

Home Address

---

A Senior Honors Thesis

Presented To

The Faculty of the Department of English

University of Houston

---

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Bachelor of Arts

---

By

Melinda Mayden

May 2020

# CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	3
INTRODUCTION .....	4
HOME ADDRESS.....	9
Blame .....	10
Uproot.....	24
El Rancho Gonzales .....	36
Courses .....	43
Living Statue .....	54
NOTES.....	66

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I sat down with Antonya Nelson at Agora for coffee and to discuss a story I wrote for her class, I did not expect a senior honors thesis to come up. When she suggested I write one, her belief made me believe, for once, that I might actually be able to make something of my writing. I will forever be grateful to her for that day and for being my thesis director, because without her these stories would not exist. I also want to say thank you to my parents—to my dad, who designs houses for fun and flips them like a regular Chip Gaines, and who got me interested in homes in the first place, and to my mom, for telling me the stories that are so often the nuggets that spark the stories I write. I am incredibly grateful to Emma Allbright, for letting me tell her these stories before I even wrote them and for our writing wine nights. I am also thankful for Taylor Compton, who I know loves me because he asks me to read him stories even though he doesn't read. To the rest of my friends, the support you provide for me is in every way unmatched, and I will always be grateful to you for holding me up when I am down. Thank you to Corpus Christi and to Houston for being my homes. To my entire committee, thank you for taking your time to read my work. Your support has changed my life.

## INTRODUCTION

This manuscript aims to do exactly what it claims to in the title—to address home. Home is a word that gets used without thought and often multiple times per day. “Let’s go home” and “I’m on my way home” are thrown out over dinner parties or phone calls. Advertisements that plaster the side of apartment complexes tell the passerby, “If you lived here, you would be home by now.” There is an inherent assumption in these and other sayings that life is a web with home at its nexus.

It was not until I moved to Houston and started college that I begin to question what, exactly, constitutes a home. When people ask me where I live, I have two separate answers, depending on context, who I am talking to, even what time of year it is. For me, there are only two, but for others, there are many more than that. And for some, there is no answer to that question at all. Particularly in today’s environment, the connections which tie people together are simultaneously fracturing and being pulled tighter together from different directions. People are being empowered to share their various identities with the world—a brave act which can often be both fulfilling as well as isolating. In those instances, particularly, “home” can become a large question mark. Not all roads lead home if you do not even know what that means.

Therefore, *Home Address* contains five short stories, each of which strive to contextually define and redefine “home.” This collection explores aspects of the stories’ characters’ homes, or lack thereof, and the effect that can have in warping, creating, or breaking down personal identities. While the word home has connotations of physical setting, family, romantic relationships, cultural background, and religion, among others, I placed these stories in descending order according to the protagonist’s “level” of home referring to the most traditional

definition as the place where one lives permanently. I chose this order to demonstrate just how lacking that definition is.

The protagonist, Neal, of the first story “Blame” has a home in the physical sense. In fact, he has two—one in San Antonio, Texas where he resides when the story takes place, and one in Lincoln, Nebraska where he originates from. That does not change. Yet circumstances, the actions he took in his youth, and most of all, guilt, make him feel alienated from home. He feels as if his two home cities have turned against him and as if his work home has been yanked from him. Frederick Busch’s story “Ralph the Duck” has a similar narrator, one who struggles with misplaced guilt and who must navigate relationships in the wake of that. He, like Neal, is left to wonder what remains and to rebuild a home.

The next story, “Uproot,” considers involuntary removal from a physical home due to forces of nature. Middle-aged Luci lives in a trailer park in a seaside town a year after a devastating hurricane has ravaged her house that had been just down the road. When her daughter comes to visit, Luci is forced reexamine what having a home means to her. Sherman Alexie’s story “What You Pawn I Will Redeem” deals with isolation and homelessness in a different way than this story does but is a strong example of the way home can be found in community. I hoped to bring a similar sense of communal home in the relationships Luci has to the other characters who live in the trailer park with her.

In “El Rancho Gonzales,” the main character has a physical home as a young boy that gets taken away from him by his father. He then makes a home of the place he is sent, but when he becomes an adult, his father’s choices take this home away from him as well. He even moves to a different country to seek home again but is unable to ever grasp again what he once had. This story is steeped in culture, and I read Tommy Orange’s book *There There* to research and

better understand how I might use cultural references and background to serve the story and themes of home rather than distract from them.

“Courses” involves a voluntary removal from a physical home in order to escape that which comes along with it and to pursue actual home. The story takes place between a young woman and her mother after a yearlong separation and follows the shape of the meal—a classic multi-course Italian lunch. As the meal’s courses become heavier, so do the complications in the mother/daughter relationship. Like the boy in John Cheever’s “Reunion,” which inspired this story, the main character of “Courses” thinks differently of her mother after their reunion. She realizes that her mother is not the woman she wants her to be, and so she takes back power by deciding not to divulge the news of her engagement. She has crafted her own home, away from her mother both physically and emotionally.

The manuscript closes with “Living Statue,” the protagonist of which is homeless. I admire the way Bryan Washington uses setting as another character throughout the stories in his book *Lot*, and the way he uses setting helped me craft this story. I wanted “Living Statue” to feel close to its setting of New Orleans, because both for work and “home,” the protagonist Wren lives and breathes the city. However, she once felt more at home in New Orleans than she does when the story takes place, back before her gambling addiction destroyed her relationship with her sister. Ashley Wurzbacher’s story “Ripped” inspired me with ways to craft this sibling relationship that often relies on things unsaid rather than said. Wren wants to find her way back to the figurative home of comfort and love her sister provided more than she does the physical home they once shared.

As humanity marches on, so do the stories produced to reflect the way it has changed, and I feel that by exploring this topic of home, those who read these stories and who are working

on shaping their own identity can feel an affinity to characters who are doing the same. No collection of work could possibly include all the possible ideas of home, and I am certainly not trying to with this thesis. Rather, that very point is what I want to show. Home is not a place, or a relationship, or a blood relation, or a material thing. It is none of those things. It is also all those things. I hope that those who read *Home Address* and who feel as if they have no real home can be encouraged by these stories which show the ways home is a concept, not a concrete reality, and that it can continue to be shaped throughout any individual life.

*Dedicated to the people and places that make me feel at home*



HOME ADDRESS

## Blame

On the first day of CIVE 3337, Fundamentals of Structural Engineering, Neal's professor stood up from his metal desk and flicked off the lights without saying a word, the only light left a green glow from the class projector. Titters sounded through the class and feet shuffled until Professor Ryzniak pressed play on the video queued on his computer. A bridge collapsed in front of Neal's eyes and the room stilled. Dr. Ryzniak pressed play again. A tunnel crumbled, and the tip of a car nearly escaped before being crushed under the weight of the tunnel opening. He pressed play again. Neal winced at the sound of millions of pounds of concrete falling to the ground as a skyscraper met its end. Again. A dam broke and the water made its strength known. Again. An entire freeway.

Ryzniak flicked the lights back on and the sound resounded through the low-ceilinged lecture hall. Students blinked into the fluorescent light. "Don't let anyone tell you your job isn't important. Don't ever let anyone tell you that you don't have lives in your hands. He paused to punch a finger in the air. "Don't you ever forget to care."

Neal stretched back in his seat, cracking his back on the hard plastic, and looked around the room. A guy in the front row looked like he was about to either cry or run out of the room. Neal rolled his eyes at Amy, an acquaintance he had met in a class last semester, and nodded his head towards the guy, who sat three seats down. *Drama*, she mouthed back at him, and winked.

Ryzniak was one of the "fun" Civil Engineering professors, and the following year, just days before Neal walked across the stage and accepted his diploma, Professor Ryzniak was crowned "2001 Professor of the Year" by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He worked

closely with Neal on his senior capstone project—a cable-stayed bridge that cut down on the amount of required steel by ten percent. Neal was in the audience at the banquet when they give Ryzniak the award, clapping and screaming in celebration of the engineer who inspired him most. The pair was similar, both ambitious with a streak of temper. After graduation, Neal presented the design of his senior project to LNG Services, a smallish civil engineering firm in Nebraska. The senior management called him “exceptionally talented,” and Neal’s bridge was constructed atop a river an hour outside of Lincoln. The bridge was only one lane wide and mostly populated by golf carts, pedestrians, and the very occasional car, but still. His first project! And right out of college! Neal emailed a photo of the completed bridge to Professor Ryzniak, who he could never quite bring himself to call Jack. The subject line was “The Ryzniak Bridge :)”

---

Neal interlaces his hands behind his head and cranes his neck back to look up at the bridge tower being constructed fifty feet away. The steel bars extend one hundred feet into the air, and the concrete tower drags behind, the blocks only halfway up. Neal motions for the crane to add the next layer as his supervisor walks up. “We on schedule?” Shannon asks him. He’s been at Grant Engineering Enterprises since making the move to San Antonio, Texas eighteen years ago and has worked with Shannon as his peer and then boss for most of that time.

“Should be.”

“We’d better be. This is a \$900 million project.”

“Believe me, I know.” She nods. He has told her of the routine 5<sup>th</sup> grade test that revealed Mia’s scoliosis, as well as the subsequent orthopedic doctor and \$10,000 price tag attached to the brace she needed. He has also told her of the decreasing health of Amy’s father and the rent prices of the nursing home they have had to move him to in order to give him the level of care he requires. He has told her of the stress of flying to Nebraska once a month to make sure they are able to spend adequate time with him since Amy’s mother’s death the previous year. Neal suspects this is why she gave him this, the Lainey Bridge Project, after fifteen years of doing mostly commercial work and freeway planning, although she will never admit it and he will never ask.

“I’m a little worried about those blocks. They’re a different grade of concrete than we’ve used before. Have you made sure that the stress ratios check out?”

“I believe so.”

“Good, I trust you.”

---

Neal sits at his desk, staring down at the plans on his lap. He is also concerned about the sheer stress ratios Shannon mentioned. He presses two fingertips to his temple and rubs at the spot that throbs every time he’s had too much work and not enough coffee. Amy’s figure appears in his peripheral vision, at the doorway to his office. “I know, I know,” he says, holding up his hand to preempt what he’s sure is coming. She’s finished with her work in her office two doors down and is ready to go pick up their daughter Mia from his mom’s house where she stays after school. “I’m sorry. I’ll finish this up tomorrow.” He shakes off the figures mashing themselves into a

soup in his head and grabs his coat, ready to toss the car keys to his wife. When Neal finally looks up, keys in hand, Amy is crying. Neal leaps up and reaches for her. “My God, Amy. What’s wrong?” Her phone is dangling from the tips of her fingers.

