there's only 677, looming and alone. Eve slows onto the circular driveway, braking at its crest.

Will we pray? Will we hold hands?

Eve shuts off the ignition. “Ezri,” she says, unclicking her seat belt.

“What?”

She leans her head back against the seat. “What do you think we'll find?”

It was what I'd asked myself when I came looking for Mama and Pop after the text. At that moment, I couldn't guess specifically what I'd find on the other side of the front door. I knew only that it would be bad.

“I think we'll find Emmanuelle,” I say. “We'll find her, and we'll take her home. That will be that.”

The answer must satisfy her, because she opens the car door and gets out, slams the door behind her. I follow suit but refuse to look up at the house. Gazing upon her would be admittance of defeat, for she is big; I am small.

I always expect nights like this to be quiet, to match the solemnity, but crickets chirp and sprinklers spew. There's even the sound of music a few houses down where someone is having a backyard party. It's late enough that they'll be fined by the HOA.

The distance from car to door stretches before me like a great pilgrimage. I should've packed snacks, a Bible, water, the hair of a lover in a locket, a letter to God. I've brought with me only fear.

I forget that I'm in pajamas, that neither Eve nor I bothered changing into our clothes when we'd realized where Emmanuelle was. It means that when we step into the vestibule, both of us in flannel bottoms, I feel, believe, know, that this is my house. That I live here.

This is the house I sleep in.

This is the house where I take a shower and put on my nightclothes, where I go downstairs before bed to tell Mama good night.

Everything is still in its place. Furniture, art, candles, rugs. I'd hardly noticed it before, how beautiful this place is. It still smells of home, of Mama and Pop.

"Emmanuelle?" Eve calls out, then says, "Weird."

"What?"

"It's fucking freezing in here," she says.

"Probably the AC?"

"What the fuck are we cooling this giant-ass house for when we ain't even living here?" she says.

"I mean, I agree that environmentally it's bad, but it's not like we can't afford it," I say, the quip automatic, as if spoken by a robot, not by me. Eve snort-laughes.

It hurts, but it is home.

"Emmanuelle," Eve shouts again.

When she doesn't answer, I suggest that Eve call her. Given that her phone has been ringing—even if she hasn't picked up—it suggests she hasn't turned it off or put it in Do Not Disturb mode. Maybe we'll hear the ring or the vibration.

"You hear that?" asks Eve. The faintest vibration for several seconds, then nothing. Eve rings our sister again. "Damn. Straight to voicemail this time."

The pang of hurt that passes through me is a surprise—to be actively avoided by my sister. She is hiding from me, from us. She'd rather be alone in the house she knows killed our parents than speak to us.

"We should turn on the lights," I say, but also can't bear to do it myself.

"No, I don't—I don't want to—"

I understand. It's terrifying not to see coming the things that might harm us, but it's more terrifying to be seen ourselves. The darkness hides us as much as it hides the ghosts.

We remain side by side as we search the downstairs for Emmanuelle. I want to hold my sister's hand, but I don't know if she wants to hold mine, and I can't bear a rejection.

Moonlight and starlight from outside throw shadows through the blinds against the living room walls, slices of alternating dark and light. In the corner, a figure, smiling. It is one of Mama's ficus plants. Against the wall, a painted portrait that in the dark is grotesque and maddening. Is it a woman, screaming, laughing, chiding, in pleasure? Does she not know herself? Like me, does she refuse to cohere?

"The washing machine," I say.

"What?"

"It's running."

High-tech, low-water, and eco-conscious, my parents' machine hardly makes a noise, but I can finally parse the hushed spin of clothes in the laundry room that's been going since Eve and I came in.

"Leave it," says Eve, and I nod, lest we open and find ourselves whisked inside and drowned, to remain forever in 677's secret realm.

"Maybe it's Emmanuelle, though?" I ask, so we walk together to the laundry room. It's empty.

I breathe. I breathe again. I breathe again. It's a wonder to me that in the end, that is all there is—breath. With it, we live, and without it, we die.

"Come," I say, turning, and walk away toward the downstairs study.

The curtains that typically cover the glass sliding doors that lead out to the backyard are open, and the ground lights around the pool cast rays of orange light into the room where my mother often worked on what she called her "projects"—a dozen or so unfinished books, treatises, applications, none of which came to anything.

Her study is that of someone important and old-fashioned, full of dark wood, thick, leather-bound books, Afghan rugs, a beige globe. So much of Mama is, was, an image she was constructing.

I fumble through the papers on the antique desk, which I remember her buying at exorbitant cost, using my phone so that I can see. Whatever hope I've nurtured that some tangible artifact would reveal the truth to me is dashed when I examine what's there: a flyer for an upcoming estate sale, printouts of financial and budgeting spreadsheets, a notebook with to-do

lists that contain items for hair appointments, fundraisers, speakers' series at local colleges and museums. Mother is God, and Mother is just a woman.

"Look at this," I say, picking up a piece of paper with an ink sketch of a magpie on it. I know that it's not Mama's, as she had no eye for such things and lacked the hand-eye coordination to make realist art.

Eve isn't here with me.

"Eve?"

Nothing.

I walk back out into the hallway and then to the laundry room. The door, this time, is shut. "Eve?"

I knock.

"Eve?"

Again, I breathe, and again, I breathe. I open the door. Before me, on the floor, a bulbous mass of white fabric shivers like a dead thing freshly defibrillated.

The washing machine door is open, and inside there's nothing. With another breath—always with another breath—I step forward once, then twice. Reaching out my arm with the bravery of a girlboy dipping a foot into a cold river that will grab hold and wash xem away, I touch the mass. Something bristly but gauzy brushes my palm, a texture I can't place, like fried hair. I grab it and pull.

My sister is there, quaking with a force that will leave her muscles tight and sore tomorrow, if she is here tomorrow, if any of us is here tomorrow. She's holding on to the white fabric, has a section of it clutched in her teeth.

"Eve," I say, and kneel down to her. I don't ask what happened. I don't want to know. If this is Eve's state after ten minutes in the house, what is Emmanuelle's?

I sit down next to Eve and wrap an arm around her shoulder. I sweep her in as tight against me as I can, for my anchorage and hers. "Shhh," I say. I want to sing her a lullaby, but I am never sure which are the ones that are real, that I learned from Mama or an aunty, and which are the ones I learned from the house.

"What's that?" asks Eve. The sketch of the magpie is still in my hand. I turn on the flashlight on my phone so she can see. "Always one for sorrow with you," she says, and snuffles. Her body is still a shuddering baby bird. I can't tell the difference between grief and ghosts. Both seize the body and

take what they will. Eve has the look of something that is dead but still twitches, moves—the last sparks of life blowing a fuse, the smell of burntiness in their wake.

“One for sorrow?”

“The magpies. You used to draw them all the time.”

