

Strays:
A Short Story Collection

by Emily Skeens

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Contents

Dangerous Things	1
Family Tradition	15
Rotten.....	28
Putting Out Fires	43
Crowded.....	55
Strays.....	63
Connections: An Analytical Essay.....	71
Works Cited	80

Dangerous Things

Atlas Walkins had never been particularly good at keeping his hands off things that were dangerous. When he was four, it was a light socket in the living room that sparked and sizzled when he'd jammed the antenna of his RC car into it. When he was fourteen, it was an electrified fence that a snot-nosed younger cousin had cajoled him into touching. Now that he was twenty, he guessed it was the preacher's son, Ira Horn.

His great aunt Jemma's old house was positioned far enough back into the head of Cherry Hollow that it hardly existed to the rest of the world, but he still worried that somebody might drive by for some reason and ask themselves what he was doing out there with a preacher's son. If the question bothered them enough, they might ask Ira's father if they saw him that Sunday. In even the most optimistic of outcomes, people would talk. People already talked about him, but being the maybe-queer son of a Waffle House waitress was a very different kind of gossip fodder than fooling around with Brother Horn's youngest son. Your ability to shock people in a town like Barlow depended heavily on who your parents are, considering it was mostly the older folks who can still be scandalized by anything. Ira might be nineteen now, but he was still pastor Horn's boyish, freckle-faced youngest. Atlas was not so histrionic to believe he'd be run out of town, but he might be strongly incentivized to pack it up if he intended to continue being a mostly private sort of person.

He just hoped whatever they're doing was serious enough to be worth the trouble.

"You feeling alright?" Ira asked. He'd turned to face him and edged closer into the middle seat the moment Atlas put the pickup into park. "You look out of it," he said, voice steady and careful. Ira leaned in and laid the back of his hand against Atlas's forehead like he

was checking for a fever, the same way he'd seen Ira's mother lay her hand on him if his expression soured for just a moment too long during service. Though, that had been years ago now. Atlas had stopped going to church when his parents had stopped begging him to. Still, the gentle touch gave him a little rush of affection for Ira and he leaned into it.

"I'm fine," Atlas assured him. He nodded towards the old house, "I got a key for the front door, if you want to go on in this time." For nearly six months now, they'd been driving out here and sitting on the slowly dry-rotting back porch or in the truck parked out front just to talk about things or, on one lightly embarrassing occasion, to mess around in the front seat of Atlas's pickup. In high school, his friends who wanted time alone and far away from their parents' prying eyes had bragged about fooling around in church parking lots late at night. That had never really seemed like an option for them. Especially considering the way Ira would occasionally avert his eyes to the floorboards when they so much as passed by a church while hanging out.

"You got a key?" Ira asked, and his worry melted into an oddly mischievous glint in his eyes as he leaned a bit closer, "What'd you do, steal it from your dad's dresser drawer?" He sounded thrilled by the idea of an incredibly petty and worthless sort of breaking-and-entering. There was nothing to take in there, and he couldn't imagine Ira would try to anyway. No, Ira just seemingly enjoyed the idea of breaking rules even when they didn't matter--the last dregs of teenage rebellion he'd never fully allowed himself to indulge in while entirely dependent on his parents. Now that he'd gotten a job, a car of his own, and a few friends with couches he could occupy if everything went real south, he felt he could cut loose a little.

"No, nothing like that," he said. "Mom gave it to me so I could store all my shit from high school out here. Said it was cluttering up the attic. Sorry if that's, ah, a little disappointing..."

Ira looked at him strangely, opened his mouth like he meant to say something and then closed it again. Eventually Ira just opened the truck door and the cooling late afternoon air rushed in. “I was just kidding,” he mumbled towards the soft-lit mountainside that frames the single-story home--so low that Atlas thought he might have misheard, “But, yeah. Hell yeah. Really want to see what this ol’ place looks like on the inside. It’ll be like being one of those guys that explore abandoned buildings for fun.” Ira stood in the driveway for a minute as Atlas leaned heavy on the pickup, both staring straight up at the sky.

“Should bring a blanket out here some time,” Ira said. “Lay out on the grass, look up at the stars...”

“Sounds like some shit from a Hallmark movie,” Atlas teased. Ira pulled a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and pat himself down in search of a lighter.

“Hm. Nah. If this was a Hallmark movie, one of us would be a pretty blond lady and the other would run a small-town bakery or something,” Ira said offhand, finally locating the little green Bic lighter where it had fallen out of his pocket onto the ground beside the truck. It’s difficult not to laugh at the idea of owning a bakery in Barlow, Virginia. If this town could nearly fold a *hospital*, not many businesses stood a chance in hell. From what he could tell, the Walmart and the Dollar General were pretty much the only thing that were never hurting for traffic. There was also the weird little second-hand bookstore that sold witchy shit to all the goth kids at the high school, but Atlas was pretty sure a deal with the devil had to be made to keep that place in business.

Ira lit his cigarette, glanced over to Atlas, and motioned to the Marlboro balanced between his fingers, “You still quitting?”

“Mmmhmm,” Atlas nodded. Cigarettes had lost their primary appeal when smoking them in the boy’s bathroom was no longer an excuse to skip out on Calculus class, but that was another thing that Ira had decided to take up since graduating in the hope of making up for lost time. (Plus, in his first few months of EMT training, Atlas had already seen more old people talking through a hole in their throat than he cared to think about.)

“Good,” Ira said, sounding oddly proud.

They wandered up to the house slowly, Ira pausing to scratch idly at the peeling paint on one of the front porch posts. He glanced in either direction as if he was waiting for someone. Atlas unlocked the front door and tried to open it, grunting when it refused to budge. He shoved his shoulder up against the door, firmly but hesitant to put his full weight into it. Still no luck.

“We could have a party or something out here, if your Mama don’t mind. Bet you could set off the really good fireworks out here and nobody would even hear,” Ira mused. “Hell, we could do that with just the two of us. I know a guy.” Atlas was certain he was joking again from the tone he said it with, but it didn’t matter. Atlas bristled instinctually at the thought. He remembered all too distinctly the flickering flames lapping at the side of a dead Sugar Maple and a pile of dried leaves, his hand shaking around the wrapper of a roman candle, his uncle yelling in his ear and shaking his shoulders so hard that his ears ring as they all silently prayed that someone from the volunteer fire department can make it out in time. Sirens. He imagined his uncle’s wild eyes so close to his face as he screams, “*What the fuck is wrong with you, boy?*” until his great aunt demanded that he leave Atlas alone.