“The Ryzniak is gone.”

Neal’s thoughts leap to his college mentor. “What? How did he die?” Neal’s mind is reeling—he just spoke to Ryzniak on the phone a few days ago. They had made dinner plans for Neal’s next visit to Nebraska.

“No, Neal.” Her brow furrows in confusion, momentarily stemming her tears. “The Ryzniak Bridge.”

“Oh. Oh, God. That’s insane.” At first, Neal is just relieved that Ryzniak is still alive, but as the seconds tick by he begins to understand why Amy is so upset. A fallen bridge, regardless of how long ago it was constructed, regardless of fault, could spell the end of his career. At the very least, he’ll be pulled off the Lainey Bridge. He rubs Amy’s arms up and down with his hands to calm her, but he can feel panic welling up in his own throat. “Well, at least everyone’s okay, right?”

Amy stifles a sob with her hand. She shakes her head. Neal drops his hands and takes a step back from his wife. “My friend Emmanuel still works at LNG. He just called to tell me that two people were on the bridge when I happened.”

He stills. He doesn’t want to hear anymore. “No.”

“They didn’t make it.”

*No, no, no, no, no.* He takes another step back, almost tripping over his desk chair. The office walls are getting closer, the glass windows no longer opening the space the way they are supposed to. He looks at a framed photo sitting on his desk. In it, he, Amy, and Mia, stand in front of his parent's eyes in Nebraska. Mia is bundled in his arms, just a baby. Neal's eyes refuse to focus and their photographed faces blur to smudges. He hopes that if he just keeps repeating "No" over and over again, Amy will stop and say it isn't true. She will have to stop.

"Their names are—"

"Amy, I said *no*." She recoils from the heat in his voice, the raised volume. He has never made her look at him like that before.

Her voice is quiet, sad, when she eventually says, "Neal, you have to know who they are."

*If I know who they are, then they are real, and I am a murderer.*

"I can't."

---

Alana Cisneros. Freddie Painter. Those are their names. When they trundled across the Ryzniak Bridge on the day they died, Freddie was clutching his red "Perfect Attendance" ribbon to his chest, not wanting to risk it being blown off the Painters' shiny new golf cart. Alana was nineteen and driving the golf cart—she nannied Freddie when she didn't have classes at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. At the beginning of Freddie's first grade year, she had promised

that any time he got an award, she would take him to get ice cream. They had gone twice already, traveling over the bridge to Lulu's Handmade Ice Cream. It was only October.

"You've got to slow down with the awards, buddy. This is way too much ice cream."

Alana shook her head in mock disappointment.

Freddie giggled. "I love you, Miss 'Lana," he told her, drawing out the 'love' so the sentence lasted twice as long as it needed to. He was missing one tooth right in the middle of his face, and Alana thought it might be the cutest thing she had ever seen. Freddie whooped when they got to the center of the bridge—it was his favorite part, to hear the way his small voice reached through the trees and down the river.

Crumbling concrete cracked and rendered Alana's laughing response to Freddie unintelligible. The middle of the bridge collapsed first, the rest following in an instant, and Alana didn't have time to turn around to look before the pair fell, backwards, away from the end of the bridge looming in front of them.

When Mrs. Painter's text to Alana asking her if they could grab an extra sundae while they were at Lulu's went unanswered, she called. When the pair wasn't home an hour later, she called her husband. Fifteen minutes later, they called the police.

---

Neal finds this out later the same day, when his boss calls to fire him. He has been sitting, motionless, at the kitchen table since Amy dropped him off at home and went to get Mia. "We heard from our LNG contacts that the company is being sued," is what Shannon opens with, right

before she tells the story the same way she heard it from the Nebraska news stations. She follows the story with “Freddie Painter’s parents filed and Alana Cisneros’ sister is going to testify.”

There’s a pause on the other end of the phone, but any questions Neal might have had are now lodged somewhere between his tongue and his esophagus, expanding with every word Shannon says.

She seems to sense this. She coughs, and her voice, brusque and matter of fact before, lowers. “No investigation can be conclusive, Neal. Design failure could be the cause like they’re trying to say. But it also could not be. Erosion, an earthquake, a scheduled maintenance that got put off for too long. Hell, someone somewhere along the line could have mixed concrete incorrectly. It could have been anything.” He can hear her deep intake of breath and knows what she’s going to say before she says it. He hardly cares anymore. “Unfortunately, Grant just can’t have this kind of liability, especially with the stakes of the Lainey Project right now. The entire city is watching us build this bridge.” The silence hangs heavy, even several cellphone towers away. “But I know you know that already. You’re a good guy, Neal. I am—I am so sorry. I wish things were different.”

Neal hangs up the phone just as Mia bursts through the door, her mother right behind her. “Hi, dad,” Mia says. As she breezes past, he can see the edge of her brace peeking out from the edge of her tank top, the one that he owes several more months of payment on. The weight of things suddenly feels much more tangible. He’s been working with measurements for his entire career, tons and pounds and ounces. But the weight of a bridge, the weight of choices, the weight of guilt—they are piling on top of his chest and the mind that has never failed him before can no longer calculate how to remove them.



Neal cannot sleep, so as dawn breaks and the first sun begins to filter through the gray air, he stands at the kitchen sink, a second cup of coffee clenched in one fist. Amy had walked into their room the night before, after her shower, fully clothed, and pulled her pillow off their bed. Her hair was darkened with wet from the shower, dripping down her back and turning the red in the flannel pajamas to a dark crimson. She didn't say much, only that she was going to give him his "space" so he could process the events of the day. So they both could. Her words suggested this was for him, but her eyes refused to meet his, staring at the book on his bedside table, their wedding photo above the headboard, the beading on the comforter. He knows she is still upset with him for the way he acted earlier, and about the event itself, but he needs her to comfort him. He wants to beg for whatever forgiveness she can give to him.

Earlier this morning, while his first coffee cup was brewing, Neal had peeked into Mia's room. Amy and Mia lay curled up next to each other, breathing easily. Amy's hand rested on her daughter's back, which was free, for once, of the restraining scoliosis brace. Now, trying not to think of his wife's hurt, or of little Freddie Painter, or of Alana Cisneros' grieving mother, or of his lost job, Neal's thoughts wander to Dr. Ryzniak. The pair has lazily stayed in touch over the years. Their relationship had been largely a social media friendship, with the occasional birthday phone call sprinkled in, until recently. When Grant got the contract for the Lainey Bridge Project and assigned Neal as head engineer, he turned to his old mentor. Ryzniak readily offered up praise and advice. In the subsequent year and a half, they had spoken on the phone every few weeks, sometimes so Neal could ask a quick calculation question, other times for hours as they waded their way through complicated structural scenarios. They quickly fell back into their old

mentor/mentee patterns— eighteen years later and Neal still looked up to Ryzniak like he was a college kid again, desperate to prove himself to Amy and the whole world of civil engineering.

He sets the coffee down on the counter and picks up his cell phone, its black case scratched and worn from the many recent twelve-hour days spent out at the Lainey site. It only rings once before Neal hears the retired professor's voice staticky over the phone; it's not enough time to decide what he really wants to say to him. "Neal. I was wondering if I might be hearing from you soon. This whole thing, it's awful."

"It is."

"Can I do anything to help?"

Neal thinks about that. Is there anything a seventy-year-old professor can do to help pull the layers of Neal's life up, cozy, and wrap them back around him? Is there anything he can do to ensure that Alana Cisneros graduates college? Or that Freddie Painter learns to do long division? Or that the Freddie's parents don't have to live the rest of their lives with the image of their son's perfect attendance ribbon still clutched to his tiny unmoving chest burned in their memory? Can Ryzniak tell Neal if he is a murderer or not?

"No." He can't.

"Okay, well I'm always here for you, Neal."

"Grant fired me." There isn't anything he can do now in the present, anyway.

"Man, I'm really sorry to hear that. I'm sure once this whole thing blows over, you'll have no problem getting a new job."

“It feels like the home I’ve built is falling apart,” Neal blurts out. There isn’t anything Ryzniak can do now, but Neal is beginning to think there is something he could have done then.

Ryzniak continues, unaware of his protégé’s rising anger, of the blame he desperately seeks to shift to his mentor, of the guilt weighing down on him like one of his concrete building blocks. “I know it’s tough. You’re a great engineer. My brightest student, I always said. You’ll come out on top.” But Neal doesn’t want to come out on top. He wants to stay on top, where he has always been. Neal tightens his grip on the phone until his knuckles turn white.

“Why didn’t you catch it?”

“What?”

“You worked on those blueprints every damn weekend with me for my entire senior year of college. You were supposed to mentor me. So tell me why the hell you didn’t catch it, whatever it was that went wrong?”

“What are you talking about? Neal, I didn’t design that bridge. You did. Besides, nobody even knows if it collapsed because of a design error. It could have been anything. This could have happened to any bridge placed in that place, for all we know.”

“‘It could have been anything, it could have been any bridge.’ That’s what I keep hearing, but you know what? It didn’t happen to any bridge, and we don’t know what the ‘anything’ was.” He’s nearly screaming now, but he won’t stop. “And you’re right, Ryzniak, you didn’t design the bridge. You just taught me how to design it, step-by-step. You let me think my design was perfect. I listened to you. You double-checked everything. And now? Now, people are dead.” Neal can feel Amy’s presence behind him, awoken by the rising volume of his agitation.

“Look, I feel bad for you. I really do. But this is not my fault, and this conversation isn’t going anywhere. I’m not going to sit here and let you rail at me.” The professor’s voice has turned from sorrowful to cold.

Neal’s breathing is heavy, and he drags his free hand across his buzzed scalp, nails catching. He doesn’t want Amy to see him like this, and he wills her to go away. “Your negligence is the reason this happened. You could have stopped this. You’re a murderer, Jack.”

“Excuse me? Don’t try to make me the scapegoat for your own guilt, asshole. Make no mistake, Neal. If anyone is a murderer, it’s you.” The dial tone blares in Neal’s ear.

Neal’s body deflates along with his anger. He sags against the cold kitchen sink behind him, turning to face his wife. Anger, sadness, worry, concern—they battle for top spot on her face.