I did, and yet until this moment I’d forgotten that, the memory not suppressed, simply unimportant enough to frequently recall, for years floating and unarchived. The sketch is my own, and judging by the anatomical detail, I would’ve been fourteen when I penned it.

I’ve dedicated it to someone—Mama?—but cannot decipher my dysgraphic scrawl. I fold the drawing and put it into my pocket.

“It’s Mama’s wedding dress,” says Eve.

“What?”

She gestures to the white cloth in my hand and in hers, its swaths of fabric still draped partially over her. The material I couldn’t discern before is lace. “I opened the machine. I thought maybe—I thought maybe—what if Emmanuelle was somehow in there? We used to be able to fit inside the washing machine. Do you remember?” That was a different time, when we were small, and a different machine, bigger. Actually—

“No. It was the dryer. The dryer we used to hide ourselves in. Among the hot towels,” I say.

“Right. You’re right. I would wake up—wake up in the dryer,” she says. I nod my head. I know this. “Do you remember—Ezri, do you remember putting me there? Or did I dream it? Did I dream that? Did I dream you stuffing me into the dryer?” It feels wrong to hold on to her in the face of such an accusation, but I do.

I don’t like to remember such things, and I do my best to turn my mind from them. I don’t have to try so hard. Six seventy-seven is a gray, mist-thick valley. Unlike the dark, eyes do not adjust to mist or fog. When I traverse my memory of it, I can’t trust most of what I see and am always tripping over my own feet.

“I do remember,” I say. “I did do that.”

“Why?”

“I was hiding you.”

“Yes. Yes. Yes. I remember. From her.”

“Yes.”

“She’s still here,” says Eve. “I was starting to believe that maybe I had made it all up, that time and childhood distorted what was real. But who else would do this? Put this through the wash like it was a dirty soccer uniform?”

I nod. “The woman without a face.”

Eve turns to look at me. I cannot read her eyes but to know that she is also trying to read my own.

“We need to find Emmanuelle,” I say. Still shaking, Eve nods. She lets the wedding dress fall to the floor as she stands.

I know now that the house is awake. We’ve not managed to elude her knowledge in the dark. She taunts us with the washer, the dress. She says to me, Hello, non-sliver.

I am grateful for the easy way Eve and I touch now, neither of us having to reach out because we’ve remained clinging to each other since our embrace on the floor. I hold on to her left arm with both of my arms. The sides of our hips touch. Shoulders. I can smell the chocolate on her breath that she ate on the car ride over.

The game room is empty but for shadows that might not be shadows but ghosts. So is Pop’s study. Yet the sense that we are not alone here only grows.

In the dining room, Mama’s bone china is laid out. The table set in full. Silver—real silver—ware. The tea service, too, is no longer in the cabinet where our family kept beautiful, sacred objects. It sits on the antique rattan trolley. Ready to be served.

I put my hand on the teapot. It is not hot, but not cold. I open the lid and sniff its contents. Mama’s Lapsang. The smoke of it calls my mother to me. A night on her lap. Me, drinking a hot toddy she’s made me to settle my throat, which I’ve worn raw with screaming and crying in the night, and her with her Chinese tea heavy on her breath.

Can you feel it, all your troubles melting? she says.

The brandy in the hot toddy takes me gently away from the world.

I wish I knew how to help you, baby. Can you tell me?

Save me, Mama, I wanted to say, but I didn’t know that that was what I wanted to say. At seven or eight years old, I thought only in feelings: terror, loneliness, desire. They were the heads of my Cerberus, my three-faced guard dog.

The last downstairs room to check is the nursery, Mama's plant oasis—the one she made when the HOA denied the dream she had for the front yard. It's a circular room that has more windows than walls, which she'd had replaced with custom-fitted stained glass. It is there that we find Emmanuelle. It is there that we find Emmanuelle alive.

She is not herself. Kneeling on the floor in a circle of salt, her eyes wide open, she is taken by a force that is not of her.

No words emanate from her lips, but her mouth hangs open, slack like an empty bag. Enough candles light the room that it feels like day, that time of warm afternoon light. Four p.m. light. Is there truth to whatever ritual Emmanuelle performs? Is the house fighting her in its small rebellions, its insolence, playing with Mama's precious things, reminding us who is truly Mother here?

I step toward her. Beneath my feet—not salt as I'd thought, I can tell by the feel. It's cracked eggshell. I know of these things from great-aunts, grandmas. Jacqueline used to rub an egg over my body after a meltdown, crack the egg in a cup. A cleanse.

There are pieces of whole nutmeg. She wears a necklace of them, a necklace of many layers, a red thread woven into nutmeg seeds she has turned into beads.

The not-herness, the force, is her belief, her unflinching belief. I long for such a thing, a force that might fill my cracks like glue. I want to tell her that what darkness is in this place cannot be exiled with rootwork. That is not even the nonbeliever in me. I know there is much in this world beyond my understanding, that I do not have control over, but what is in this house is not just a problem of the house. It was a problem with Mama and Pop, and it now lives in us, this rot that tries to eat away our joy.

"Emmanuelle. Baby," Eve says tenderly, and I am jealous. Jealous to be for a moment not the center of her care, jealous to be thrust out of the little partnership we'd made of ourselves back in the laundry room. One for sorrow.

Emmanuelle either doesn't or pretends not to notice our presence.

I look around the room trying to find the meaning behind all the items in here. But memories of my childhood and our various traditions are not enough for me to understand what my sister is doing, has done.

“Is she on something?” Eve gets down on her knees, broken eggshells crunching beneath her. She puts a hand over each of Emmanuelle’s cheeks. “My love. Enough,” she says.

Tears trickle out of the corners of Emmanuelle’s eyes. Mixed with the flash of flame light against her cheeks, they are hard to see, but I know that they are there. The shift in her demeanor tells me so. Her jaw tenses, teeth clench.

“Tell me y’all don’t believe that woman and what she said about Mama and Pop.”

I can do no such thing. Looking at Eve, I can see that she can’t, either. “Let’s go home. Please,” Eve begs.

Emmanuelle hardens, wipes away the tears that have fallen. “Not until I finish. You go if you don’t believe. I came here prepared to do this on my own.”

“We aren’t leaving you in this house alone.”

“Why not, if it’s so safe? Mama is dead, so.”

“I never said it was safe,” says Eve.

“Didn’t you? Every time you refused to defend Mama?” she asks.

Eve closes her eyes. “I’m sorry it’s not as simple for me as it is for you. I know you have your neat, tidy story of what happened—”

“Story? Is that what it is to you? A story I tell myself?” I don’t understand her objection. Isn’t everything a story we tell ourselves? “Then what’s your story?”

Eve remains silent.

“Ezri, what about you?”

Whatever half-worthy words I dream up do not make it to my throat, my tongue, too tangled in uncertainty.

“Right. So neither of you can tell me anything. It’s how it’s always been, right. *Send away Emmanuelle, she’s too small. She can’t handle this.* You shut me out. Well, I’m here now, and I am handling this. The way you two never did. I never asked to leave.”