“No,” Atlas said briskly, “tree line’s too close. You’d set the mountains on fire.” He didn’t admit to Ira that he was speaking from experience. He couldn’t bring himself to say it, even if he was sure Ira would get a kick out of the story. He was a little ashamed of the way he

acted as a kid--reckless and desperate to be seen and heard. Ira was not exactly like he was, no, it was much tamer and bubbling just under the surface, but still it made him afraid. Atlas pushed his shoulder hard into the door again, and the rain-swollen wood finally gave.

“You sure you’re alright?” Ira asked quietly, following him into the old house. After just a few moments inside, Ira decided the cigarette might be a bad idea as well and leaned down to snub it against the rubber sole of his boot.

There was a recliner shoved back into one corner with a floral sheet draped loosely around it--his great aunt’s favorite chair. He wanted to crawl up into it like he had when he was younger, wanted to curl against Jemma’s bony hip so she could tell the other cousins to stop prodding, or tell his mother not to be angry that his elbow had caught one of Jemma’s figurines as he ran down the hall. He stood there quietly for a moment, longer than he meant to, and just looked at the old chair until he felt fingers brush up against his arm. He didn’t jump, just slowly turned to Ira, who was looking at him the way a concerned stranger might look at a lost child.

“There’s a lot of places outta town we could go to sit in the truck and talk,” Ira said. “Any reason you always want to come out here?”

“Just feel more at ease out here, I guess. Safer. Whole family did. Probably why Uncle Jim couldn’t bring himself to sell the place.” That, and the fact that it was a bit too far out of the way to be worth the time and energy to get it sold--or even to get it to a place where it could pass inspection, for that matter. Each floorboard creaked and moaned ominously as they passed over them and the floor had begun to dip and sag in places. The roof, too, had begun to warp slightly with age and disrepair.

Ira smiled, “I think every family has one of those houses where everybody just kinda gathers.” His hand left Atlas’s arm as he started venturing further into the house, far enough that

the rapidly dulling daylight from the front door no longer illuminated the obstacle course of boxes and old furniture that populated every room. Ira dug his phone out of his pocket to use as a flashlight. The house had always been a little shoddy in its construction, and in its new life as extended storage, it almost seemed frail.

As much as he'd missed the old house, it also hurt to see it like this, just as it had hurt to see his great aunt Jemma lying in her hospital bed. She had always seemed so thin but still untouchable--immortal, in Atlas's childhood mind. Her death had shaken something loose in him. His mother had claimed, over the phone to a friend of hers when she was sure he wasn't listening, that it was like losing Jemma had put the fear of god into him--that it had finally began the sluggish march to adulthood by making him confront a horrible reality. It was a tragedy that he had to find her like that, she'd told her friend, but he'd be stronger in the long run. When the middle school guidance counselor had told her she needed to take him to see a therapist nearly two hours away, she'd nearly laughed in his face. Her son was fine, she'd told him, and better behaved than he'd ever been.

"Jesus, there's a lot of spiders in here. *Goddamn*," Ira announced, flinching away from a densely built web in the doorway connecting the front room and the kitchen. Atlas can't help but think that Ira still said 'Goddamn' and other such blasphemies like someone learning a foreign language--a little hesitant but nevertheless enthusiastic. Despite all the darkness and the creepy-crawling new inhabitants, the house still couldn't quite manage to look *scary* in the way Atlas expected of abandoned places. His aunt Jemma had decorated the place like one might decorate a dollhouse. The peeling pink floral wallpaper of the front room and the cracking sunny yellow paint in the kitchen now gave it the impression of a toy that no one had played with in a while, but most of the house was still far from intimidating. Not to Atlas, at least. Ira was peering

around corners and investigating piles of cardboard boxes like he was on one of those paranormal investigation shows they both enjoyed.

“Hey,” Ira said, stomping his foot and making the floor groan with the impact, “this one’s got your name on it!” Atlas’s eyes followed the trails of light from Ira’s phone down to one of many grey plastic tubs haphazardly strewn around the house. Most were labeled things like “Christmas Decorations” or simply “Junk.” The Walkinses, Atlas thought, were not a family that was particularly good at letting things go. It was a trait that annoyed his mother to no end, and she had railed against her husband’s sentimentality constantly. The tub Ira is kneeling in front of, however, had “ATLAS” written in glittering gold permanent marker on the lid. He didn’t recognize the container or have any real guess at its contents.

“Open it if you want to,” Atlas told him with a little shrug. “Probably some of my old stuff Ma packed up without me knowing.” In the little bit of light they had, he could see Ira brighten up at the permission. The tub had two unnecessarily complex closing mechanisms on either side that Ira couldn’t quite maneuver with one hand as he also held their only light source. Atlas watched for a moment before realizing, with a little stab of shame that it had taken this long, that he should probably be helping. He knelt down beside Ira and helped him to pry off the lid.

“I’m not even sure why you want to see it. Probably just old toys and junk.” Atlas said, feeling his face get hot.

“I know, I just want to see if we were into the same kinda things when we were kids.” Ira began digging through the box that, sure enough, was filled to the brim with entangled piles of action figures and toy trucks covered with peeling stickers. “I kinda want to know if we would have been friends.”

Atlas snorted, “I doubt it. I was an annoying little shit. Couldn’t slow down for a minute.” Ira was two years behind him in school and had been homeschooled until fifth grade. This was enough of a divide that they had only a passing knowledge of each other’s existence until they had both already graduated.

“I don’t believe that,” Ira said. His digging paused for a moment. Atlas could hardly see him now, with his phone light still directed into the plastic next to where he sat cross-legged on the warped wood floor. Still, even in the low light he could feel himself being stared at. Or stared toward, maybe. If it were anyone else, he was sure he’d start to feel a little itch of anxious energy, but he never really minded as much when Ira stared. It didn’t feel so prying as a stranger’s eyes did. Atlas didn’t have very many distinct plans for the future, but he’s pretty sure he wouldn’t mind if Ira kept looking at him.

There was a word for that, he reminded himself. He didn’t want to say it. Too sentimental.

Ira dug around a bit more, and Atlas could see the rough shape of him nodding approvingly at a few of the toys he found.

“Oh,” Ira said. “There’s an old blanket in here, I think. Something soft.”

“What? Let me see.” Atlas shifted even closer so he and Ira were nearly shoulder-to-shoulder. Ira playfully bumped their shoulders together. From the bottom of the plastic tub, Ira dragged up a small, handmade baby blanket and handed it over to Atlas. He adjusted the little light so Atlas could see better. He recognized the blanket, however faintly he could make out the details of it. It was a fragile little thing, faded royal blue with four squares of blocky hand embroidery depicting little teddy bears and toy cars. Ira continued looking through the box,

finally pulling the light away to inspect an Optimus Prime figure with one of his arms snapped off.

“You were rough on your stuff as a little kid, huh?” Ira snorted, pulling out some more broken and pieced back together toys. A few action figures had been secured with superglue. “Like Sid from *Toy Story*, holy shit.”