“This isn’t Dr. Ryzniak’s fault,” she says.

Neal pulls his across his middle, wishing for those comforting life blanket layers to come back and swallow him whole. “I know.”

“You were the one who designed the bridge, weren’t you? Why didn’t you catch any flaws?” Neal feels the weight of every passion inside his wife weighing on the final “you.” He wishes she would pull him to her, loop her arms around his neck and then rub her fingers on her temples, the way she does when she knows he’s stressed, but her arms remain glued to her side.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? Isn’t it our job as civil engineers to know? Triple check everything, remember? That’s one of the first things we’re taught.”

Neal winces. “I know.”

“So why didn’t you do it?”

“I did do it.”

“Okay, then. That’s what I thought.” She throws her hands up. “Stop feeling sorry for yourself. This isn’t your fault. You can be sad that people lost their lives but stop whatever this is. Whatever blame you’re trying to put on other people isn’t right.”

“I just... How do I know I did everything I was supposed to? How do I know I didn’t make a dumb mistake somewhere along the line? It was over twenty years ago. I can’t know that something I did isn’t the reason that two people—two children—are dead.” A sound comes from Mia’s room. The ten-year-old is waking up.

Amy shakes her head. “You won’t *know*, but there were so many other people involved that if there was a flaw somebody else should have caught it.”

“Maybe somebody else should have caught it too, but why didn’t I?”

---

San Antonio’s Channel 6 news shows up on Thursday. The news reporter does not know that Alana was studying Nursing at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, or that she recently started dating her best friend from high school, or that she had plans to study abroad for the summer, learning new medical techniques at hospitals throughout Asia. The news reporter does not know that Freddie was supposed to have his second tee-ball game the Saturday after he died, or that his

best friend would ask for him the next day in school and his teacher wouldn't know what to tell him.

No, the news reporter knows none of that. She is here because the City of San Antonio announced a halt on the Lainey Bridge Project. The 1.5 million people who live in and around the city are incensed, and Channel 6 saw his name on the project website. "Lead engineer," it says, next to the shiny headshot the company photographer made him take one morning, bribing him with the promise of kolaches. An easy target.

Neal gives short answers. "Yes," "No," "I don't know," "I can't say." The news reporter wants to know when the bridge will be back under construction, why it was halted in the first place, why Neal thinks wasting the city's tax dollars is okay. "I don't know, I don't know, I don't." He wants them to leave.

Amy murmurs a low "excuse me" as she tries to get out the door to head to the job she still has at Grant, and the boom mic nearly knocks Neal over in its rush to get to her. "What do you think of all this, Mrs. Sommers? What do you think of your husband?" Amy's eyes flash at the young reporter, her anger at the uninvited invasion of her home evident on her face.

"I think I'm going to be late." She pushes past them the crew and jumps into the car. Neal closes the door and lets his tears flow quietly, so they can't hear.

---

Mia walks up and fits her hand into Neal's as he stands at the door and watches the news crew leave for the second time, on Monday morning. The questions were harder to answer today. For

the entire weekend, San Antonio's "Breaking News" had been how a local engineer was responsible for the death of two people. This time when they showed up at his house, they knew all the things they didn't know before.

The ten-year-old leans into him, and her warmth seems to flow into him. He feels his breathing slowing to match hers. They stay like this for a while, until long after the news crew has packed up every camera and bundled every mic. The white van peels off the curb in a hurry. "Dad," Mia says, "They hate you, don't they?"

"Yeah, they do." Neal takes a deep breath. "And maybe they should."

"My friends at school say you killed people." Her grip tightens on his hand when she says this, and she looks up at him as if in apology. "They sing *London Bridge* every time I come near them." Neal kneads his free hand into the pocket of his trousers.

"I'm so sorry you have to deal with that, Mia."

"It's okay." Silence wraps around them and fills the space between them. Neal thinks he might cry again.

"What did you say to them?"

Mia shrugs. "I told them to stop."

## Uproot

When the delivery woman arrives from the nursery, Luci is grateful, of course, but the orchid is not the right shade of purple. This one is more of a fuchsia; Luci is looking for a plum. Luci thanks the woman anyway—it's not her fault, the options on the order card had not been very clear. Before the delivery woman hops back into her car, she says, "I'm from the town over. We didn't get hit as hard, but I just wanted to say that I'm really sorry for what happened here." Luci smiles softly and waves in return, cradling her new plant child and carrying it into her aluminum camper as the woman peels past the faded sunset colors of the "Sand, Sea, and Sun" RV park sign. The sign echoes the colors of the sky behind it, albeit more faded and less like a watercolor painting.

The phone rings as she walks into the camper. Ana. "Hi mom, just wanted to let you know I'm on the ferry right now. I'll be there in 20 minutes."

"Sounds great, hon. I'm headed outside. See you soon." They exchange I love you's and Luci's daughter hangs up the phone. Luci pulls her thick black hair back with an elastic and picks up the card resting on the side table by the door. Her first orchid a few months back came with this tiny placard denoting the meanings of the colors, and she now always keeps it nearby for quick reference, determined to collect all the colors. She already has blue (rarity) and white (reverence, humility, innocence, and purity), and just last week another bloomed—red (passion and desire). She has one which has yet to bloom and reveal itself, although she's hoping for yellow. She wonders if the one she is holding would be categorized as pink (grace, joy, and happiness) or purple (admiration, respect, dignity, and royalty). Luci frowns, then tosses the card



back on to the small table and balances the orchid on one hip, ducking through the creaking door to head back outside.

Nickels is already in the tiny garden plot in the center of the RV park when she gets there, as are Raymond and Maria. “Lucinda,” Raymond greets her. Nickels just waves, sweat dripping from his tanned forehead and on to the soil as he wrestles back the weeds trying to strangle his radishes.

“Did you hear about the block party my husband and I are throwing on Sunday night?” Maria asks.

“A Labor Day fiesta,” Raymond adds, looking up briefly from his plastic watering can.

“Yeah, Nickels told me. It sounds fun, but Ana is will be here for the whole weekend. She has Labor Day off from school, and I’m off work, so she’s driving down from Austin. She’ll be here any minute, actually,” Luci says, double-checking on her watch.

“Come on, I’m sure Ana will have fun, too. There will be fajitas, enchiladas, the works,” Maria wheedles, “and Raymond is making his famous margaritas.”

Luci laughs. “We’ll see. Ana does love fajitas, but she’s coming to help me get my affairs in order so we can start renovating the house. We have to look and make a list of what needs to be done so we can start putting that insurance money to good use.”

Nickels leans back to stretch out his arms. “You’re finally getting around to that?”

“What do you mean, finally?” Luci looks at him, confused.

“I don’t know, just kind of figured you were going to stay here with us now.” Nickels picks up the plastic water bottle lying next to him and pours its contents over his salt-and-pepper hair.

“Stay here with you? I thought you were leaving?” Maria and Raymond have lived in the park since their marriage in ’92, but most of the other residents are either vacationers or Winter Texans. Luci and Nickels are the only hurricane transplants left in “Sand, Sea, and Sun.” From the beginning, Nickels had told Luci how he planned on moving out and restarting his life as soon as possible.

“I don’t know. I don’t mind it here,” he says, and turns back to his weeds.

“Well anyway, you know I’ve just been waiting for that whole insurance mess to be sorted out. The company was slammed with claims after Josephine, and we just got the money a few months ago. So, now I guess it’s time to get on with it.”

“We’ll miss you,” Maria says, smiling, as Luci starts digging the hole for her new orchid.

Luci glimpses Ana’s baby blue Pontiac pull onto the packed sand road leading to the park. “You know it’ll take a while to get the house fixed up. I’m not going anywhere. Besides, I still need to complete my orchid collection,” she says, standing up to greet her daughter.

---

When Josephine first whipped herself into a frenzy in the Gulf of Mexico, the meteorologists predicted 5 inches of rain. Category 2. Some torn down fences, maybe, but nothing to be concerned about. Luci hadn’t even wanted to put up the hurricane shutters, not really. Her

experience was that those storms almost always work out their violence in the Gulf, dump a few buckets onto the seaside town, create a couple cozy indoor days, and then the general populace can get on with their lives. Ana had been concerned, but Luci had assured her that any attempts at evacuation would just result in hours-long bumper-to-bumper traffic to get five miles down the freeway. Josephine, though, in a big “F you” to meteorologists, stewed in the Bay just long enough to reach Category 4 before she marched her way onto land and tore Luci’s Port Aransas home apart like a puppy gutting its favorite squeaky stuffed animal.

So no, Luci hasn’t always lived alone in an RV, but it has been long enough now that she no longer turns down the wrong road out of sheer force of habit. Making herself do so now, to turn onto Palmilla Drive and to stop three houses down on the left, feels alien. She has been making a conscious effort to take side routes and back routes for 345 days, doing anything she can to avoid seeing the house that she had lived in for 20 years, since shortly after Ana was born. She has returned only once since Josephine, two weeks after the storm hit, to take photos per the insurance company’s request and to salvage what personal items she could. Now the *click, click, click* of the turn signal is deafening and the neon green of the newly replaced, reflective street sign warns her away.

“Are you ready for this?” Ana asks, leaning across the console to squeeze her mother’s hand. Ana clicks the pen she has brought with her, and on the header page of a memo pad they picked up at the store, she scribbles a tiny hurricane then writes “Fixes” right beside it. She has on an oversized T-shirt, paired with the long pants and closed-toe shoes Luci has instructed her to wear, and her bobbed brown hair has been pulled up as much as possible, although wisps keep falling down around her face and into her eyes. Luci is grateful she is here. It has always been

the two of them, since Ana was a baby, and the last few years while she's been at college have been lonely.

Luci hands Ana one of the disposable masks she picked up the last time she went to the home improvement store for mulch. "Let's do this thing."

The house had been turquoise, once, just another in a row of brightly-colored beach houses, sandwiched nicely between a sunshine yellow and a coral pink. Josephine did her job well, though, and the turquoise is now cracked from where it was waterlogged, streaks of dirt settling in every crack. Most of the brown roof was torn off during the storm, and Luci hadn't been able to replace it without the insurance money, so it has been half tarp/half shingled roof for nearly a year now. Sand has piled up against the side of the house where the wind blows the hardest. Luci points to the roof. "First thing," she says, and Ana writes it down. When they walk into the house, Ana cries. This is her first time going inside the house since she had come to visit before the start her junior year of college, just a few weeks before Josephine hit. Shattered glass from picture frames and windows litters the floor in prismatic piles. The living room couch is scattered with driftwood and dust. Sand crunches and the hardwood floors rot beneath their feet—they have to test each step they take as Luci points at things for Ana to write down, the pad blurry through her tears.