Emmanuelle stands in a fluid motion, determination making her movements more preternaturally graceful than usual. From the large apron pockets in her linen dress, she removes an egg—too large to be a chicken’s or a duck’s.

It's an ostrich egg. She cradles it in her two palms, then heads for the staircase. Presumably, she's already done what she meant to do downstairs.

Emmanuelle rubs the egg gently along the banister, brushes it against each step and the wall. Eve and I keep a small distance behind her—enough not to disturb her, but not so far that if we need to grab her, we can't.

Each of us stills when we reach the top of the stairs. It's where our fear lives. Downstairs, there is always the promise of the front door, where one might run out into the street to safety. Upstairs, there is only the maze of our bedrooms, which have many nights seemed like cells, impossible to escape.

Emmanuelle holds the egg to her chest. Up here, it is a truer dark, all the curtains drawn, all the blinds down. I think that I can still hear the backyard party a few houses down. And just under it, just under it—voices prattling. Laughter. A TV.

I walk in the corridor toward it, stepping in front of Emmanuelle. I don't know if my sisters hear it yet, or if the sound is truly there.

"What is it?" asks Eve.

I follow the sound until I am close to its source: my bedroom. Blue light dances under the crack at the bottom of the door.

"Maybe one of the cops left it on," says Eve, hopeful. "Let's go. Please, let's just go." But I am drawn toward the light, the noise. I recognize what's playing. It's one of the videos from my small VHS collection, which never needed growing, because I preferred to watch the same things over and over.

Is it me who reaches for the knob? Turns it? How could it be so, when I know that what's inside will kill me?

Inside, my room smells of pungent florals. Strong perfume. In the bed, there is a body, a body under the covers, curled away, hidden.

Is it me? I consider the possibility that I died weeks ago when I visited the house, that every day since then I've been a ghost haunting my sisters.

Emmanuelle shoves me out of the way, egg in hand. I want to hide from her what she's about to see if she pulls back the quilt—me, my dead body, lifeless, the way I found Mama's body and Pop's. And she'll know it, know that all this time I wasn't real. I feel myself disappearing.

"Don't," I say. Please, don't. Please, don't, dear baby sister.

Since we moved into 677, I've been hiding. I'm still not ready to be found.

Eve grabs my wrist and pulls me into her; she tucks my head into her chest. But still, I feel myself floating, the body I thought was mine, that I've been inhabiting, flopping in a heap to the floor, while I, the spirit who animates it, dissolve into the air.

Emmanuelle pulls back the covers. She turns on the lamp on the bedside table. Immediately aglow, the figure in the bed startles, moves.

Eve is holding on to me with a tightness I am only now able to feel. It bruises my ribs. Her nails dig into my neck and cheek where she holds me to her. "Shh, shh, it's okay," she says to me, like I am a baby, her baby, and she is doing her duty as mother to calm me. "Shh now," she says. I realize she keeps saying it because I am shaking and moaning deep from my chest.

"Who the fuck are you?" says Emmanuelle, standing over the bed. "I don't—" I notice the egg cracked on the floor near the bedside table, where Emmanuelle must have dropped it.

There are wine bottles and used tissues, and there is our neighbor Laurie, in a sparse silk nightie. Her face is not so pretty as the last time I saw it, however many years ago that was. It is blotched and red. Puffy. She is drunk and has been crying. I think also—it is hard for me to speak the truth plainly. To admit it is to know I am nothing but meat. I can feel the feverish pulse of blood, the grinding beat of my heart, the churning of my bowels, the stiffness in my neck, in my knees, in my ankles, the flash of pain in my temples, the burn of my stomach.

I vomit, all over myself, on Eve, because I smell that Laurie has been fingering herself in my bed.

"Children," Laurie says. She's looking not at Emmanuelle but at Eve and me. She is not how I remember her: perfect, a statue. She is something haggard.

She stumbles out of the bed. In the nightie, with a white sheet draped over her narrow, bony shoulders, she could be mistaken for a ghost. She is pale. Smeared, wet makeup has turned her face into an eerie white blur.

"Ezri," she says. I am about to answer, to say her name back, but Eve moves us so that she is between Laurie and me, even as she's still holding on to me, gripping me tight.

"Do not come near them. Do not say their name again," says Eve.

I cannot see what transpires—how Laurie reacts—even though I'm desperate to. To know what she is thinking, thinking right now, of me. I try

to turn my head, but I can't, not with how Eve holds me.

"Please," says Laurie. I don't like to hear her on the verge of tears.

"What the fuck is going on?" asks Emmanuelle, poor, left-out Emmanuelle. She can't understand that there are some things that are good to be left out of.

"Tell me," Emmanuelle says, sensing a secret knowledge passing among Eve, Laurie, and me.

Emmanuelle's breaths are heavy and fast. I use the sound of it to remember my own breathing, to reconnect my lungs to my body. I feel Emmanuelle's eyes. They are searching. Then, a sharp inhalation, a catch. "I know you," she says. I plead to her quietly not to say it. Dear sister, unknow what has just become known to you. Like most of my prayers I made in this very room as a child, it goes unanswered.

"The woman without a face," says Emmanuelle. The name suits Laurie especially now. She is a rubbed-out watercolor.

Confronted with the naked force of her words, I can acknowledge this simple truth, that Laurie is Nightmare Mother. "No," I say.

I don't want anyone else to know. Never wanted Mama to know. Or Pop.

"I will kill her before I let her touch you," says Eve in my ear. Her voice shakes, but not from fear. It warns of fury to come, an earthquake.

"Please don't kill her."

Did Mama find out what passed between Laurie and me, her child, her spoiled fruit? Is that why she raised arms against herself? No one could live down the shame that is me. Not me, certainly not her.

"Shh, shh, shh," says Eve to me.

"I need y'all to tell me what's happening," says Emmanuelle, through tears.

"Can't you fucking see this is not the time?" asks Eve.

"Please don't tell her. Please don't tell her. Please don't tell her," I beg Eve.

"I won't," says Eve. She holds my secret close, the way she always has, even as Emmanuelle begs to have it said aloud—that Laurie has invaded this house since I was a small child. And it is I who let her in, that first time, opened the door and said, Hello, I remember you, you came by with petits fours. And she said, Yes, that's right, hello, sweetie. You are beautiful. I

said I know. She laughed. She reached out her finger and used it to nudge one of my braided ponytails. Do you want to see my room? Absolutely. Where are your mom and dad? Dad is away. Mama is napping with the baby. May I look around? Yes, I will show you everything. Isn't it big? It is. Isn't it wonderful? It is. What's your name again, sweetie? Ezri. That's beautiful. Unique. Now is that a boy name or a girl name? Both.

We walk around the house, and I show her every nook and cranny, then she says, I need to use the bathroom. Will you head up to your room and then I will find you there? I nod and skip up the steps.