Atlas couldn't look away from the blanket for more than a moment. His aunt Jemma had made it for him. He'd dragged it around like a lifeline until his mother had decided he was too old.

The longer he looked, the more anger started to bubble in the pit of his stomach. He was angry at his mother, for bringing it out here to rot with the rest of the things his father's family couldn't throw away. He was angry at himself, for not even noticing it was gone. How had he forgotten it so easily?

He was angry at Ira, too, for treating this whole thing like a scavenger hunt. Even if that clearly wasn't fair. Even if he'd given him no real, true indication of the kind of weight this old house carried for him. He knew it wasn't right, but knowing better did little to temper his gut reaction.

“I'm gonna go sit out on the porch a minute, I think,” Atlas said.

“Oh. Alright. I'll come out with you--”

“No. You can stay here. Look around some more. Dig through some more of these old boxes.”

“Come on, Atlas. I don't want to pry like that, I just wanted to see--” Atlas knew if he heard Ira out, if he sat down and talked about this like a grown-up, he wouldn't be able to hold

onto the boil-over emotions. None of this was Ira's fault, not really. He just wanted to feel that burning anger for a little while longer.

“Look through whatever you want. Open every box. It doesn't matter. Nobody else gives a shit about this old house, anyway.”

Ira didn't say anything else, but he didn't follow Atlas outside either. Atlas kicked a few boxes out of his way as he went, making a little path for himself in the dim light with the added benefit of taking his misplaced rage out on something he wouldn't regret later.

As expected, his anger started to dissipate nearly the moment he was outside on the front porch all alone. It wasn't Ira's fault if he didn't take none of this--this slice of the mountainside, this little decaying house, its contents, whatever the hell it was they were doing together--quite as serious as Atlas did. Atlas had never really asked him for serious, after all. Their usual interactions were easy and joking. That was part of what Atlas liked about him, on a regular day. It no longer felt much like a regular day.

He sat down in a metal patio chair so rusted he was honestly shocked it could still hold his full, considerable weight. Except for a bit of moonlight, it was entirely dark out. He could faintly hear the creek trickling by from across the gravel road. Even without his aunt living out here it still gave Atlas a slow, lulling sense of peace that he had trouble finding back in town. Atlas stayed like that for a while, letting the cool night air seep in past the thin flannel of his shirt and run a chill down his back. As an adult, Atlas had never really taken to being the “outdoorsy type” so much as he was as a kid, but he could easily make an exception for his aunt's property. He knew this place better than he knew anyone, and not even the lingering painful memories could quite outweigh its soothing quality. For a while he sat there, holding tight to the silence and calm, clear air.

He meant to go back in eventually. He meant to talk to Ira about everything, like a *real man* would, eventually. “Eventually” he told himself, while not moving at all, could be as long as he liked. This is just what he got for touching dangerous things: nothing peaceful, nothing easy.

Eventually, as it turned out, was the moment he heard a horrible crashing noise accompanied by a choked off scream from inside the house.

“Shit, Ira--” He pushed himself out of the rusted chair and stomped back inside, realizing he can barely see where he’s going only when he nearly trips over an old plastic Jack-o-Lantern that had been randomly deposited in the living room. He patted himself down for his own phone to use as a flashlight before deciding he must have left it out in the truck. He followed the path he’d trodden on his way out as far as the kitchen before the steady stream of cursing from Ira helped lead him toward a back bedroom. His aunt Jemma’s bedroom.

“You alright?” he called out into the house. He couldn’t see Ira yet from where he stood, just a stream of light on the other side of the doorway--too bright by far to be emanating from his phone’s flash.

The cursing paused as Ira considered an answer, “I don’t know? I don’t--I don’t think so.” As he said it, Atlas finally got close enough to see why: Ira was sitting on the bedroom floor with one arm cradled protectively against his chest. Next to him was a broken wooden step-ladder and a little red flashlight he must have found. Atlas knelt down close, took the flashlight from the floor, and tried to inspect the injured arm. Ira was breathing so hard Atlas thought he might pass out before he could even tell if the situation was serious.

It was difficult to tell in the low light, even with the aid of the flashlight, but it seemed like Ira’s wrist was already beginning to swell.

“I broke it,” he said, voice a little distant.

“It might not be broken, just sprained,” Atlas told him, trying to gently pull the arm away from Ira’s chest. “You gotta let me--”

Ira shook his head, “No, the ladder thing,” his voice was cracking. In that moment, Atlas thought he sounded so much younger than he was. “I broke it. Can’t believe I broke it...”

“So?” Atlas said, a little frustrated with Ira’s oddly settled priorities. “Nobody *really* cares, whole family just dumps shit out here ‘cause they can’t let nothing go.”

“*You* care,” Ira said, near frantic. “And you’ve been acting weird all day, and I was trying to fix it somehow, and I broke the stupid goddamn ladder, and I was just trying to get the pictures...” Atlas didn’t know what pictures he was referring to, and he barely cared. He couldn’t look away from the expression on his face. Ira looked terrified. What had he ever done to inspire this much fear in another person--another person he *cared about*, deeper than he’d ever really admitted out loud? Had he really seemed that upset?

“Pictures?” Atlas asked. Ira nodded up at a tall cabinet, and Atlas followed his line of sight with the flashlight to a box labeled “Photo Albums.”

“I thought I could get the box down and you might want to go through them or something,” Ira said. “I don’t know. I thought it might make you feel better. We could talk about our weird family hangups. Reminisce. Get to know you better, the way you’re supposed to when--I don’t know, I *clearly* didn’t think this shit through.”

Atlas finally got Ira’s arm away from the curled position against his chest, and had the horrible, sinking feeling that he’d broken something far more important than a dry-rotted wooden ladder. He needed to calm him down. His instinct was to keep Ira talking so he’d focus on something other than the injury, but he had a feeling that his mind was already elsewhere. He

kept as many points of contact as he could, both afraid of putting pressure on the injury somehow and terrified of letting him go for even a moment.

“It’s alright,” Atlas assured him. “We’re alright. I’ve got a first-aid bag out in the truck, come on.” Ira’s legs worked just fine, considering his wrist apparently took the full force of his fall, but Atlas kept a hand steady on the small of his back anyway.

Out in the moonlight, Ira did not look quite like the scared little kid Atlas had once been--terrified that he’ll get in trouble just for breaking something. The fear seemed deeper still, tinged with an uncertainty Atlas knew all too well.

“I’m so sorry,” Ira whispered upward into the clear night sky.

“Me too,” Atlas said. He didn’t elaborate on why and Ira didn’t ask. He was now convinced there will be another, better day for that conversation. A day when Ira wasn’t in what must be immense pain.