The list ends up taking three pages of the memo pad they've brought, but Luci reasons that Ana's scrawl is larger than the average person's, so realistically it's probably only one very cramped page. Replace the roof, gut the flooring, buy new flooring, replace the shattered windows, replace rotted studs, redo the drywall in most of the rooms, buy all new furniture. She doesn't want to turn the page. When they get back into the car, Luci snaps a photo and sends it to

Nickels. He's a construction crew manager, and he would know where they should start to rebuild their lives.

---

Luci decides that she and Ana should take Sunday off. Ana says she's going to visit some friends from high school, Luci calls the nursery to see if they have any orchid colors she's still missing—orange, yellow, green—and then spends the rest of her free time in the garden, toiling alongside Nickels and his zucchini. Luci is buoyant at Raymond and Maria's block party that evening. Going through the house with Ana had been cathartic for her; she feels like she is finally moving forward with her life after a near year of inactivity. "How did it go at the house yesterday?" Maria asks Luci as the two women move the last of the foil trays of fajitas from the interior of the trailer to the foldable table that is set up, buffet-style, outside. She speaks loudly so Luci can hear her over the sound of Raymond's industrial-sized blender, which is plugged in to the extension cord snaking out of the trailer. Ana and Nickels are already sitting at the wooden picnic table a few feet away, discussing Ana's psychology classes and her upcoming medical school applications.

"Great, actually. It feels good to finally have a list I can start chipping away at."

"Taste this for me, will you, honey?" Raymond stops the blender and holds a wooden spoon out towards Maria.

"That's great, Luci. Happy to hear it. I'm sure you're looking forward for life to go back to pre-Josephine normal." Maria sets her tray down next to the tortillas. "More tequila," she adds.

“I don’t know,” Luci shrugs, passing over a plate piled high with chicken fajitas and absurd amounts of sour cream, just the way Ana likes it. Luci and Maria make their way to the table and sit down next to the other two as Raymond goes back to blending. “I love it here. I get to hang out with you guys all the time.”

Ana’s head whips up suddenly, interrupting something Nickels is saying to her about MCAT scores and standardized testing. “Yeah, but it’s not like this is a home, mom, come on.” Her eyes are wide, and Luci thinks they look almost scared.

Maria’s hands still where they had been folding a taco on her place. Luci watches as she slowly lowers them, one on each side of her plate. “It’s my home, Ana. Mine and Raymond’s.” Raymond brings a fresh pitcher over to the table and settles next to his wife. Luci looks between them, then at her daughter, who is staring down into her fajitas, then to Nickels, desperately.

Nickels leans over and grabs the sour cream in the middle of the table. “Right. So, Luci, I heard there’s some big real estate conference coming to Corpus next month. Are you planning on going?”

Grateful for the change of subject, Luci seizes the opportunity. “Yeah, I think my boss wants us all to go for a day or two. It counts towards our training hours.”

“No, wait on that for a minute.” Maria holds one hand up, the other still next to her plate. “I want to know why Ana thinks this isn’t a home.”

There is silence at the table. “I really don’t think that’s what she meant,” Luci looks at her daughter, then more firmly says, “I know that’s not what she meant.”

“Looks like it’s dessert time,” Nickels says, giving Raymond at a pointed look.

“I’m sorry,” Ana says quietly, pushing back from the table and walking away from the group.

Luci finds Ana by the garden plot, facing the heavy hanging moon, head dipped down to look at the orchids. “The woman from the nursery came by and dropped this off for you while you were helping Maria with the guacamole. Said she knew you were looking for it,” Ana says, nudging a plastic pot orchid with her toe, still not looking at her mother. The one bloom is a blinding shade of scarlet. Enthusiasm, boldness, and pride. Luci checks orange off her mental list. “Why are you doing this, mom?”

“Doing what, sweetie?”

“The orchids. Planting things in an RV park. In your ‘temporary housing.’” Luci can hear the air quotes in Ana’s voice. “I didn’t think you could even plant orchids in the ground like this. They’re not made for it, they’ll die.”

Luci looks down at her orchids, all lined up neatly in a row next to Nickel’s squash and behind Maria’s cabbage. She is just missing green and yellow now. “They’ve been fine so far. And I don’t really know. To show that I can, I guess.”

“Well, you know what I want?” Ana wheels around then, facing Luci for the first time. Her eyes are wet. “I don’t particularly want a mom who lives in an RV less than a mile from the remains of my entire childhood. A mom who goes to block parties when it’s not a block. It’s hardly a rectangle. It’s a trailer park filled with a group of people who are just fine with anything that happens to them.”

Luci takes a step backwards, recoiling. The warmth of the people she lives with still sits warm in her heart, lies heavy in her stomach. “They’re just trying to make it homier, you know. Do what they can. I thought you liked them.”

“I do like them,” Ana presses the palms of her hands to her eyeballs in frustration. “But mom, come on. This is no home, not when we already had one.”

“Ana, I’ll be out of here as soon as the house gets fixed up. That’s the plan, isn’t it. That’s always been the plan.” Luci is tired.

“You’re wrong, mom.”

Luci feels her annoyance rising. “What do you mean? Why are you acting like this? I told you I would move back into the house. That’s why we went over there yesterday in the first place.”

“We don’t have the money.”

“The insurance—”

“No,” Ana cuts her off. “I looked into the stuff on the list we made yesterday. That insurance money won’t even cover half. We have to demo the house. The only thing worth doing is to knock down what’s left and sell the land. Rebuilding would be insanely expensive.”

“Don’t be negative, Ana. We can get quotes, talk to people.”

“Mom, I checked everything. I spoke to Nickels while you were on the phone with the nursery, and he confirmed what I looked up. There’s just no way it’s going to work. The best thing for us to do, he said, is to buy another house.”

“Buy another house,” Luci echoes.



"Or get an apartment somewhere. We probably won't be able to get a house we can afford in Port Aransas. You'll have to move into town. Or maybe you can come up to Austin. Then you'll be closer, at least, so I can help you if you need anything. But you need to do it soon. You're better than this, mom." She gestures around them. Luci isn't sure what she's referring to—the RV park, the box plot garden, maybe the block party. The sounds of Nickels' and Maria's combined laughter at Raymond's singing to Tejano music drifts over to them, and Luci wishes she was with them. "You don't have to be stuck living in a trailer park if you don't want to. You're successful, mom. You made it through nursing school as a single parent, for God's sake. Josephine took her knocks, but I think it's time for us to move on."

Luci is shaking her head. "Why didn't you tell me any of this? Why did you do this without me? You can't just make decisions for me."

"I haven't made any decisions, mom. You just seemed so happy tonight, with them. I didn't want to upset you yet. Look, I'm sorry, I didn't know what to do. But the house is gone." Luci doesn't say anything, just stares down at her orchids in the dirt and wonders if she remembered to water them today. "I'll help you look for a new place. It'll be fun, like house hunters. We'll get through this together."

Ana looks like she wants to say more, but Luci holds up her hand. "I just need to think, Ana. Please just let me think about this."

"Okay." She sighs. "Goodnight, mom." Ana hugs her briefly before walking away.

Luci considers what Ana said, that this place is no home. Luci thinks she agrees with that statement. And yet, and yet. She bends down and uses her hands to dig a small hole. She tucks

the small orange orchid bulbs into the soil. She pats down the dirt around them. She tries not to suffocate them.

---

Ana leaves on Monday morning, saying she needs to get back to campus in time to finish her homework and meal prep for the week. By early afternoon, Luci's email inbox is filled with Zillow listings and real estate agent contact information. All from Ana. Luci clicks through them one at a time, opening without reading. She leaves them sitting open on her laptop and then grabs her gloves and watering can and heads out to the garden.

Nickels approaches her after a few minutes. "I got you a going away slash a pre-congrats on the new house present," he says. Luci shields her face from the sun and looks up at him as he pulls a pot out from behind his back.

"It's green." Luci is surprised he was able to find it.

"Good health, nature, and longevity," he says before she can. "My wish for you."

"Thank you, Nickels." The pair is silent for a moment.

"You inspired me, you know. You and Ana. I'm leaving next week, going to live with my daughter and son-in-law out in Brownsville. It'll take a few days to get my stuff in order, but I didn't want to be the only one left who couldn't move on. But anyway, this is my way of saying thank you for that."

Luci's throat is tight. "I'm so happy for you," she says, and she means it. She wills herself to mean it. Nickels squeezes her shoulder gently and turns around, heading back to his camper for one of the last times.

Luci sinks down into the soil and places the green orchid down next to her. She traces designs in the dirt with her finger, tiny hurricanes and houses and flowers. Every so often, she punches her fist into her designs so that they disappear and she can start over. She only moves when her leg falls asleep, when the sun is well on its way to rest for the evening. As Luci shifts to sit on her other side, she notices a bud has emerged from her last orchid, the one that had yet to bloom. A tiny orchid bloom unfurls from the soil, curling from the ripened stem. It's yellow. Friendship, joy, and new beginnings. It completes the collection.

Luci leans over, grips it by the base, and yanks it out of the soil. One by one, she yanks them all up. Bulb by bulb, leaf by leaf, root by root.

## El Rancho Gonzales

The day that Señor del Rosario sells his son Marcos to the *ranchero*, Marcos is upset because he has to leave his whistle at home. It's the tin whistle that he uses to call over the scrappy dogs that hang around the *carnicería* down the street. When they appear, he raises his hands to the little kids to show them his magical powers. But Señor del Rosario gives the whistle to the baby, and Marcos' mother goes along with it, so when she reaches out to hug him, he refuses, and they board the bus. The ride from Chihuahua to the surrounding farmlands takes nearly an hour, and Marcos cries for at least half of it, so that when they get off, Marcos' new boots, which replaced his worn moccasins and hurt him when he walks, make little puffs in the dirt that match his red, puffy eyes. As soon as the bus is out of sight, Señor del Rosario boxes Marcos' ears and asks him what kind of man he is, crying like that about a damn whistle, and then grabs him by the ear and marches into a low wooden house marked "*El Rancho Gonzales*" in pretty blue and orange hand-painted tiles. Marcos looks around as they step through the door and rubs his ear where his father has released it. A man stands in the middle of the room by a low table, muscular but with a soft middle. He has a *serape* wrapped around him, blue and orange like the tiles outside. His boots are scuffed and worn, unlike Marcos', and Marcos is fairly certain that the *ranchero*'s boots don't rub against his heels.