I am playing with stuffed animals when she joins me. She smiles. Now this is a room. Do you like it? I love it. I got to choose everything. You have very good taste. Do you want to play? Yes. She looks around. Your mom is sleeping? Yes. When will she wake up? I shrug. I should get going. I only came to say hello to you. Oh no, don't be sad. Don't you want to keep playing? I do. Very much so. But it might not be the best idea right now. Why not? Am I talking too much? Sometimes I talk too much. Not everything needs saying. Not every thought needs speaking aloud. I want to hear all your thoughts. How about this. What if I come back? When? Whenever you want—how about tonight? Before bedtime? Maybe after that. But I will be sleeping. She shrugs. I don't have to. No, no. I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. Of course I will come. I will come and we will play—very quietly so as not to wake your mother and the baby. The baby's not really the baby anymore. She's two. Mm. Not a fan? I shrug. It's hard not being the baby anymore, she says, but maybe you can be my baby? I shrug. I don't know what that means. I will be back tonight, she says. She holds up a pair of keys. This way you won't have to get up to let me in. They were in your mother's purse. Mama needs those. Don't worry, I'll make a copy. When you come, you'll play with me? Yes. A lot? Yes. As much as I want? Yes, and then some.



When Mama awoke from her nap that day, I did say a woman came to visit. I told her that she played with me in my room and would be coming back at nighttime to play with me again. Mama was not distraught. She thought it another of my childish whims—an imaginary friend—and I

understand now the great fatigue that held her constantly in those years, mothering two small children, one of whom, me, was not such an easy child to mother. She napped when Eve napped, but also at times when Eve and I were both awake.

Eve had not yet been weaned off Mama's breasts, and she fed constantly through the night even as a toddler. I don't know if Mama wanted to ungrip herself from the particular madness that is having one's body and what flows from it be a child's absolute and only comfort, but she did not breastfeed me, and I suspect her attitude about the whole thing was competitive, making up for what she denied me, in her eyes.

The night after Laurie came the first time, using a copied key to enter, returning Mama's to her purse, I cannot say for sure what happened, if she touched me then, or if we merely played, quietly, on my rug, with Barbies, with my stuffies, with my dollhouse.

The way that she always came, in the dark, no one but me any the wiser, I think I thought she was not real, a figment only I could see.

"Is it you?" Emmanuelle asks, the only one of us three siblings who still cares about understanding. Eve and I understood long ago, I think, and found that understanding worse, indescribably worse, than the haunting we dreamed up.

In the laundry room just now, when Eve said *She's still here. Who else would do this?* I asked her if she meant the woman without a face, the ghost memory, but the way she looked at me, I know now that was not what she meant: she meant Laurie, the person, the person who hurt me.

And she knew it that night at the diner—all those nights at the diner—*she likes you*. And she wondered that night if Mama knew, and she reckoned yes.

She thought of the headaches, the stomachaches. They were not the house's doing, but Laurie's.

The benzodiazepines and opiates found in Mama's and Pop's systems—Laurie.

Goodness, Eve, how much she tried to save me! She had no business looking after me, but it was her whole childhood.

"Did you—what are you doing here?" asks Emmanuelle.

"I was just sleeping. I'm sorry."

“You’re not sorry,” says Eve. “Say it was you, say that you killed them,” says Eve.

“No. No,” says Laurie.

If not her, then who? The house? But she is the house. I am the house.

“Why can’t you just give us this? A single answer so we can go about our lives. Be honest for one single moment. Haven’t you done enough? Can you give us this? Have this confession be your amends.”

“I have done a lot, but I did not kill them. I didn’t. I just—” She’s breathing so fast, and it’s hard to imagine a woman like her losing face.

I want her to be Charles Manson, Ted Bundy. Unrepentant to the end.

“Did you kill the fish?” I whimper. I am back in time.

“What?” she says.

“The fish!” I scream. “Did you kill the fucking fish?”

“I don’t know what you’re—”

“The fish,” I scream again. Air from my lungs bludgeons my throat. I give myself a sore throat, a cough.

Eve would’ve been too small to remember Mama’s fish dying, and I wonder if she thinks I’m hysterical.

“I didn’t mean for you to get in trouble for that,” says Laurie.

“What about my ants? Them, too? You killed them?”

These animals become, at once, of utmost importance. Every dead dog. Fucking Bentley.

“Yes.”

“Why? Why? You knew I loved them. You knew how much I loved them. You helped me, I remember, you helped me gather them into a jar. Why then would you do that? What the fuck is wrong with you?”

It is easier to ask about the ants than it is to confront her about her more personal assaults. Those, I put all my will into keeping buried, even as the smell of her cunt exhumes each act of wrongdoing.

I cannot even say the words, still, not directly. Only in generalities. With distance.

“It wasn’t about you,” says Laurie. “Your parents. It was a—it started as a joke. A game. I met your mother and she was one of the most awful people I’d ever met. We were a friendly, loving neighborhood. She didn’t fit. She acted so better-than.”

“So wait, what? You killed her? And my dad?” asks Emmanuelle. Poor thing. Her world crumbling. “Is that what happened? Ezri, Eve, did you know? Have y’all been laughing at me this whole time? You think I’m a joke? Pathetic?”

I’m the joke. I’m the pathetic one.

“Emmanuelle, I need you to not be self-obsessed for three seconds,” says Eve.

I wish I could look at Emmanuelle and say, I’m sorry, but then she’d know I have something to be sorry for, will know my wretchedness.

“Don’t dismiss me, Eve,” says Emmanuelle, fiery and unashamed. What must that feel like? “You can’t keep gaslighting me. I don’t know how to keep going when I can’t trust what’s true and untrue.”

None of us do.

“Not you using the word *gaslighting*,” says Eve. As my sisters argue, Laurie is silent. How pleased she must be with our dysfunction.

“I didn’t kill your parents. I swear it.”

“But you did torture us,” Eve says.

Laurie is silent. Maybe she thinks she can still get away with this. Run around the kingdom of siblings she’s divided, conquered. “I thought I could get your parents to sell. Get them to understand that they didn’t belong here.”

“How? How did you do it?” asks Emmanuelle.

“She didn’t do it alone,” I say, because it wasn’t only Laurie who wanted us out. “A couple of weeks ago—I don’t know. In the middle of the night I drove back here. To the house. I ran into someone on the way, and we talked. Somebody’s dad that we used to know as kids here. It was off. Like he knew something. Like he’d done something. Like he was maybe willing to kill me to cover it up.” The Oak Creek Estates had never been kind to us. Could Emmanuelle really act so surprised? Mama sent her away rather than have her grow up here.

And there was me, of course, who helped, from that very first day I let her in, when she made a copy of the key. What else did I do at Laurie’s bidding? Did I erase tapes to cover my secret, lest Mama see me compromised and become disgusted by the truth of me?

A child can’t know it wasn’t its fault it happened. Can’t know it is without blame, without fault. A child will drink bleach if you give it a cup

of it.