“I need a drink,” Ira announced, interspersed every few seconds with more bouts of unhinged cursing.

“I have half a bottle of Pepsi left and there’s Tylenol in the glove box.”

“I guess that’ll have to do it, huh?”

Atlas deposited Ira in the passenger seat and dug around in the back of his pickup until he found the first-aid bag. He wrapped the wrist in an ace bandage to the best of his ability. Ira leaned his forehead onto Atlas’s shoulder and bit into his lip until it started to bleed. Even through the swelling, Atlas could see an odd, unnatural twist to the wrist.

“This is way above my paygrade, I think. We’re gonna have to go to the ER.”

“Oh but Mr. Walkins, *people will talk.*” Ira tried to joke in his best overblown southern-belle-drawl, but the effect was marred by a ragged and pained inhale by the end. Joke or not, he

wasn't wrong. People would always talk. Even nurses, who probably weren't supposed to. It would be nearly two in the morning by the time they made it to the hospital, and Atlas had enough of a reputation to be noticed.

"I don't care if you don't," Atlas told him.

"I don't care. I really don't," Ira said, cradling his good hand through his mousy brown hair. "My parents probably won't even ask. Won't know. I don't think they want to know what's going on with me anymore. I've been staying at a friend's--you know Marnie, I think--for like two weeks. Ma doesn't even ask when I'm coming home anymore."

Once he was sure that Ira's wrist was secured well enough for the drive back, he tossed his medical bag back into the truck bed and climbed into the driver's seat. Atlas winced in sympathy each time they hit a particularly rough patch on the gravel road that led back towards the town of Barlow proper. Even once they hit pavement once again, Atlas had to drive carefully not to hit potholes that might jostle Ira, who was still holding the wrapped wrist protectively close and sucking his breath through his teeth.

"Hey Atlas," Ira asked, voice soft and low as they passed by a little white church house, "do you really think we're gonna be alright?"

There was a pause as Atlas considered it. "Yeah. I think so."

Ira was quiet again until they were nearly at the hospital.

"Do you think your aunt would have liked me?" he asked.

Atlas laid a hand on Ira's knee, squeezed it in a hopefully comforting gesture. He didn't know the real answer. Aunt Jemma wasn't around to clarify. What Atlas did know is what both of them desperately needed to hear, "Yeah. I think she would have loved you."

Family Tradition

Her mama still had breakfast for the whole family on the table every Sunday morning, but they didn't ask Lou to come around much anymore. The tradition had been passed off to various aunts and cousins for a few years in the uncertain times immediately following her grandmother's passing before finally landing at her mother's feet. She had the biggest house, after all. She had the most space downstairs for the ever-shifting catalog of extended family members intent on sharing a weekly meal. Her mother, Jean, had taken on the role more out of obligation than anything else, and Lou could still picture her standing at the kitchen counter, mumbling in misplaced frustration about how there was never enough room for anything, even with all that counter space. Still, despite any grumbling, Jean took on the task with the same single-minded determination she took on most things. It *was* a family tradition, after all.

Lou's birthday had, at the time they started planning this, seemed like the perfect time to take back a little tradition for herself. Lou liked tradition. She liked routine. Half drunk off spiked cider a few weeks back, she'd told her girlfriend how bad she missed those early Sunday morning breakfasts, and Nora had gotten wide-eyed and tipsy-excited at the prospect--though Nora got excited about almost anything suggested to her when tipsy, so maybe her delight shouldn't have been so much of an incentive as it had been. Nevertheless, she'd made an event of it. Lou's Birthday Breakfast. She'd sent an email invite out and everything. It was happening whether the sad, misshapen lump of biscuit dough on her countertop decided to make something of itself or not.

Her own kitchen was nowhere near as big as her mother's. She rented a little house close enough to be within walking distance of her job at the library, mostly so she wouldn't have to worry about finding a ride on the days that Nora had to work. It was an older house, nothing like

the spacious open floor plans of more modern homes--even the ones being built in Barlow. Lou's kitchen was insulated and closed off from the rest of the house, which helped the heat from cooking from quickly seeping into the rest of the house, but likewise ensured that the kitchen was sweltering whenever she used the stove.

Lou huffed out a breath and wiped the sweat from her brow with a red-checkered kitchen towel--leaving a long swipe of all-purpose flour across her forehead. She was now much more sensitive to her mother's complaints about counter space, as she pushed a plate of bacon to the side to make a little more room. She glared at the shimmering-hot bacon grease left in the skillet apprehensively.

"Alright, alright, alright," Lou whispered to herself, certainly more dramatic than making breakfast called for. "You can do this."

Cooking had never been Lou's strong suit, if she was honest with herself. She was a baker by heart, more at ease with the specific instruction and clear measurement baking required. Cooking allowed for--even occasionally *required*--a certain amount of guesswork that left her feeling a little unsteady. Her grandmother had tried to teach her to make biscuits by feeling her way through, by knowing how much flour and butter by sight rather than my measurement, but it had never stuck. Her partner, Nora, cooked when she could. When she couldn't, Lou made one of a few tried-and-true recipes that she felt comfortable with--things she'd honed down to a perfect science.

She also remembered, distinctly, her grandmother trying to show her how to make white gravy for Sunday breakfast. Lou had been ten, and her mother's worried disapproval of her helping in the kitchen at that age had done little to stop her grandmother. Lou hadn't stirred the milk in quickly enough, and it'd been nasty and lumpy and her grandmother, much to her horror,

had served it anyway so everyone could pretend she'd done well. Even her mother, as afraid as she had been that Lou would hurt herself at the stove, acted like she'd done well for a first try, but Lou knew better. She rarely tried to repeat things she so utterly failed at the first time. Lou had never been a strong believer in her own ability to improve.

The bedroom door opened and closed somewhere in the house, the sound nearly lost behind the true-crime podcast Lou had put on for a bit of background noise as she worked.

"You started without me," Nora mumbled, shuffling into the kitchen bleary-eyed and still in her underwear and an oversized T-shirt she'd gotten free at some event. Nora had a ridiculous collection of free T-shirts from an inordinate number of local events, Lou had noticed. She has nearly half a dozen just from volunteering to help Lou out with library events.

"I did," Lou hummed, turning her attention back to the stove. "I told you I was going to start cooking at six. I didn't want to wake you up that early. Should have set an alarm if you really wanted to wake up."

"Should have," Nora told her, sliding up beside her to get a pot of coffee started. Lou liked coffee well enough--though not nearly as much as Nora seemed to love the stuff, but what Lou truly loved was the *smell* of fresh coffee. When Nora pried the lid off the Folgers can with sleep-sluggish fingers and the smell began to permeate the room along with the menagerie of other scents of an early Sunday breakfast, Lou felt herself breathe a little deeper. Nora huffed out a little breath, "You shouldn't have to cook your own birthday breakfast. It just ain't right."