"Señor," the *ranchero* inclines his head to Marcos' father and gestures for him to take a seat on the bench at the table. A girl in a poufy blue dress, with pink ribbons draped over the sleeves, peers around the *ranchero*'s knees. She clutches a painted wooden whistle in the hand that doesn't hold on to her father's pant legs. The two men sit and talk in low voices, but the girl

remains at a standstill, still half hidden behind her father, and stares at Marcos. She is about his age, but Marcos is still upset about the loss of his own whistle, so he looks away.

When the men finally wrap up their conversation, which takes so long that Marcos begins to feel his eyes droop, Señor del Rosario stands and places his heavy hand on Marcos' shoulder. Marcos stares at the dirt accumulated underneath his giant thumbnail, and asks, "Papá, can we go home now?" He hopes that when they get home he will be able to steal his whistle back while the baby sleeps.

"No, Marcos, you're going to stay here and help Señor Gonzales with his ranch for a while. This will help the family— your mamá and your *hermanos*. You like to help, don't you?" Marcos tries to shake his head no, that actually he does not want to help anybody at all, that he just wants to go home, but before Marcos can get out any words at all, Señor del Rosario is gone.

"Papá," Marcos whispers, but only his dusty boot prints on the wooden floors show that he had ever been there at all. The boot prints, and Marcos. Hot tears prickle the back of Marcos' eyes again as he faces the door his father disappeared out of. He hard swallows to force them back. Marcos feels a tap on his shoulder, and he turns to see the girl standing in front of him, the painted whistle lifted out in front of her, proffered to him. Marcos can see now that the paint on the whistle shows a tiny ranch house, much like the one they are standing in. "I'm practicing bird calls with this," the girl says, "so I can fly away someday. But so far, I can only do the pigeon." She pauses for a moment, but Marcos just looks at her. Finally, she asks, "Do you want to try it with me?" Marcos hesitates for a moment but reaches out to and gently takes the beautiful whistle from the girl, who tells him her name is Lydia.

"I can do a dove," Marcos tells her. Lydia smiles.

---

After that day, Señor del Rosario comes every year the Friday before Marcos' birthday to pick up his money. He rarely speaks to Marcos on these occasions but whispers a curse to the Holy Trinity if he sees money has been taken out for a replacement pair of boots, or a new leather apron Marcos has to wear when he skins the cattle. He brings a letter from Marcos' mother, and sometimes from one of his siblings, whichever one is currently in the highest grade in school they will be allowed to attend. They are taught to read and to write, and then yanked to start the closest available job. These letters are how Marcos learns of the closing of the *carnicería* down the street, of his eldest sister's marriage, and of his mother's death. Marcos writes letters in return, presses them into his father's hands before he leaves each year, but he doubts they are delivered.

Marcos works mostly outside, with the cattle and the other boys like him, whose families have sold their labor to keep the rest of the family eating. Sometimes, Lydia's *mamá* needs help inside, where she manages the estate's bookkeeping. Those are Marcos' favorite days, because he always gets to see Lydia. They play, sometimes with the whistle and sometimes with the wooden puppets the *ranchero* brings her back when he goes into town. Lydia shows him how to get eggs from the chickens that stay in the yard, and Marcos shows her the make-believe games he played with his friends in Chihuahua. When they get old enough to think about these things, Lydia tells him about how she wants to leave the ranch and drive straight to the ocean. She has an aunt in a place called Corpus Christi, she says, which is not at all like the ranch. Lydia says her aunt told her it's the sparkling city by the sea, calls it *linda*. When she brings this up, Marcos tells her nothing can be more *linda* than her, which always makes her blush. Marcos disagrees

with her about going to Corpus Christi, though—he can’t imagine a life outside of Mexico. What will they do if there is no ranch, he wonders, but he agrees with her because this is Lydia and a sparkling city sounds like a fairytale he might want to read, the kind with the happy ending. The first time Lydia tells Marcos she loves him, they are fifteen years old and he is confused, because nobody has ever told him that before and he’s not sure what it means. He says it back, though, because he knows that if he loves anyone, it’s Lydia. It takes him a few moments after this declaration before he realizes she expects him to kiss her, so he does. They plan to have a house by the ocean, with two stories and four dogs, so that they each get to pick two. They promise each other to never buy any cattle.

On Marcos’ 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, a decade after Señor del Rosario sells his son, the *ranchero* whistles at half past six, the signal of the end of the workday. The whistle is a shrill sound that reverberates through the cattle pen; the call stirs cattle and worker alike. Marcos figures it must have taken years, decades even, to perfect. Usually on Marcos’ birthday this would also mean for all of them, family and ranch hands alike, to come to the yard, where there will be *arroz con pollo*, dancing, and *tres leches* cake just for Marcos. Marcos knows that today is different, though. The *ranchero* explained the terms of his deal with Marcos’ father a few years ago, so when Señor del Rosario stands up from a chair by the door as Marcos walks in to the house, he is unsurprised. The flat cap Señor del Rosario wears has been out of fashion for nearly a decade, and Marcos notes that he is now several inches taller than his father. Señor del Rosario glances at Marcos, nods a greeting, and then Marcos can see him check off the box from the to-do list in his now-bald head, “Collect property.” Down the hallway of the house, the *ranchero*’s wife sighs and sets down a plate of food outside a bedroom door after her knock remains unanswered for the third time today.

“It’s my birthday,” Marcos remarks to his father, but he hardly expects an answer. He doesn’t get one. Señor Gonzales is not an emotional man, but when he steps out of the back room with a stack of papers and an envelope in his hand, Marcos notices that his eyes are glossy. Marcos’ father signs contract completion paperwork. Marcos thinks about Lydia. They said their goodbyes the night before, because she refuses to do it today. They had kissed and hugged as they had for the last three years. They had made love as they had not yet done in those three years. They had talked about everything as they had been doing for the last ten years. They had cried together. They are no longer naïve as they once were, so they did not discuss the future anymore, the house or the dogs or the ocean. Marcos feels for the parting letter she gave him and is comforted by the crinkle of the paper in his pocket.

“It’s my birthday,” he repeats, louder this time, *but it doesn’t feel like it at all*, he adds in his head. Señor del Rosario ignores Marcos, but Señor Gonzales looks at him, full of sorrow. As he hands his father the envelope, Marcos sees his father check off the second box in his head, “Collect money.” The *ranchero* walks over to Marcos and places his hand on his shoulder, as Señor del Rosario had once done.

“I’ll miss you, *mijo*,” he tells Marcos, “un *bendición* to this family,” and then he can say no more. He squeezes Marcos’ shoulder, and then releases. Señor del Rosario gruffly announces the arrival of the bus on the road, so Marcos turns and walks out the door behind his father. During the bus ride, Señor del Rosario seems to remember something, and reaches into his pocket to hand Marcos a crumpled paper package, held together by the smallest piece of tape Marcos has ever seen. The tag indicates the present is from his youngest brother, the baby who is now eleven years old, whom he has not met since. Marcos looks at his father, a dark eyebrow up in confusion, but Señor del Rosario turns to speak to the tradesman sprawled on the seat across



the aisle about how Mexico has finally joined World War II, to get his opinion on how it will affect trade.

Marcos opens the package in his lap and guffaws loud enough for most of the bus to turn around and look at him, because out of the package falls a tiny tin whistle. His brother has written a note which says he heard it belonged to him once. He wonders if he can still use it to imitate the birds. He wonders if Lydia will hear the birdcall and know it is him, if he can use it to fly to her.

When they get off the bus, Marcos walks away from his father, the whistle in his hand. His father is right—the country is at war, and Marcos knows where to sign up. He hears his father call his name and for a moment, he wonders if Señor del Rosario bothers to actually look at his son for once. He does not turn to check. As he walks, his ceaseless prayers are only her name.

---

The shores of Corpus Christi come into view as Marcos turns his car onto Ocean Drive for the first time. He rolls down the window; he tastes the salty air, feels the wind caress his scalp, listens to the seagulls squawk at each other. The war is over. As he drives, he watches a sailboat out in the bay move imperceptibly along the surf, and spots a family setting out their lunch. He sees a young boy being walked by his overexuberant Labrador Retriever along the sea wall that runs along the beachfront. There are no cattle in sight. The buildings downtown reflect off the water and make it sparkle. You were right, Lydia, it really is the sparkling city by the sea, he thinks. *Linda.*

Marcos will meet a sweet woman named Angelica who probably had dreams once, too. They will have eleven children, one of whom will die before it can be baptized. Marcos will have a brief stint as a door-to-door knife salesman, then as a grocery store manager. Marcos will cheat on his wife with a woman he thinks looks like Lydia. He will accumulate real estate and rent it out to earn some extra money. He will be proud of his children. By the time Selena Quintanilla is shot, Marcos will have small grandchildren. Marcos will not say “I love you” to his wife, or to his children, but he will try it out on the grandchildren. He will provide for the family, doing this, that, and the other. He will pull the whistle and the parting letter out periodically, and he will not forget Lydia. Marcos will have regrets.

In Mexico, right after the war and about an hour’s ride outside of Chihuahua, a toddler-aged boy will run into the yard of the ranch house, dusty boot prints puffing up behind him, with a painted wooden whistle he found while snooping in his mother’s private things. He will practice and practice with the whistle until he sounds just like a dove.

## Courses

### *I. Aperitivo*

Dylan's phone dings, and the sound resounds through the cramped Italian restaurant. She picks it up quickly, fumbling as she goes, trying to turn the damn thing on silent. She curses under her breath but doesn't bother looking at the screen, instead dropping her phone into the overlarge, catch-all purse at her side. She doesn't have to read the message to know that her mother is here—she can feel it in the way her heartbeat has picked up speed and her stomach has tightened. A plate holding a thin slice of bread rests next to a blood-orange Aperol spritz on the table across from Dylan.