“I admit that it escalated,” says Laurie. “It was a game among us. A competition. It was wrong, the lengths we went to. It was like something had a hold on us. Like those witch trials, you know? Ezri, it was you who first told me about them. Do you remember? You’d been reading *The Crucible*. God, you were only nine.”

“But you hurt me,” I say. What a nonsensical utterance, no more wisdom behind it than the enslaved going up to the master, in shock, saying, You own me. That’s not something people do to one another.

“You turned my parents against me. They thought— You know they thought I did all that, don’t you?” I ask. “You said you loved me, but you made me a monster. How come? How come? I was never really that bad. I don’t think I was really that bad a kid at all,” I say. “Why would you do something like that to me?”

In the imaginary true crime doc that chronicles my family, its downfall, the question *why* hovers unanswered to the very end. The Lord does what he does. “Why did you hate me? Why did you make everyone else hate me, too?”

I know now why Mama never left. Because she never believed it was the house. She believed it was me, and wasn’t she right?

“Why did you—you know if my parents left, that would mean me leaving, too. Did you want me gone, too?”

“Never.” I hate myself for wanting this to be true. It’s suicidal to crave nourishment from a fruit known only for its poison, but have I not come by this madness honestly? Laurie is Nightmare Mother and Nightmare Mother is God. Nightmare Mother is Creator. For years, we have been drugged, my sisters and I, my parents. Our bodies were the playthings of Laurie—and how many other neighbors?

Lapses in memory. Why we would awake in the strangest places, hardly knowing who we were. It wasn’t possession. It was Ambien.

“I made this for you.” I take the sketch out of my pocket. The magpie.

“And I’ve cherished it.”

“Did you leave it here to taunt me?”

“Ezri. No.”

“Then why did you let people here believe that there was something wrong with me? Is it because you wanted to be the only one I could confide

in? Who would think lovely things of me?"

"If it was ever about you, it would've stopped after you were gone, right? But it didn't," Laurie says.

"And that's why Mama grew suspicious," says Eve. The full extent of everything Eve knows and has known becomes clear. Did she ever truly believe, in any way, that 677 was haunted? No. She was too clearheaded for my fantasies. I don't deserve a sister like her, and she doesn't deserve someone as fucked as me.

I don't know at which age Eve put it all together, but here, now, in front of Laurie unafraid, it is clear that it has been a long time that she's understood it was nothing supernatural that was ever our tormentor.

When Mama sent Emmanuelle to boarding school, it was to save her not from the house but from me. What must Mama have thought when I screamed for her, Emmanuelle's legs scorched wet near down to muscle? When I told her the sulfuric acid came out of the tap?

She thought I'd gotten my hands on it somehow and poured it into the bath.

All along, it was Laurie who'd poured it in. Or one of her helpers. Maybe it was me. Maybe she'd told me it was bubble bath.

I remember now. She said they were Epsom salts.

"Your father killed himself. Your mother killed herself. They did it together. I can prove it." Laurie pulls out her phone and shows us. She shows us our parents self-murdering, plays a file of their last horrid, grotesque moments. There is sound, clear. Crisp. The plop of water as Mama slides into the pool. A plane that flies overhead. A dog barking in a distant yard. I wonder if the hidden camera she must've used is still there or if she had the good sense to remove it. Obsessed as she is with us, it would not surprise me to find out she couldn't resist leaving it, couldn't risk missing surveilling another of our family's breakdowns.

Oh, Mama. Oh, Pop. Oh, world, which slips, and slips, and slips away from us. Life is a soaped-up baby, slick with suds and Johnson & Johnson baby oil. Oh, sweet child, there goes your infant head, cracking against the porcelain of the tub. There goes the water slithering down your throat and into your lungs.

"You filmed it? You filmed it and you didn't—you didn't stop it? You didn't call for help?" asks Emmanuelle.

These are easy questions to answer, but I know why Laurie won't answer them. She is not someone who can face up to consequences, to who she is. Calling someone, intervening, would have been admittance. Admittance that she was there, watching, all along. That she is nothing. Nothing but a bad thing who will never not be a bad thing. I wonder, at Christmas dinners, Thanksgiving potlucks, July Fourth barbecues, Labor Day blowout sales at Walmart, through airport security on her way to Belize, the Bahamas, Barbados with her husband, did she think about raping me, or did she not think about it at all, ever, but when she placed my hands on her, and hers on me?

"And even with them dead, you couldn't let it rest," says Eve. "You coulda said then: Damn. Shit. I fucked it. It went too far. It went too damn far. I tortured these people damn near to death. I made their life such a misery they offed themselves—but you had to send my sib that text."

I have to believe it's because she wanted to see me, needed to see me. Here in this room with her, as sick with fear as I am, I know that I am alive, that I am hers.

"I didn't torture them to death."

"What do you call it, then? What do you call what you did to us if not torture?" asks Eve, but then she shakes her head, remembering that she is done, that she has made a choice to let the past be the past, and she will not let herself be drawn back into agonizing, wondering, ruminating.

You dig, you dig, you dig. You never strike oil, only more dirt, all the way to the center of the earth.

"Your parents didn't kill themselves because of what I did to them. They'd grown suspicious, so I stopped. We stopped. Did I keep an eye? Yes. I watched. But I hadn't done anything for years," says Laurie.

I lose form, become liquid. Slump. First knocking into Eve and then into the wall. Legs giving out beneath me, I grab for the doorframe.

Then guilt drove Mama to it, for blaming me. Had I only remembered correctly. Had I only not opened the door to Laurie.

"Your mother came to me," said Laurie, continuing without prompt from any of us. Now that she can speak, she is dying to speak, to make known what have been her own private shames.

Harshly exposed in the lamplight's and TV's glow, pale and veiny, Laurie looks dead. Her hair is so long, still, to her mid-back, and dyed

blond, the roots only just starting to show dark. I know what each strand smells like. Eucalyptus and orange. She hasn't washed herself today. She has that thin, fine hair that, if not shampooed daily, looks grimy in a matter of twelve hours. She used to wear it slicked with gel in a bun on such occasions, but now I can see that her hair, flat and textureless, has escaped her elastic, which sits on my pillow, a brown ring.

"Your mother came to confront me. I denied it, of course I did, but there was a part of me that was relieved."

"Why did she come to confront you?" I ask.

This time, Laurie is not so quick to answer.

"You said you hadn't been in the house in years. So why the fuck out of nowhere would she come to you?"

"Someone told her," Laurie says, and she sounds as pathetic as she is. "Jordan. Do you remember him, Ezri? You used to play together all the time. He came to her and confessed that he knew something. Remember that day—remember that day that boy disappeared in your house?"

I am going to be sick again. I'm going to be sick until my body runs out of liquid. I am going to vomit myself into desiccation.

"He was my nephew. I gave him fifty dollars to do it—told him how to sneak out the back gate fence and come back home to mine. He must've told Jordan about it."