"It's alright. I don't mind too much," Lou said. "I would have woken you. I just-I just want everything to be perfect."

Nora turned to face her fully and smiled, “Of course, I get that. If you want me to help out, I’ll just be an extra set of hands. No input from me at all. Just tell me what you want me to do. What are you working on now?”

“Gravy.”

“Is that right? Looked like you were just staring at a skillet.”

Lou hid her face in both hands and groaned, “I ... might be a little overwhelmed.”

“I don’t understand why it had to be so early,” Nora said. “None of our friends are morning people.”

Lou furrowed her brow a little. “I want it to be the way I remember it, you know?” her voice cracked, and she felt a little flush of shame. This was nothing to be upset over, she knew. She leaned over the stove and turned the heat off the skillet, afraid if she left it on the heat, she’d take this morning from stressful to disastrous. It was stupid to be upset over something so small. Her mother and grandmother had done this every week, and with barely ever a second pair of hands in the kitchen to help.

Nora took Lou’s face in her hands and held her steady. “We’ll get it done, hon,” she said, “and if it’s awful, we’ll call down to the Waffle House and see how many orders of pancakes and bacon we can get for carry-out before the manager tells us to piss off.” Nora had gone to high school with Melanie Blankenship, aforementioned manager, and been friendly enough that Melanie would have no problem going off over the phone if sufficiently provoked.

Lou recognized that Nora was doing her best to cheer her up and it settled a soft little smile onto her face.

“People will be here soon...” Lou mumbled.

“Our friends have never been on time to anything, and you know it.”

“I just wanted to do it right.”

“I know, I know.” Lou knew that, while Nora didn’t have the near-obsessive attention to detail that she did, she was much better at actually getting shit done. Nora didn’t get hung up in the details, and Lou made sure she didn’t gloss over anything important. It worked for them. Lou wrapped her hand around Nora’s wrists where they still held onto her face, and pressed forward for a brief kiss. It was calming, kissing Nora--calming in a way she hadn’t known kissing could be for a long time. In high school, kissing girls had always felt like something inherently followed by the sort of wary adrenaline rush one might get from smoking under the bleachers during gym class. At the time, it was the one thing Lou did that she might get in trouble for--her only rebellion.

“What do we need to do first?” Nora asked, with an almost professional level of focused detachment. Working as a nurse in the OR at the local hospital had made her level-headed at the very least.

“Gravy?”

“It’ll probably get cold.”

“Right. Yeah. You’re right,” Lou said, embarrassed that she was so focused on it. She was always so focused on the things she was sure she wouldn’t do right.

After a few moments of discussion, Lou turned her attention to the slab of biscuit dough on the counter. With a little stab of shame that she can’t do it by memory or instinct, Lou looked up a few videos on YouTube with titles like “RECIPE: How to make PERFECT Southern Buttermilk Biscuits” and watched carefully to make sure she was doing everything correctly. She pined for the practiced ease of her mother and grandmother as they cooked. Maybe that was too

domestic, too traditional, but her grandmother's kitchen had always felt like a place of practiced self-expression. Food felt so quintessential to a history of family life she felt disconnected from.

Thinking about it too much made her chest hurt. There had been no confrontation. No big fight. No one had ever said, "*You aren't part of the family anymore, Louise, because you're a lesbian.*" Except maybe they wouldn't say "lesbian." Maybe they would say something worse, sneer at her about sin and hell and her immortal soul. Or maybe they'd strongly imply it, but dance around the word *lesbian* because what she was just wasn't comfortable. She didn't know what they would say. Did the rest of her family even know? Or had they convinced themselves that Nora was just a friend and that she was just a sad, lonely woman that hadn't found the right man yet--and stopped inviting her to family events for some other unspecified reason? She didn't know. She wasn't even sure if she wanted to know. Her mother knew she was gay, even though Lou had never had a proper "coming out" scene like they showed on TV.

No, her mother had just asked in a quiet, hushed little voice across the kitchen table, if her high school girlfriend was "*more than just a friend.*" She'd heard whispers around town. Lou had just nodded, unable to drag the words out of her throat. Her mother had laid her hand over Lou's from across the dining room table. Her mother had told Lou she loved her between whispery, devastated sounding sobs that made her heart clench in a way she'd never forget.

Then, they had never spoken of it again.

There were days when she wished, in some small, dark corner of herself, that she'd been disowned. That, at least, would feel like a resolution. Then, she would know where she stood. As it stood, everything felt so unsure.

All Lou knew for certain was that her family didn't seem to invite her to anything. Lou added a little flour like the woman in the video tutorial suggested, rolled the now-acceptable

biscuit dough out, and cut perfect little circles with a clean mason jar lid. Beside her, Nora peeled and cut potatoes to be fried. Lou did the only thing she could: She slid the biscuits into the oven and hoped for the best. The two of them had to sort of maneuver around one another in the small kitchen, but neither really minded. It became an oddly coordinated little dance.

“Did your grandma make chocolate gravy?” Nora asked, her voice a little wistful. Lou almost regretted being upset over her own relationship with her family--considering how much worse Nora’s was. She’d had to get a restraining order on her own father, just so he wouldn’t show up at the hospital and harass her at work.

“No,” Lou said, though she was almost sure she’s heard of it before. “Sounds a little gross, to be honest.”

Nora grabbed her chest where her heart sat in mock shock and offense, “No, no! It’s good. It’s like... hot chocolate sludge.”

Lou laughed, wrinkled her nose, and shook her head a little, “You’re not making it seem any better, no.”

“Aw, I’m telling you!” Nora cackled, reaching over Lou’s head to look through one of the cabinets. “I’m telling you, it’s good. We got any cocoa powder? I’ll make some.”

The landline phone rang from the living room, and when Nora moved to go answer it, Lou waved her off, “I’ll get it, I’ll get it. It’s the one day a year it might actually be for me,” she said. For the most part, the only calls they got on the landline were either irritating robocalls or Nora’s coworkers asking if she’d pick up an extra shift for them.

“Hello?” Lou propped the cordless phone between her ear and shoulder and wandered back into the kitchen.

“Happy birthday, sweetheart.” Her mother’s voice, still low with the weight of sleep behind it. “Thought I’d call early in case you had to work.”

“Not working, Mama. I got the day off,” Lou said. Nora turned from the stove to look at her. She had cocoa powder on her shirt (and her hands and a little dusting of it on the edge of the counter and the floor.)

“*Your mother?*” Nora mouthed silently. Lou nodded and watched the way Nora’s eyebrows furrowed and her lips pressed together. It wasn’t that Nora disliked her mother in particular, so much as she was a little wary of family members in a very general sense--a learned caution rather than any natural prejudice. She would certainly never say anything about it directly.