She does a quick mental check. She had blotted the oil from her overactive pores in the bathroom a few minutes before. She glances down to make sure all six turtle shell buttons on her mauve long-sleeved blouse are still there, snugly fastened. She runs a hand over her hair to make sure the anti-frizz product she put in is still doing its job. She fidgets in her seat. Mostly, she wishes Luca was here. Dylan does not trust her shaking hands to pour a glass of chianti from the bottle sitting in the middle of the table in its straw basket, or to tip the olive oil from its glass decanter into a pool on her plate. Both the wine and the oil look they belong here in Bologna, Italy more than Dylan ever will. She contents herself to sip on the sparkling water already in her glass, the fizz burning as it goes down her throat.

Alondra Cisneros bustles in to the restaurant, all fast-fashion maxi skirt and loud American accent. She looks just as chic in person as she does in the Facebook photos Dylan scrolls through on her mother's page. In this setting, though, the ensemble looks forced and

gimmicky, the colors too harsh for the dim interior. Alondra pushes gigantic black sunglasses up onto her forehead and casts her gaze around until she catches sight of Dylan sitting at the table. “My prodigal daughter,” she proclaims, loudly enough for the maître ‘d to raise his eyebrows. He looks at Dylan as if to say, *is this one yours?*

Dylan pulverizes the crusted bread on her plate slowly under her index finger, letting the dough squish as thin as it will go before releasing. She waits a moment, watching as the bread slowly unfurls and springs back to its original height, before she stands to hug her mother. She is surprised to find she missed her.

## II. *Antipasti*

“Look at you!” Alondra gushes. She immediately lifts her phone to snap a picture of her startled daughter. As they settle down into their chairs, Alondra looks her daughter up and down. Though she doesn’t expect her to notice, Dylan still automatically draws her left hand under the table. Better to save that tidbit until she’s ready. “Oh, you did your hair, how nice,” Alondra comments. Dylan uses her right hand to pull at the ends of her freshly cut and colored hair and smiles. It was a stupid waste of 150 euros just to turn her hair from dark brown to full black, but right now she doesn’t regret it.

“Thanks for coming, Mom.” She wouldn’t dare call her Alondra to her face. The woman who birthed her twists around to survey the inside of the restaurant. She looks at the carved low wooden beams on the ceiling, the crisp white tablecloths, and the gold accents on the light fixtures that are just enough to be complementary for the small space. Dylan notes that her mother’s dark hair is freshly highlighted with a caramel shade of blonde. Alondra has always taught her daughter to present her best self to the world—Dylan’s frizzy hair is her public enemy

number one—and Dylan can see that she still follows her own advice. By the time Alondra twists back, Dylan can tell by the upturn at one corner of her mouth that the restaurant passes her test.

“They’re considering giving it a Michelin star,” Dylan offers, so that her mother is aware that she is not oblivious to her judgments.

“Of course you would choose a place like this for us to have dinner in.” Alondra dips her head and chuckles.

“Yeah, well, you know me well. The 2019 Michelin guide labeled it as ‘on the rise,’ so we hope this year it’ll finally snag the star.” Dylan puts her hand behind her head.

The waiter walks over and sets down a long tray of crostini between them. “*Grazie*, Emile,” Dylan says, and he throws her a thumbs up.

“No menu?” Alondra raises her thin eyebrows. Dylan blows air out between her lips. They are sitting in one of the world’s finest restaurants, one where Dylan is lucky enough to have been studying culinary arts for the better part of the last year. She shouldn’t be surprised her mother is complaining about the lack of a menu.

There are six crostini on the tray—two each of which are topped with liver pâté, caprese salad, and a mixture of mozzarella and mortadella. “Oh, these are just precious. The cutest things I’ve ever seen. I have got to take a picture.” Alondra picks up one of the pâté crostini and inspects it at eye level, nodding admiringly before using her phone to snap a photo. She pulls a bite delicately between her teeth. It’s silent while she chews, tapping at her screen. “I tagged you, don’t worry,” she says.

“I wasn’t. So I saw you’re going to be here for two weeks, right? What do you plan to do?” Dylan suggests. She found this information out from social media.

Alondra swallows. “Yes, and oh sweetie, when I tell you it has been a nightmare.” She draws out the word ‘nightmare’ so that the ‘t’ sound pops and the ‘r’ sounds harsh. Alondra proceeds to spend most of their time over the appetizer telling Dylan about her awful experience getting into the European country. Her London flight had been delayed by six hours, meaning she didn’t arrive in Milan, where she is staying, until nearly four pm. “Oh, honey, I was so exhausted, you wouldn’t even believe.”

This story blends in to the next one, but Dylan is patient and used to her mother’s rambles. Alondra has been traveling alone, and Dylan notes her wedding ring is not on her finger. She must be fighting with Jeff again. She nods through her mother’s mixed bag of tales, from misfortune to life-changing spiritual awakening. She looks shocked when appropriate and laughs when she’s supposed to, happy when her laughter makes her mother’s own laughter last even longer.

### *III. Primo*

Dylan is determined to tell her mother about her dream job, and Luca, before they finish the *antipasti*, but Emile brings out the next dish— miniscule servings of roasted rabbit—when Alondra is only halfway done telling Dylan of the saga of her days in Venice. The diamond ring feels heavier than usual on her left hand, and so does her intimate knowledge of the people bustling around the restaurant, all stealing furtive glances at their soon-to-be boss sitting here with her unenlightened mother.

“Beautiful presentation,” Alondra says, nodding appreciatively at the painstakingly plated rabbit. Each chunk of meat has its own herb garnish sticking up at the top. Dylan stabs one with a fork, gently sinking her teeth into the delicate meat. The juices flood her mouth, and she closes her eyes for slightly longer than a blink, enjoying the sensation of the food on her palette. Mancini must have used the fresh batch of spices they had gotten from the farmer an hour outside the town. God, that man really was a genius with food. She hardly notices that her mother has ceased talking to take a breath and pour herself a glass from the wine bottle, having finished her spritz during the *aperitivo*.

“So, when are you coming home? I miss you, baby girl. We all do. I had to fly halfway around the world and take a vacation just so I could see my only daughter,” Alondra jokes.

Ah, there it is. “Don’t pretend you’re not enjoying it.” She rolls her eyes. “And I don’t know, I might come visit over Christmas.” She’s beginning to regret not taking Luca up on his repeated offer to join her at this lunch. She could use some fiancé support right now.

“What do you mean, come visit?” Alondra says, furring her brow. “I thought you were coming here as an alternative to culinary school, as a way to learn to ‘cook globally,’ or whatever. One year and done, max two. That’s what you told me.” She is not angry yet, just confused.

“Come on, you of all people know school was never right for me,” Dylan says softly. It feels important that her mother not forget this about her, that she still know who her daughter is, even if Dylan has done all she can to make sure she is separated from this woman who has never believed she would do anything important.

“Of course I do.” She sounds impatient, and Dylan can tell she’s trying not to roll her eyes as she wipes her mouth. “Which is why I okayed this in the first place.” Dylan feels her temper rising. She resists the urge to remind her mother that she is a 24-year-old woman and that she would have come to Bologna regardless of Alondra’s overbearing opinion on whether or not it was “okay.” She thinks she would have, anyway.

“Well, Chef Mancini offered me a full-time job, and I’m not very well going to turn that down.”

“Who?”

“Nicola Mancini. The world-renowned chef?” Alondra’s stare is blank. “He owns this restaurant.” Dylan gestures around her. “I’ve been working here since I moved to Bologna.”

“Oh, you work here?” She looks around them. “Wow. Okay, but regardless of that. So what, Dylan? You’re just going to up and live in Italy for the rest of your life?” Alondra scoffs. Dylan twists her ring around on her finger in her lap.

“Yes, actually. I am.”

“Yeah, right.”

#### IV. *Secondo*

The second main course is pasta, always. *Strozzapreti* tossed in a light pesto sauce, and *chitarra* with a creamy mushroom sauce, rich but balanced, not overwhelming in the least. When Emile sets down the two steaming dishes on the table, Dylan thanks him instead of responding to Alondra.



She twirls a fork into the *strozzapreti* and holds the pasta up to her mother. “Did you know *strozzapreti* means strangled priest? Apparently, the group of priests who invented it thought it was such a perfect noodle that when they ate it, they chewed and swallowed so quickly that they choked.” Dylan loves that story. “It’s my favorite pasta.”

Alondra looks at her, aghast. “God, that’s awful,” she says, putting her own fork down and shaking the noodles off of it. Dylan can’t decide if her mother is responding to the story or to her daughter’s decisions.

“So, that’s it, then? You’re just going to throw your life at home away?” Dylan sighs and sets down her fork without taking the bite of pasta. She wishes she was one of the strangled priests right now.

“Throw what life away, Mom? What home? Yours, where I have to deal with Callum and Jeff? My waitressing job at The Cheesecake Factory, where I couldn’t even dream of getting into the kitchen unless one of the cooks got sick and they just needed an extra pair of hands? Is that the life you’re referring to?” She could almost laugh.

“First of all, your brother and your stepfather have nothing to do with this. And second of all, you made great tips at The Cheesecake Factory.”

“Okay, fine. Besides the fact that they’re both dramatic brats, fine, Callum and Jeff don’t have that much to do with it. And The Cheesecake Factory, whatever.” Dylan can feel her phone vibrating in her purse, and she’s tempted to pull it out and text Luca to come. She knows the warm embrace he always gives her would be a clearer message to Alondra than any of the words she can speak. “Then it’s about you.”

“About me? What about me? I’m the one you’re leaving. Everyone is going to look at me and see me as the woman whose daughter abandoned her.”

“Look, I don’t even know. I don’t even where I should start.” This is quickly turning in to the fight she was hoping to avoid by giving her mom a taste of the best food Italy has to offer. “I love you, Mom, and whatever you think, I’m not abandoning you. But...well, it’s not like you’ve exactly been supportive.”

“Are you kidding me? I’ve been nothing but supportive. For your entire life.” This is the same woman who left clippings from the local newspaper of restaurants who were advertising open dishwasher positions on Dylan’s bed when she was in high school. This was her idea of support after Dylan confided to her mother that she wanted to become a head chef after graduation.

“I just—I’m here, you know? I’m doing the thing I’ve always wanted to do, in the country I’ve always wanted to do it in. I want you to be happy for me.” Dylan rakes her fingers through her hair, which she can feel frizzing despite all her earlier care and attention.

“And that’s great for you, Dylan. Really, I’m proud of you, but do you really think you’re going to make it without your mother around?” Her mother scoops up a full fork of *chitarra* pasta and chews on it slowly. Her voice closes the subject, her tone not entertaining any question.