I cry out and it hurts my throat, like it wasn't prepared for the sudden jerk of movement. "I came to you that day. You wouldn't let me in. Because he was there."

I can't catch my breath. Can't catch my heart. Can't catch my body. It is rocking so hard it's going to make me topple over.

"So she comes to your house. She confronts you. You deny it, then what?" asks Eve.

"Then she saw the drawing," I say. "The drawing I gave you." My voice is shaking, a thousand me's wishing to speak at once, and so be it. Let every ghost scream.

"Yes," says Laurie.

"She saw the drawing and understood," I say.

"Yes."

Oh, Mama. Mama, could you not have called, called and said, Hello, my child, it's been many years, but I've learned the truth now. I am so sorry.

Let's move forward together.

"I am glad you messaged me," I say, standing over her. "It is good for me to see it plain, to have it in writing, saved on my phone, one little ounce of proof of your depravity."

I hope that my words make her crumple like paper, that her face collapses into a mess of wrinkled folds as her lips quake, that she cries, trying to hold herself up with her lanky arms, but I turn away before I can see.

"Let's go," I say to my sisters.

I make my way down the hallway and down the stairs, not bothering to check if my sisters have joined me.

I hear Laurie behind, yelling, making herself big. She had her little confession, but she can't stomach it truly, the idea of being known for what she is. "Don't think about telling anyone," she says. "They won't believe you. Don't tell a single soul."

I wouldn't dare. The shame, still, hasn't left me. She has made certain of that.

THIRTY-FOUR.

The world should look different now that we've regathered out front, but it doesn't. The black sky, the gray sidewalk, the silver mailboxes. There is the hottest wind upon me. The neighbor's party is still going. Thirsty, I want to go to them and ask for a soda. That feeling of a body that's forgotten itself remembering it is but flesh, and that the worries of consciousness do not supplant the need for light, food, water, heat.

"Should we call—should we call the police?" asks Emmanuelle once we're in the car. It has not waned, her urge to speak.

"I don't think Ezri can go through that," says Eve.

All the words I still cannot say haunt me. I don't want anyone to know the truth of me.

"What about our testimony? I mean, she's still literally in that house right now."

"Will she be by the time anyone gets here?"

"There will be evidence. Now that we know—"

"I've known," says Eve. "Mama knew, toward the end. You don't think she tried telling someone? You don't think she reached out before she went to confront that evil bitch? That was her last move. I told the police almost everything once before. The things I knew, anyway. You know what happened, sis? Nothing. And if that startles you, if you don't believe it, you've been living in a fantasy world."

"Man, fuck this. Fuck everything," Emmanuelle says. "All of this was a fucking waste." I don't know for sure to which "this" she refers: the rootwork, the confrontation with Laurie, her trip back to 677, her entire life, but I feel it all. I do, and I have felt it before, many times, all the time. What a fucking waste.

"I did it," I say.

"What?" asks Emmanuelle.

"Your legs. The bath. I put that shit in the water, the shit that burned you. I could've killed you."

I want the admission to bring relief. Instead, every pain I've ever felt coalesces into a maelstrom in my gut.

"I remember," says Emmanuelle. "I saw you pour in the powder."

"I wasn't possessed," I say. "That's what you always thought, right? That was just me. That's who I am." I should go right back into that house. Laurie and me, we deserve each other.

"What do you want me to say, Ezri?" Emmanuelle asks. "That I hate you? That you're evil? You were fucking, what, eight years old? Nine? If I made up a story about you being possessed, it's because even then, as a little kid, I could see the truth, that it wasn't your fault. I'm sorry for the hold that woman had on you. For what she made you do. I'm sorry that you're nearly forty and what she did to you still decides how you feel about yourself."

I'm not sure if she means it that way, but I take her words as an indictment. Nearly forty, but still four years old. Grow up, Ezri.

My cheeks burn. All my skin does.

"I love you," says Eve. "When that woman put her eyes on me, you hid me in the dryer. But even if you hadn't, I'd love you."

"I love you, too," I choke out. My words are an unintelligible sob, and as I speak them, sirens sound off not far from 677, blotting out my utterance further.

"Ezri," says Emmanuelle.

"What?" I use the back of my forearm to wipe tears from my eyes, snot from my nose. I have to breathe through my mouth for how clogged my nasal passage is with mucus.

"I'm sorry," Emmanuelle says.

"You don't have anything to be sorry for. I'm the one who's sorry."

"No. No. I did something—I did something you're not going to like," she says. "And I did it just now, not when I was a kid. Not under the direction of some pedophile psycho."

Eve is still holding me.

"I was on Live," says Emmanuelle. "On Insta. When all that was happening. With Laurie, I mean."

My throat hurts too much to swallow, and spit dribbles out the side of my mouth. I catch it with the collar of my T-shirt and force the rest of the saliva in my mouth down the hatch, pain or not.

“The fuck?” Eve asks, her voice angry enough that I worry she’ll slap Emmanuelle.

“I didn’t—I didn’t know that all that was going to come out.”

“Those sirens coming—did you do it? Call the police?” I ask. No one could know from the deadness in my voice that seconds ago I was mid-weep.

“No, but I think, I think someone else could have. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“Everyone will know who I am,” I say.

Little boygirl in bed, hidden under your sheet—the world has found you. You cannot hide.

“Get in the car,” says Eve. “We’ll be gone before they get here.”

The police sirens disappear. They aren’t meant for us after all. I wonder if that feeling will ever stop, that every ill in the world is meant for me.

★ ★ ★

“Do you forgive me?”

“No,” I tell Emmanuelle, but what has she even done wrong?

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have come here.” Any ire she felt toward me, toward Eve, crumples under the weight of her guilt. “Shoulda just picked up Elijah and took her to wherever she wanted to go. Had a nice little evening with my niece-niece. But I’m here, here with this mess.”

“Pick Elijah up?” I ask.

“Must’ve been after y’all left to come chase me or something? She called me asking for a ride.”

I get out my phone and ring my daughter. Straight to voicemail.

“Ezri? You okay?” asks Eve.

I dial Elijah again.

“What is it?” asks Emmanuelle.

“My kid asked you to pick her up and you were like, no, makes more sense to do an exorcism on a house,” I say. It takes everything in me not to add *you stupid fucking bitch*.

But I am, too, aren’t I? I’ve had a funny feeling, a funny feeling about Elijah for some time, my shy, reclusive daughter who’s suddenly been so

interested in exploring, of all places, Dallas, Texas. But I am full of funny feelings. Every feeling to me is a funny feeling, not to be trusted.

Being raped repeatedly over the course of one's childhood obliterates any trust a person could ever have in themselves, in their own body as a vehicle of protection. What is intuition? I will never know.

"I'm sorry," says Emmanuelle.

"You two try calling her. Maybe she's blocked me," I say.

Elijah still does not pick up.