“You’re up awful early, then!” her mother said, her voice crackling over the landline’s shaky connection.

“Hm, yeah. Getting ready for Sunday breakfast.”

“Oh! You’re coming up here this morning?” Lou’s mother asked in such a rush that her words all ran together. She sounded nervous, panicked almost, “I mean that’s alright. We can make room. We just didn’t talk about it. I didn’t know you *wanted to*—”

Lou cut her mother off, a little more terse than she meant to be, “No, no. We’re having a couple people up for breakfast over here.” Something about her mother’s voice in the moment she’d imagined Lou coming over to mingle with the rest of the family solidified into a lump in Lou’s throat. It must have shown on her face, too, because Nora’s worried expression deepened.

“Oh. Well... that’s good. That’ll be nice, I’m sure. Are me and you still having dinner tomorrow evening?” Right. Lou had made that offhand plan with her mother so long ago she hardly remembered agreeing to it.

“Sure, ma. I mean, I’d still like to. I get off work at three, you can just meet me there at the library if you want,” Lou said. She worried her bottom lip between her teeth for a moment, surveying the mess she’d made of her own kitchen in the last few hours. “And do you think you could possibly copy down some of Mamaw’s old recipe cards for me? Maybe take a picture of some of them? I’m feeling a little in over my head here. Didn’t learn enough from her while she was still around, I don’t guess.”

The line was silent for a while, “Of course, sweetheart. I can do that.”

By the time Lou was finished talking to her mother, Nora seemed to be nearly done with her chocolate gravy. She offered Lou a spoonful, and it was certainly something. It tasted a bit like the little chocolate pudding cups her mother had sent in her school lunch mixed with baking flour.

“Good, right?”

“Wow. That’s... an interesting texture.” It wasn’t as bad as it had sounded, at least.

Nora pouted with faux disappointment, “Alright, alright. Maybe it’s an acquired taste. Something you had to grow up with.”

“I’m sure someone’s going to be thrilled to see you made it.”

“I’m sure, I’m sure,” Nora said with a little nod and smiled her best, brightest smile. The edges of her eyes crinkled and Lou could see the barest hint of a dimple in her left cheek. Nora looked at her like she saw her fully and wholly. She leaned against the kitchen counter as residual exhaustion and anticipation swirled together in the back of her head as she tried her best to stay focused on the moment.

“Stressful or not, I’m glad I decided to do this,” Lou said, and Nora swung her arm around her shoulders and pulled her close to kiss her forehead. Lou stumbled a little with it. She

was smiling too, big and bright, the light nervous tension of her phone call faded blissfully into the background noise of her birthday morning. A timer on Nora's phone went off, and Lou pulled a tray of imperfectly browned biscuits out of the oven. Not perfect, but finished. That's what she had to focus on now. Lou wished, belatedly, that she could tap into some sort of hindbrain knowledge of cooking passed onto her through generations--like a thousand little old Scotch-Irish grandmothers guiding her hands--but she couldn't.

On top of the stove, the bacon grease had solidified into a thick, waxy layer of fat in the bottom of her hand-me-down skillet. Her grandmother had used to keep a little jar to reserve rendered fat in while she cooked. As a child, Lou had found it unnecessary or even a little gross to keep jars of fat sitting around in the kitchen. Her grandmother's kitchen, for all the love she'd had for it every Sunday morning, had been disorganized and chaotic in a way that had disquieted her at even a young age. Her grandmother snubbed her nose at the idea of the Tupperware parties that her mother attended, and kept her leftovers in emptied out Country Crock tubs. She wasted nothing, threw away nothing. Lou had once watched her rinse a long strip of used tin foil, fold it neatly, and place it under the sink to be reused later. At the time, Lou had been unable to differentiate her grandmother's particular idiosyncrasies from the lingering aftershocks of poverty. She had a better grasp on it now--the whole shape of her grandmother's life. She'd had to piece it together from bits of conversation with her mother, who didn't even really seem to like to talk about her own childhood.

Lou felt a little spike of anxiety as she turned the stove eye back on and watched the bacon fat slowly melt. It was still such a silly thing to drag at her anxious mind, but she had never liked learning through failure. She tried to go through the motions, but lacked a bit of the careful precision of her mother and grandmother's practiced hands. She didn't cook the flour

quite long enough, and in the end, it wasn't perfect. Edible, surely, but not exactly right. There was a knock at the door, and she settled into the idea that she didn't have the time to worry about it anymore. Nora went to greet whoever it was at the door while Lou finished up what she could.

Before Lou even had time to process what was happening, their little house was seemingly inundated with laughter and sound and bodies. They'd only invited six people, one of whom couldn't make it, but still, in the little rented house, it seemed like a sea of them. Her friend Mae made a beeline to the kitchen to see her. Mae held her arms out in a silent request to hug her, which she nodded and leaned into. Her friend August, whose nickname was Pigeon for some reason Lou couldn't remember, flowed into the kitchen singing "*Happy Birthday*" loudly before he'd even gotten his coat entirely off.

"August," Lou said, because she could never bring herself to call a grown man "Pigeon," "did y'all rent a bus?" She'd hoped to get a little more time to prepare as friends trickled in slowly.

"We carpooled, yeah," he said with a little shrug. "Gas is expensive these days, you know?" Lou expected that he'd make a little joke about the fact that she didn't drive, but he left it at that.

Lou never even got a chance to set the table, as her guests seemed to decide that they'd serve themselves.

"Sit down and relax if you want," Mae said. "I'm sure you've been running yourself ragged." Lou nodded. She couldn't disagree. She realized, distantly, that she felt less nervous about this whole thing now than she had before Nora had woken up that morning. It was much harder to convince herself of failure in a room full of people joking and laughing and wishing her a happy birthday and dipping biscuits in the still-too-hot gravy. As she'd expected, August and a

few of their other friends were thrilled to see Nora's chocolate gravy. It was different from the Sunday morning breakfasts she remembered. She expected that to be the case, but what Lou hadn't quite expected was how nice it felt anyway.

The "party" seemed to stretch on far past breakfast without Lou ever really noticing. It was so much *easier* than she ever expected her life could be. Not perfect, but easy--comfortable, even. Lou nearly suggested having another breakfast like this soon, but looking at the way her friends yawned and wiped the tired from their eyes, she wondered if something closer to brunch might be more their speed.

She was still thinking about how nice the breakfast had gone the next day when she met her mother at a little diner in town. Her mother spent the first several minutes of her birthday dinner checking her over like someone might inspect a thoroughbred horse. Lou almost expected she'd start checking her for lice before the waitress got back with their drink orders. It's fine, she reminded herself. She and her mother had both been cut from the same, exceedingly nervous, cloth.