#### V. *Dolce*

A few minutes later, after the two women finish their pasta in silence, Emile shows up with two glass ramekins of *zabaglione*. Mancini has put a veritable mountain of raspberries on the surface of one of them. “The chef’s specialty, and just the way you like it,” he says, winking at Dylan. She doesn’t say anything.

A graveyard of trays litters the tablecloth between mother and daughter. “I can’t possibly fit one more bite,” her mother groans, laying a hand on her stomach. “I’ve cheated on my diet too much already.”

“Can I ask you something, Mom?”

Alondra sighs. “You don’t have to ruin this lovely dessert, too, do you?”

“What does make it mean, in your opinion, to make it?” She hopes her mother can hear the air quotes she places around the words ‘make it.’

“Oh, you know. Married. Kids. Job. Being close to your family. All the stuff we talked about to you and Callum when you were both little. Not gallivanting around Italy like your life is a Latina version of *Eat, Pray, Love*.” Dylan is fairly certain Alondra has never read, or even seen, *Eat, Pray, Love*. Her mother’s ideas of success have never been the course Dylan has wanted her life to take, so she just nods and presses the diamond of her engagement ring into her thigh. Alondra never noticed it. Dylan no longer feels the need to bring it up.

Alondra scrapes the final bite of the airy custard into her mouth. “I’ve got to catch the train back to Milan at 9, so I’d better get going.” She dabs her mouth with her napkin and puts a hundred-euro bill down on to the table. “That’ll cover it, right?”

Dylan knows this is Alondra’s last-ditch attempt to show her daughter how much she needs her. Alondra wants to hold it over her head that as the mother, she is still the one paying. Dylan doesn’t bother telling her mother that the bill for the meal they just shared would have been at least three times that, or that she has already made arrangements for the meal with Mancini.

“I’ll see you at Christmas.” Alondra’s voice is smug, certain. “I love you, Dylan.”

“See you,” Dylan echoes.

## VI. *Digestivo con caffè*

Dylan’s phone buzzes once again. She glances down to see a Facebook notification this time. Her mother has tagged her in a post. She ignores it and peers down at the shot of liqueur Emile has placed in her hand.

“For digestion,” he had said, and offered her three options—*limoncello* she knows, and *amaro* too, but the black licorice flavor of the one she is currently holding is new. The smell makes her tongue curl. It’s supposed to help with digestion, and Dylan hopes it does, because she feels like her entire meal is still caught in her throat. Italians don’t take shots, but Dylan plugs her nose and shoots the bittersweet alcohol straight to the back of her throat.

Her train home to the flat she and Luca share doesn’t leave for another twenty-five minutes, and the station is a five-minute walk from the restaurant. She picks up her phone and clicks on the notification.

“A five-course meal with my girl today. I am amazed every day by the life she has made for herself in Italy. I could not be prouder of my independent little girl!” Dylan’s vaguely smiling face, highly edited, peers out from beneath the text. Dylan bends her head, studying the photo. Her eyebrows arch on the same curve as her mother’s, the hairline a mirror image. Dylan has her father’s nose, but her mouth curves the same way Alondra’s does and her eyes are set the same slightly-too-close distance apart. She is fully aware that Alondra wants what’s best for her. That has never been in doubt.

“Would you like some *caff  * to finish off your meal?”

“No, thanks, Emile.”

The post has been up for less than ten minutes and already has twenty-two “likes” and four comments. Dylan’s thumb hovers over the “like” button.

She likes it. She doesn’t, of course, but she does.

## Living Statue

“Order your king cake here!” The sign twirler and his sign both scream an advertisement for Fleur de Lis Cakery at Wren as she pushes her way through the crowd under the porticos, heading towards the public restroom tucked into the corner of the row of restaurants, high-end boutiques, and tourist traps. She would like to smack the sign out of his hand. Two doors down from him, a purple tube boy wearing a string of beads the size of cantaloupes flaps in the wind, competing with an advertisement for “The best king cake in Louisiana!” Wren holds a paint can close to her body and ducks around both the sign twirler and the erratic blowup, pushing open the door marked with a large “W.”

It’s not ideal to get ready for work here, because there are far too many drunk people even at 2 pm and the mirrors are cloudy, but Sheila and her husband have company this weekend so she couldn’t do it at their place.

Wren began to paint surfaces—the desk at school, scrap paper from the home copy machine, the walls, her own skin— when she was a toddler. She was restless as a rule, and in middle school, Wren made it her mission to learn every game in the world so that she could never be bored. Indoor or outdoor, solo or group, sport or card game, it didn’t matter; she learned them all. By the time she turned 18 and graduated high school, she had run off to Baton Rouge for art school. Her sister Laurel had supported her when their parents told her she was on her own. While in college, Wren got a penchant for performance art. The art of movement and nonmovement fascinated her, and her drawing professors groaned when she would show up to class, final project drawn in marker and paint across her own body. After she graduated, pursuing a graduate degree wasn’t financially feasible, so Wren did what she had always done, this time

taking to the streets of her hometown of New Orleans to make money as a performance street artist. Back then, she thought she might eventually go to the Netherlands to compete in the World Championship of Living Statues, but that turned out to be a pipe dream, and she's been painting herself up in Jackson Square for three years now.

The ancient Grecian woman Wren plays is fairly simple to perform—she just holds her arms and hands regally out from the rest of her body while standing atop a pedestal, but it takes her almost two and a half hours to get ready. She carefully dips her brush into the metallic gold face and body paint time and time again, swirling it in the can so the consistency remains even throughout. She fixes the gold leafy crown to her head, making certain the leaves don't move when she pushes against them. She takes special care around the eyes as she covers everything that is Wren and turns herself into a nonspeaking, nonmoving, nameless woman. Even with the cloudy mirrors, Wren can see how she gleams, and she knows she will be blinding in the sunlight.

Now, she's a living statue. She walks out of the bathroom and quickly crosses onto the side street right by the square, setting up her box pedestal and arranging the empty paint can she's painted to look like a Grecian urn that will collect her tips. Dull to shiny, just like that. She steps up onto the pedestal and strikes her pose. She looks out across the square to see Andrew Jackson and his horse, carved in bronze, and resolves to be as they are—just a part of the scenery.

Three hours later, Wren blinks and shifts her eyes around her. The square is emptier than it's been all day. Most tourists have either retired to their hotels for a nap before the night's festivities or have moved to congregate along the lines of the street where the "Family Gras"

parade will soon begin. Wren scoops up her full bucket of paint and her money paint bucket and walks across the square to where Sheila is finishing up a reading for a drunk grandmother. As the grandmother stumbles away, clutching a half-empty Hurricane to her chest, Wren taps Sheila on the shoulder to let her know she's there and settles down in the foldable client chair across from her to count.

Sheila nods a hello as she shuffles the tarot cards back into deck. "How'd you do today?" she asks. On a normal day, in a three-hour shift, she'll make anywhere from \$75 to \$150, but Wren gets excited as the number she counts ticks up and the bucket seems not to empty. When she finishes counting, she shows the wad of cash to Sheila and slaps it into her other hand. "\$250, hell yeah." Wren has never been a numbers person, but they seem to be all she's been thinking about in the last couple years. "It's February and it's Mardi Gras. Primetime, baby. And nobody overly creeped me out today, so yeah, I've been feeling pretty good about myself today." Sheila laughs, likely remembering the stories Wren has told her of hecklers who get into her face and stare at her for as long as they can muster, or for the men who make suggestive comments to her about what's under all that paint. "What about you?"

"Same boat," Sheila says, shaking her full tip jar. "I'm going to go home for a couple hours then come back later tonight. God, I love Mardi Gras and I love tourists." She packs up and waves as she leaves.

Wren usually tries to avoid the French Quarter unless she's working. It's far too crowded and expensive, but she knows that the Big Easy Daquiri around the corner from Jackson Square has two working slot machines, and she can't wait any longer. There are far too many people to make the sidewalk an option, so she walks in the gutter. She pulls a black sweatshirt from high school over her clothes, tucking the wad of cash in the front pocket, but she still draws stares as



she walks, paint buckets in hand. She's anxious. She hasn't had the money to gamble in days, and she's been waking in cold sweats, nightmares of stolen chips and mutating lottery numbers dancing through her uneasy sleep. She needs to make enough today to be able to pay the bookie his \$300 and to get a new can of paint.

The parade is starting, and Wren can feel the energy in the crowd lift and swell as hundreds of pairs of eyes turn towards the sounds of the marching band and see the first trumpets as they come into view. A few seconds later, an oversized jester head appears on the first parade float. Its eyes are diamond-shaped black holes.

Distracted by the jester, Wren almost runs into a toddler that dashes out into the street, grubby hands reaching for a strand of purple beads lying neglected in the gutter. "Whoa." She holds her hand out to steady the girl before she tumbles headfirst onto the cobblestone and pulls her back to the sidewalk so that she won't be trampled by the plumed marching band and their swinging brass instruments. A hugely pregnant woman rushes past Wren, almost pushing her over a second time in her panicked rush to get to the child. She clutches the girl, who is maybe three years old and wearing a cherry-printed dress, to her side.

"Maddie, don't run away from me like that. You scared the heck out of me, chick." Wren feels every muscle tense up at the voice, so much like Wren's own, which pierces every one of her muscles with recognition. Her breath catches in her throat and she feels like she might choke. "I'm so sorry about that. Thank you," the woman continues, turning to look up to see her daughter's savior. Her eyes widen when she sees Wren standing there, pinching the crunchy fabric of her gilded dress between her fingers.

"Oh my God, Wren. Hi."

Wren knows what she must look like. The wind bustling through the square has brought involuntary tears to her eyes that are now drawing tracks through the metallic paint on her cheeks, and, aside from the sweatshirt, the rest of her is still entirely painted gold. People are not used to seeing people like her walking around on the streets, do not want her to be capable of movement at all. The less real she pretends to be, the more money she gets. Right now, though, her sister's stare is making her feel far too real, far more real than she wants to be. It feels like the crowd surrounding them has dissipated. Laurel straightens, holding Maddie tight to her with one hand and bringing her other hand protectively to her belly.

"Hey." Wren looks down at her feet, sneaking glances at her sister, trying to see what else has changed in the two years since she saw her last, when Laurel kicked her out of their shared apartment and told her she was done having a sister who only cared about wasting her money away on slot machines instead of paying the rent. Maddie wasn't even walking yet. Where does Laurel live now? With a boyfriend? A husband? Does she still work as a paralegal for the corporate law firm downtown? Does she still start every morning with a cup of ginseng tea? Does she think about her sister?