"Who are you calling now?" I ask Eve.

"The landline at home. See if I can wake the kids. Calling the neighbor, too."

I can't settle or still.

"Yes, hello, Eden, baby," says Eve after about five minutes of repeated calls to the house. "I'm sorry to wake you. Can you give the phone to your cousin?"

My nails are too short to bite. I roll my neck around my head. I breathe but do not feel the breath.

"She's not there?" asks Eve.

"Fuck," I say.

"Did she tell y'all where she went? No? She goes out most nights?"

I shoot Emmanuelle a look that I hope makes her feel like dying, but only because I can't shoot a look at my own damn self, who let this happen, who brought it on with my chronic lack of presence for a little girl who needs and deserves so much more of me than I've given.

"Maybe she's just at the movies or something," says Eve after she hangs up on her kids.

"She's not at the movies. She's with someone," I say.

"You can't know that," Eve says, trying to reassure me, but I don't deserve it.

"The first night we were here, I caught her on her laptop—the way she closed it so fast. I thought maybe it was porn or something, but she was talking to someone. I know she was. All this shit she's been wanting to do without us. That's not Elijah. And if she called Emmanuelle, that means she didn't feel like reaching out to me or you. And it also means she wanted to leave somewhere—but now her phone is fucking off."

Eve turns on the car engine and braces her hands on the steering wheel decisively. “Let’s not panic,” she says.

“I could post on my socials,” says Emmanuelle. I want to say no immediately, but maybe it’s a good idea. Emmanuelle’s reach is far. The world knows what I’ve done. Now they can know what I’ve let happen to Elijah.

“I’m going to call Magi,” I say. “Who’s got her number?”

None of us do, but Emmanuelle calls Magi’s mother, who wakes Magi and puts her on the phone. “Aunty? What is it?” she asks.

“Do you know where Elijah is?”

The pause I get in response tells me even if she doesn’t know where she is, she knows why I’m asking, which means she knows more than we do.

“Magi? Talk to me.”

“She’s been seeing someone.”

“Okay, and?”

“I don’t know—her name is Lily? She’s legit. She’s a professional musician. I’ve checked her out, I don’t think she’s dangerous.”

The phone is on speaker, and both Eve and Emmanuelle roll their eyes.

Magi’s mother speaks in the background. Apparently, Magi was raised better than this. We were all raised better than this.

“What’s her full name?” I ask.

Emmanuelle is already searching on her phone before Magi fully gets the words out.

I hang up on Magi and her mama but tell them to stand by. “Anything useful?”

“A violinist from Florida. She came far to be here,” says Emmanuelle.

“So she probably has a hotel? Or do you think she—is she taking Elijah with her?”

“Calm down, we’re so not there yet,” says Eve, driving down Acacia and out of the Oak Creek Estates.

“But we should call the police, right? We’re there, aren’t we?”

“We are,” says Eve, driving faster than is strictly necessary given we have no destination. She’s heading south, back toward Dallas.

I call 911. It’s something to do. Maybe it’s a fantasy, that I will find my daughter in time—save her like I wish someone had saved me.

Omela's child is crying out in me, desperate. Find her, or I will kill you, you useless monster, he says.

These are the first words he's spoken, and they are not in the English language, or any human tongue.

"We should go home," I say.

"What?"

"Her laptop," I say. "I can get into it. All her chat apps are linked to it."

Don't think you've won yet, says Omela's child. You are no savior. When you go to her and she is a mess from fucking, will you be able to hold her with so much love, love enough so she knows she is worthy and good? How can you, when you cannot do such a thing for yourself?

Omela's child is venom. And I tell him in my mind, Shh, sweet thing. I will love you. I have carried you home, made your bed with the softest sheets, and combed your hair, and rubbed cocoa butter on your elbows and knees. I will feed you until we find your favorite food, and I will make it for you always.

And I will do the same for my daughter, and I will do the same for me.

I do not believe you.

I will.

You are a liar.

Omela's child, I am not.

You are nothing, nothing to me! You trash thing, why am I stuck inside you? You make me want to die.

I will not let you die, Omela's child. Know it.

THIRTY-FIVE.

Elijah waits in the lobby of the Sheraton hotel, legs crossed, headphones on, reading. “Sweetheart, is there someone I can call?” asks the night concierge. “Did you forget your key? What’s your room number? I’ll call your parents.”

Elijah stands—not to address the concierge, but because she sees her yoyo.

“Elijah,” says Yoyo, crying and out of breath.

Elijah is shivering—the air-conditioning—but otherwise remains still. Yoyo stops in front of her so that they are two feet apart.

“I’m sorry,” says Elijah.

Yoyo frowns and shakes their head. “You’ve done nothing wrong.”

“I stole this,” says Elijah, holding up a phone. “She’s sleeping.”

Yoyo nods. “We can use that, if you’d like, to press charges or whatever you want to do. Elijah, look, I want to say that—”

“I just want the photos on it gone, I look disgusting, but I can’t get in. I don’t know the password.”

“Elijah,” says Yoyo. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here.”

But Yoyo is never there. “It’s okay. I’m fine.”

“May I hug you?” they ask. “Would that be all right?”

Elijah walks past Yoyo toward the automatic doors at the front of the lobby, toward Eve’s car parked outside.

Eve and Emmanuelle are standing outside the car, the relief palpable on their faces. Elijah knows they know, and it’s embarrassing.

“Elijah,” says Emmanuelle. “I was wrapped in my shit and I—”

“It’s okay,” Elijah says.

Yoyo rides in the back with Elijah. “What were you reading?” they ask.

Elijah looks up.

“In the lobby. I was watching you.”

“For how long?”

Yoyo shrugs. “I didn’t want to disturb you. You looked very studious.”

Elijah reaches into her tote bag and pulls out *The Bluest Eye*.

"Do you like it?"

"Yes," says Elijah. "I love it."

"Elijah?"

"Yoyo?"

"I think maybe we should stay here. For a while."

"In Dallas?"

"Yeah."

"Until the end of summer holiday?"

Yoyo shrugs. "Or longer?"

"Why?"

"I don't know. I want to be near Eve, Emmanuelle. Aunt Jacqueline. Your cousins. Everybody." Yoyo's left knee is bouncing. Elijah pulls away.

"I saw Emmanuelle's Live," says Elijah. "It was dark, like her phone was in her pocket, but I could hear. I could hear."

Yoyo stills their leg. They try to laugh it off, like it could be funny. "Sorry you had to hear me so undignified."

Yoyo starts crying. It's silent but wet. "I'm going to be better," they say.

"I hate words," says Elijah. "You never know when they're lies. Don't say stuff that isn't true."

"I'm going to be better."

"Yeah, okay," says Elijah.

She sinks into the seat, the seat belt pressing into her neck uncomfortably. Elijah means for her head to lean against the car window as she drifts to sleep, but it leans against Yoyo's shoulder. Yoyo sits right next to her, squeezed into the middle seat, the two of them thigh to thigh.