"You look like you might have lost a little weight," her mother said, hesitant like she wasn't sure if that was an accomplishment or a health concern.

"Just walking more. Nothing's wrong or anything like that."

Her mother was silent for a moment, while Lou glanced out a window and idly ripped a napkin into long strips just to have something to do with her hands.

"I brought you something," her mother said finally, pulling an unwrapped little box from her tote bag and placed it on the table. Lou realized what it was instantly.

"Oh, mom," she said, voice wavering more than she liked in a public setting. "You didn't have to--I just wanted copies of them." She held her grandmother's recipe box close to her chest.

“Do you like it? Should I have gotten you a real gift?” her mother reached across the vinyl table to grasp Lou’s forearm. “You mentioned them and... Well, I think she’d probably just want you to have them.”

“No, no! I love it. Thank you,” Lou said, then forced the emotion out of her voice as the waitress came back to take their order.

As they waited, Lou flipped through the box of handwritten recipe cards. What struck her most were the little revisions, the various places where her grandmother had marked out an ingredient or instruction and replaced it. Many of the revisions were in a different color ink than the original recipe or less faded in a way that made them seem much more recent. Some of the recipes had little notes on the side about humid days or which kinds of flour worked best. She stared at the little signatures of trial and error, and her heart ached in a way that was almost pleasant.

“You know, you could have brought Nora with you, you know,” her mother said. Lou wondered if she’d noticed Nora dropping her off at the diner. “I should have mentioned that yesterday, on the phone. I like spending time just the two of us, but... You could have brought her. She’s basically family.”

“O-okay, mom. Thank you, again,” Lou said. She was sure if she said anything else, she wouldn’t be able to completely hold it together.

“God, I hope those old recipe cards are enough of a gift,” her mother mumbled.

They needed to talk about a lot of things, she realized. They would. Soon. Lou could feel it hovering in the air between them.

For now, though, this was more than enough.

Rotten

When everything in her life went to shit, Magnolia knew exactly where she needed to go first. Because Magnolia Grace was getting the fuck out of Barlow, Virginia.

The trailer she'd grown up in sat nestled in the backwoods for a decade and a half before their happy little family had left it, and with each passing hour since the accident, nature prodded at its edges a little more. Weeds and fungi grew into the cracks in the siding until someone hacked away at them or sprayed them down with some awful, noxious chemical--though her brother avoided that for the most part. Black mold bloomed in corners after heavy periods of rain. Every time she came back to it, Magnolia couldn't help but take notice of the decay. It sat on what was technically her adopted brother's property now, but at this point, Garrett mostly just used the place as a makeshift hunting "cabin" now that he lived in the middle of town. He was going to sell the little sliver of property for what little he could get for it--and likely hauling the trailer off to the scrapyard--eventually, but life had moved too quickly to make arrangements. He'd been more than happy to let her use it for as long as she liked. Garrett rarely asked any questions when she needed his help. Even if she'd called him up and asked for money, he'd just give it to her.

Which is exactly why she couldn't ask. Because Garrett would say yes. Even though he wasn't *really* her brother. Because her parents had taken him in like their own and he'd promised to take care of her. He'd say yes, or his husband would offer it up, or one of her friends would step in, and she'd have enough money to cover rent for November, and then she'd stay in Barlow another month and find another terrible job that let her stay close to people that care about her more than she deserved and everything would straighten itself back out again for a little while and she'd get too comfortable in her shitty little town again.

Her decision to stay at the old trailer for a while had been a mostly strategic one. Out here, no one could convince her that everything would be alright. *That's the downside of being loved*, she thinks. *You let yourself get too comfortable*. Garrett had to love her, because he was her brother--sure he wasn't her brother by blood, exactly, but she'd called him that for so long that the semantics barely mattered. Pigeon had to love her because he loved Garrett. Her friends had to love her, because in a town like Barlow, you found the people who understood, and you held tight. No one with better options, she thought, was likely to stick around. Every boyfriend she's ever had figured it out quickly. Every girlfriend she's ever had has stuck it out a little longer, but she figured their options might be more limited.

So she'd just asked Garrett if he cared that she stay a couple nights at the old trailer. And then turned her poor brother away when he'd asked if she wanted company. Maybe he'd heard something in her voice. Maybe he just wanted to spend some time with her, because he's a good man that deserves a better sister. She didn't know, and she didn't want to think too much about it right now.

Magnolia showed up in her little hand-me-down car--another reminder that her brother was kinder than she deserved--on a dreary, rain-drenched evening. Garrett and Pigeon must have come out ahead of time because the power had been switched on, there were a few staples and snacks in the pantry--all in-date, she checked--and more importantly, a note on the kitchen table that read "call us if you need anything—Gare." Another sentence had been written down and marked out completely. She squinted to read the crossed out section, but couldn't make it out no matter how hard she tried.

The place looked so starkly different than it had when they'd lived there. Magnolia wasn't sure if her memories had casted it in a much better light than it had deserved or if time

had really changed the place that much. Garrett had tried to rent it out for a little while after he'd inherited it, but that had been more trouble than it was worth. The first tenant had been an addict with few other options, the second got laid off a few days after moving in. Her brother dragged his feet for months on evicting them, before deciding that the landlord business wasn't really in his nature.

Magnolia ran her finger down a crack in the wall in the bedroom that had once been her younger sister's after she had moved out. Double-wides, she supposed, aren't really built to last forever. It was stomach-churning, to see Amber's dark, purple-painted walls peeling and cracked. She hadn't spent any significant amount of time here since the car accident, but this room--save for the crack in the wall--seemed almost pristine in comparison to the others.

She wondered if the other people living in the hollow had noticed the way the trailer had seemed to decay in their absence, or if it was one of those things that happened so slowly that you never really saw it--the same way people got comfortable with anything else.

She couldn't bring herself to sleep in any of the old bedrooms. It felt too strange. She took a blanket from Garrett's old room and curled up on the futon in the living room that she's almost certain had been dragged out of her brother's first apartment when he moved. She found a broken handgun haphazardly tossed under it.

She had a nightmare, but every memory of it slipped through her grasp as she woke up. All she held on to was a rolling sense of dread that turned her stomach. She sat at the kitchen table for nearly an hour, still dressed in her sweatpants and T-shirt from the day before, until her stomach settled. She'd packed everything irreplaceable into the trunk of her car and left everything else in her apartment without a second thought. Magnolia laid her life's savings out in front of her. Seven hundred and thirty-six dollars. She'd been saving it for two years, stuffing

crumpled tips into a jar beside her bedside and refusing to touch it for anything--even when she ran out of gas and the week before Christmas and Pigeon had to drive her to work. She'd never paid him back for that. She'd never paid him back for a lot of things. She had taken and taken and taken. He always told her not to worry about it, but she had anyway. She tried not to think about it now.