Laurel is just three years older than Wren, at 29, but her mahogany hair is streaked with gray, the hallmark of women in their family, and she looks tired, although that may be from the stress of having a four-year-old at a parade. However family-friendly this particular one may claim to be, it's still New Orleans.

"Good. More than good, actually," Wren says, too quickly. She curses in her head. *Awful. I'm homeless. I'm an addict. You were right.* "Congratulations," she says aloud, gesturing to the unborn baby.

“Thanks.” Laurel pauses as if debating how much she should say. “He’s due March 16<sup>th</sup>. A Pisces, like you.”

Wren feels her heart involuntarily warm. The idea of an invisible olive branch hangs between them. But she feels the weight of the cash hanging in her sweatshirt and she knows that nothing has changed. Her hand flutters to it. “That’s awesome, I’m really happy for you. But, uh, I better get going. Got places to be. Enjoy the parade.”

“Okay.” Laurel looks at her like she wants to hug her, but Maddie tugs at her hand, trying to get her mother to look at the feathered horses now marching on the street. As Laurel looks down to respond, Wren can see the flecks of gold on Maddie’s wrist where her painted fingers held the girl. She mutters a “goodbye” to the pair under her breath and turns around, shoving her way through the crowd as quickly as she can.

“Excuse me, excuse me, excuse me.” Wren looks at people’s feet as she pushes through them, trying not to notice the whole families, a mix of local and tourists, with kids riding on parent shoulders and siblings fighting over leftover beignets.

As Wren pushes open the door to Big Easy Daiquiris, the sounds of the parade fade and she is relieved to see that both slot machines are empty. She inhales, trying to stop her breaths from being the shallow puffs that have been all she can manage for the past several minutes, and sits at the left one. The bartender doesn’t bat an eye at having a disheveled living statue sitting at her slot machine, just points to the row of daiquiri machines behind her, sloshing in their rainbow colors and surrounded by neon signs, and asks if she wants a drink. Wren shakes her head and settles into her seat, perching her toes on the edge of the metal bar below the chair.

She feeds dollars to the machine, peeling them one at a time from her pocket. With each one, she relaxes a little more, sinking into the red pleather seat. Wren can feel the knot in her chest begin to loosen with the first pull, but each pull of the machine that follows turns the jester faces into Laurel's and the cherries into the print on Maddie's dress as they spin past. The "New Orleans" carved in a silver-coated plastic on the machine's edge screws and rotates.

If Wren looks at the city name—New Orleans— and squints her eyes ever so slightly, it looks a bit like a twisted, mangled version of the word normal. Or maybe only she sees that, and it's only because she lives there. But that's what the city is to her. Twisted, mangled, normal. And it's not just the voodoo. She's seen things in this city, *her* city, that in any other place would consume a person's thoughts for days on end. Years, even. But in New Orleans, those things happen ten times on a single night on Bourbon. Or off Bourbon, if hand grenades just *sound* like a terrible idea.

A pink fluffy-collared sexual submissive being walked around by a man in a dark suit. An elderly man wearing a tail and a top hat. A gaggle of women in Goodwill wedding dresses. A gator in a Saints jersey. A frat boy wearing diamond-crusted nipple tassels. A ghost down at the corner of her favorite Creole restaurant. A man fighting a pit bull because the dog looked at him weird.

Wren has seen them all, but she never expected to see Laurel.

She closes her eyes, trying not to see her anymore. She remembers the last time she saw her sister, face pinched and blotchy red as she slammed the door on Wren. It was such a small thing. That stupid king cake. Wren had come home from Harrah's without a penny left to her

name and had been in a vile mood, but Laurel's face was bright as she opened the door, a tiny Maddie balanced on her hip. "Did you get it?" she had asked excitedly.

"Get what?" Wren had snapped. She was smelling the way her clothes reeked of cigarette smoke and her head was beginning to pound as the free drinks from the casino wore off. She was also trying to calculate how much she would have to earn to be able to put down enough money at the poker table to pay her credit card bill that was due in four days. It was nearing the end of Mardi Gras, so she was getting enough work, but still. Mostly, she remembers, she had just wanted to shower.

"The king cake, dummy. You found the little baby last year, so you have to get the cake this year."

"Oh, shit. No, I didn't." Wren had said, rubbing her eyes. Stupid plastic baby.

"You said you would get it. This was supposed to be Maddie's first time. We were supposed to do it together as a family." Her voice was still low, but it had turned cold.

"Sorry, I just don't have the money right now."

"You don't have the money? Really? That's funny, because I know you just came home from the casino. You obviously had money before you went."

"I just don't have it, okay? Lay off, it's not that big of a deal." Wren had put her fingers to her temple, massaging where it throbbed with every breath she took.

"You're right, Wren. It's not that big of a deal. It's really not. But you know what is a big deal? The fact that I've been paying your half of the rent for the last two months. Not to mention groceries, electricity, your insurance, and your student loan payments." She had set Maddie

down in her playpen then so she could use her fingers to count out the number of ways Wren had managed to disappoint her.

“I told you I would pay you back.”

Exasperation was apparent in the curve of Laurel’s mouth. “Right, just like you told your bookie that. Just like you told all your friends that before they stopped being your friend. Just like you told mom and dad that before they cut you off. You have a problem, Wren.”

Wren had hugged her arms to her chest and her eyes blurred with tears. “It’s just for fun, it’s nothing.”

“Maybe you playing poker on the weekends and betting on football games with your high school friends was just fun. Maybe going to casinos when you turned 21 was nothing. But now? You’re 24-years-old.” Laurel shook her head. “I have bailed you out so many times, and you can’t even pick up a cake?”

Wren had nothing to say to that, so she had gone into the room they shared and packed a duffel bag and her paints. She had bent over the playpen to kiss Maddie on the forehead and Laurel had held the door for her as she walked out.

It was only on the night Laurel kicked her out that Wren had realized people in New Orleans tend to walk away from things they don’t think are any of their business, even things that perhaps should be their business. People’s eyes skim over dark alleyways and pretend that loud conversations are hushed and indistinguishable. Words become noise and people become statues, and that’s what happened to Wren.

In the daiquiri shop, she stops pulling the lever on the slot machine when she's down to \$50. "Fuck."

Her hand hovers over the lever as the mismatching symbols stare back at her—a cherry, a "7," and a "BAR." Maybe the next pull will bring up the matching "7"s she craves more than anything. She begins to push it down. Maybe not more than anything. She leans her head against the left side of the machine, staring down the row of symbols to her hand resting on the cold metal pull. She groans and clenches her hand around the pull, then pushes off from the machine and cashes out with the bored bartender. She tucks her money into her paint bucket, wondering if she can dodge the bookie for another week.

She's not sure where to go, and she feels listless. She finds herself walking back towards Jackson Square. Sheila doesn't know Wren is homeless, so after she finishes working, Wren always tells Sheila she's going to head home, but tonight she has no energy for pretenses. She hasn't even gone back to the restroom to wash the paint off her body.

"You look like you've been through it, girl," Sheila says as Wren walks up to her table.

Wren musters up a tiny laugh that makes hardly any sound and stretches her arm out to place a \$10 bill in Sheila's jar. "Will you read my cards?"

"I thought you didn't believe in this stuff," Sheila responds, looking curiously at her friend.

Wren shrugs. "I don't, really. But you deserve it."

"I stare at you while you work every day, right there across the way. If anything, I should be paying you. I appreciate it, though."

Wren nods and drums her fingers against the table restlessly. Then she reaches into her paint bucket again and pulls out a \$20, then places that in Sheila's jar on top of the \$10.

"What are you doing, Wren?"

"I don't know." Wren paces a small line back and forth in front of Sheila's table and grabs the rest of the money from her bucket. "I just feel like I'm stuck in place and I don't know what to do about it."

Sheila chuckles, shoulder-length earrings clinking together like miniature windchimes. "That's because sticking in one place is what you do for a living."

Wren stops pacing and roots her feet into the ground, tries to feel the stones under her feet rather than the money in her fist.

"I want to go home," she tells Sheila, who looks puzzled.

"Then go home. Maybe clean some of that paint off you."

To where? The old apartment? To Sheila's house? To her childhood home in the suburbs? Laurel's place, wherever that is, with Maddie and the soon-to-be baby boy?

She turns from Sheila. "Yeah. Yeah, I think I will."

She leaves the square and walks down the road a bit until she reaches the store where she saw the sign twirler earlier today, although he's retired by now. The crowds have thinned out a bit since the parade ended, but the night crowds are beginning to crawl out and onto the street, and the cooling night air has become raucous and loud. Wren opens the door to the Fleur De Lis Cakery, inhaling deeply the scent of flour and sweet spices, and places her final \$20 bill down on the bakery counter.



“One king cake for delivery, please.” The baker behind the counter looks exhausted—he doesn’t blink an eye at her appearance, just hands her an order card and tells her what she needs to fill out and where she needs to sign. Wren tenderly grips the pen between her fingers and holds her arm out, careful not to rub her metallic arm too hard on the glass casing. She fills out the “From” portion, jotting down “Your sister.” In the “To” portion, she writes “Laurel, Maddie, and Baby Boy.” There’s an area for a message to be delivered alongside the cake, and she puts the pen up to her mouth, sucking air through her teeth while she thinks. There is so much to say, but the card only gives her four lines. After a few moments, Wren just writes, “I owe you,” and scribbles a signature at the bottom. Satisfied, she hands the card back to the baker. He barely looks at it before flipping it back to her.

“The address,” he says laconically. Wren furrows her brow and stops to read the field. Home address. She stops and sets the pen down. She has no idea where to send it.

## NOTES

These stories draw inspiration from the following:

Alexie, Sherman. "What You Pawn I Will Redeem." *Ten Little Indians: Stories*. Grove Press, 2004.

Busch, Frederick. "Ralph the Duck." *Absent Friends*. New Directions Publishing, 1991.

Cheever, John. "Reunion." *The New Yorker*, 1962.

Orange, Tommy. *There There*. Random House Large Print Publishing, 2018.

Washington, Bryan. *Lot: Stories*. Atlantic Books, 2019.

Wurzbacher, Ashley. "Ripped." *Happy Like This: Stories*. University of Iowa Press, 2019.