★ ★ ★

Mama used to like the way I spoke in poetry. My earliest memories involve the proud anecdotes she'd share about some strange, beautiful, or witty thing I said.

Aren't you cute? a cashier would say.

More importantly, he's brilliant and kind, Mama would say.

My acceptance into Oxford pleased her, but she asked, Do you really have to go so far? And are you sure natural sciences are what you should be

studying? Do you remember your poem? About the dog? Written in blood?
Your heart is so big. It's the biggest thing I've ever seen.

I hate speaking of her in this way, in the way that I hate speaking of anyone, because whatever I might say will draw a picture, and the picture is wrong. There is no way to describe a person that is not a reduction.

I would've forgiven Mama everything had she said it, the only thing I ever longed to hear from her: I am sorry for the abundance of pain.

THIRTY-SIX.

As a child, and even into adulthood, I used to get lost in visions of what my life could've been like had Mama and Pop never left New York. I imagined the taste of the mangos off a stick I'd eat during the summer and the gyros I'd chow down from my favorite street vendor. Me and my sisters sitting on a stoop, eating Popsicles. The ice cream trucks. Bagels and cream cheese from the bodega on the way to school.

Eve, Emmanuelle, and I share a bedroom. Bunk beds and a single twin. The extra room is my mother's home office. Pop's grilling hot dogs on the fire escape like a fool. Mama is telling him, Don't get yourself killed, baby.

You retreat into fantasy a lot, says Max. Does it help?

No. Yes. I don't know.

Do you think anyone has ever fantasized about having a life like yours?

Are you joking?

Max shrugs over video. I wonder how someone else might see your life. Do you want to try?

Try what?

To imagine it. What if the life you were living right now was actually your own best dream life. How would you go about describing it?

I lean my head back and crack my neck. Roll my shoulders. I'm getting better at moving out the tension that accrues minute by minute.

I live with my sister, her kids, and my daughter in Arlington, I say.

A thriving Black neighborhood in Texas, Max adds.

I look at xem and xe shrugs. I'm only using your words. That's how you've phrased it at times.

I sigh too loudly but give in to the assignment.

Okay, so I live with my sister, her kids, and my daughter in Arlington, a thriving Black city in Dallas's south suburbs, with plentiful good food. It's summer, and we have season passes to Six Flags, where we go two or three times a week, usually at night when it's not quite as hot, and eat funnel cakes and ride roller coasters.

My daughter is already developing an American accent, a Black American accent. This pleases her immensely when she realizes it. A lot of things please her. She's reading *The Color Purple* right now, my old copy. She wants people to know who she is. She sewed a patch on her backpack that says *Magneto Was Right*.

I couldn't save her. I can still save her. We will all save each other. Or maybe we won't. Maybe there is no saving, only salvaging. Maybe every breath is the triumph, and we must learn to take the win.

Elijah didn't want to press charges against Lily after we spoke to a detective who explained how difficult the process would be. He was confident that given the evidence, Lily would want to plead out. But if she didn't, there'd be an arraignment, a trial. This would take time.

Besides, Elijah says, I don't believe in jail. ACAB, right? Abolition or death.

Not even for the likes of that bitch? asks Eve.

Not even for her.

What about the other girls—the other girls you could protect from her?

Well, says Elijah, what about the women in prison she'd be put with? What harm might she do to them? None of them deserve that, either.

I have this incredible daughter, who's so clever and so brave and so compassionate. And she needs me. She needs me. I didn't know that before. Never could believe it. But now I know.

What things do you two do together? asks Max.

I don't know. Nothing. Watch films. Discuss politics. And books. She wants another cat. In the meantime, we're trying to convince Eve to let us foster kittens at her place.

I'm applying for jobs locally, and Elijah is figuring out what she wants to do for school. She's into the idea of homeschooling, like Eden and Echo. She wants to write more music.

The house is always so loud. Noisy. It works my nerves, and sometimes it drives me or Eve to snap at the kids, but mostly, the noise is laughter, and dreams, and arguments about veganism. And when we cry, we cry together, and when we break, we make each other tea. And sometimes, I take Eve's car, I take Eve's car and drive back to the Oak Creek Estates. And I look at it and think, what a relief, what a relief that I am no longer here. I am not where I once was.

Do you barbecue?

Every weekend pretty much. Aunty Jacqueline and Uncle Frank come up at least once a month. Emmanuelle is here more often than that. She's thinking about moving back to Dallas now that the whole family's here, saying she loves Houston, but she loves her family more, and besides, Houston needs her less than Dallas does.

Once a month we drive down to Galveston and swim in the Gulf.

We go fishing and crabbing. I teach Elijah to swim. The salt ruins our hair, our skin.

We fall asleep on the sand, full on fried fish, teeth slick and sticky with cola and grape soda.

Emmanuelle takes a selfie, then takes a photo of all of us. I clasp a seashell in my palm, and then draw it to my mouth and whisper my secrets into its hollow. I imagine what it would say back to me, if it spoke my language.

Mother is God, and we are here. Mother is God, and who am I? I lie on a beach towel and turn to my side, my knees curled to my chest. My lips on the ground, I taste sand and salt, crunch it between my teeth, and swallow it.

Mother is God, and I am as good as this earth in my mouth, this earth I came from.

Mother is God, and I am the Garden of Eden, a paradise inhabited by lost creatures.

Mother is God, and I am an animal, made of blood and longing, and what was it Mama said, all those years ago?

How powerful it would be for us to be called animals and say, Yes, yes, of course. And what does that make you? Not animal? Not flesh? Not alive? Dead.

Oh, Mama, yes. How sweet it is to be alive.

Acknowledgments

Model Home did not come easy. Few books do, I suppose, but this one proved an especially difficult ordeal for me. Illness and disability were my constant companions throughout *Model Home*'s becoming. The world is daily breaking my heart, and it's not easy to create under such conditions. Even now, as I write these words, I think, What is the point? What is the point of anything unless Palestine can be free? What is the point of anything when there are those outside my sphere of influence who are suffering? Starving? Enslaved? Assaulted? Unloved? Unconsidered? There is no life without pain, without suffering. Loss, unspeakable violence, humiliation—they are facts of existence. Sometimes it is easy to carry on despite, and sometimes it's not.

But I made it, and so did the book. There are too many people to thank, too many people responsible for this moment. I am grateful to all of them. There is as much love as there is unlove. More of it, even, and I am blessed to receive my fair share of it.

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Gratitude to all.

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A Note About the Author



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[Rivers Solomon](#) writes about life in the margins, where they're much at home. Their work has appeared in *The Paris Review*, *The New York Times*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Best American Short Stories*, and other publications. They are the author of *An Unkindness of Ghosts*, *The Deep*, and *Sorrowland*. A refugee of the transatlantic slave trade, Solomon was born on Turtle Island. They currently live in the United Kingdom. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).



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