She didn't have any real, specific plans for the money now. She didn't have any real plans in general. All she knew is that she wanted to get as far away from Barlow as possible. She stared at the cash piled up in front, chewing at her bottom lip slowly and methodically for a while, her chin rested in her hands leaning over the kitchen table. The floor creaked ominously when she so much as shifted in her chair. The weight of her own irrationality started to press down on her shoulders as she realized she had enough in front of her to cover almost two months' rent, and far too little to move out of town. She'd only been unemployed for five days. The high of her nervous breakdown was starting to fade. She chewed at her lip until she could taste her own blood--hot and metallic on her tongue. She was running out of time, she thought, to do this and not look back. Soon, the decay would start to set in. She'd die in Barlow. She'd be buried next to the mangled corpses of her parents and her baby sister. She'd rot here, like the trailer.

Magnolia stuffed the money back into the little glass jar she'd brought it in, put the jar back in her duffel bag, and went back to sleep.

She woke up to a knock at the door that nearly stopped her heart. She assumed it must be Garrett, or maybe a friend of hers that had called him and asked where she was. She considered ignoring the knock for a moment. The oddly insistent rhythm of the knocking set her on edge.

There was something distinctly un-friendly about it, like the time a cop knocked on her door because he “had a few questions” about the older man who lived down the hall from her.

“Who’s there?” she yelled from inside, staying stock-still until she thought to grab the broken gun from under the futon. It didn’t work, but it might *look* intimidating enough if this turned out to be more than a random visitor.

“Who’s in *there*?” an unfamiliar male voice filtered through the door, wavering slightly as though their fear might be equally matched. “Thought this place was abandoned this time of year.” He didn’t sound like a threat, but that was something more difficult to judge than most give credit for. Anyone could be a threat if they wanted it bad enough. She crept close enough to the curtain-covered living room window to carefully peak through. There was a man standing on the porch, but he was apparently alone: long haired and a little scruffy and a good foot shorter than her. He looked like he was nearly a decade her junior, maybe nineteen at most. That didn’t mean too much. People got desperate sometimes. *Anyone could be a threat if they wanted it bad enough.*

“Well. It ain’t,” she replied, trying to get her own voice to stop quivering. “Sorry.”

The man stood still for a few moments, like he was unsure what to do next. Finally, hesitantly, he seemed to back up and off the porch. Mag released a breath she hadn’t realized she had been holding in. She watched the indistinct shadow of him through the sun-bleached curtains until he was gone.

The strange interaction made her heart pound in her throat. It felt odd, unsettling, like a story she was only seeing a tiny part of. Magnolia stepped back a bit and settled on the futon again.

After her nerves settled, she started to look at what was left around the house. It was mostly intact, with even the kitchen table she'd sat at with her family still there. Garrett had left everything that wasn't entirely worn down in place, but he hadn't been too precious with it. The two had handled losing their parents and Amber a little differently. Garrett had immersed himself in the loss for a while, sobbed and raged and cursed, worn their father's heavy winter coat to work for months.

Magnolia had drunk herself to sleep when it got to be too much and tried not to think about it. At the time, she had too much going on to break down. She'd let things bottle up. Convinced herself to take it one day at a time and deal with everything when she had a moment to breathe. It's no wonder she'd had a very public meltdown: If you bottled things up for long enough, the lid would pop off whenever it wanted to.

She found a rabbit trap stashed in the cabinet where her mother used to hide the red wine. The trap had been her mother's too, an ostensibly humane little steel cage that allowed her to catch anything that wandered into her backyard garden, load it into the trunk of her car, and set it off somewhere it probably wouldn't find its way back. Garrett had once jokingly suggested picking them off with his hunting rifle, but quickly admitted they were too cute for him to actually go through with it. She smiled a little to herself at the thought. Her parents had always been supportive to a fault, but they'd always been slightly perturbed by their soft-spoken, openly gay adopted son's interest in hunting. They were both the sort of intense progressive types that sometimes seemed few and far between in a town like Barlow. They could only stomach it, no pun intended, as long as Garrett promised to use whatever he killed for food. He'd kept that promise even after they were gone, and Magnolia had gotten a lot of free venison as a direct result.

She'd never minded her brother's hunting. She'd even tagged along for a while, and he liked having her along even though she was a lousy shot. She was good enough with a knife to make up for it, and Garrett liked that he didn't have to skin anything with her around. He always ended up with mutilated-looking carcasses and unusable pelts when he tried to do it himself. Then her parents began to joke that she was only doing it because Garrett was. That had always stuck with her.

That was why she had never told them about the girls who made her chest ache with a feeling that she, at the time, had no words for. She was afraid of what they might say--that it was a phase, that she was only doing it for attention, that there was only gay or straight and that she should pick one. She was going to tell them eventually. She was always going to tell them eventually. "Eventually" was pushed back farther and farther until "eventually" was a closed casket funeral and a long, silent ride to the graveyard, and tombstones side-by-side. She hadn't even told them then. She'd just stared silently at the grave markers that designated *Loving Mother, Loving Father, Beloved Sister and Daughter*. Three dead people defined by their relationship to the living and her, Magnolia Grace, defined by her relationship to the dead.

She didn't know if Garrett had been spared the depths of her grief because he was a Grace by choice and not by blood, if he was just stronger than she was, or if the two of them had experienced the same depth of grief in isolation. They hadn't talked about the accident much since the funeral. Magnolia did not know which of the possibilities was worse. She needed to take a nap.

When she woke up, someone was knocking on the door again. Whatever emotion was bubbling in the pit of Magnolia's stomach threatened to boil over, and it burned like bile in the back of her throat.

This time, she just answered the door. She swung it open harder than she meant to and it slammed against the opposing wall, and the man--the boy, really--standing on the other side jumped like he'd been shot.

"This place ain't--*isn't* abandoned," she told him. "It's mine. Used to be mine. Doesn't matter. Fuck off." *You have the right to be here*, she reminded herself. *You're still allowed*.

The boy put his free hand up, palm out. The other was clutching a six pack of cheap beer, which he somehow didn't drop. She was not sure he was old enough to drink; though, getting a closer look at him now, she couldn't say with any actual certainty. He had a face that might be 17, might be 25. At least, that was what she told herself. Certainly at least a little younger than her.

"I'm-I'm, uh, sorry," he said, and Mag felt a little bad. "Dad said you were probably Magnolia, and that if I wasn't careful, I'd get shot skulking around people's porches." He motioned to the beer in hand, "So. Peace offering." She wanted to tell him to get off the porch. She wanted him to sit the beer down slowly and back away. She hadn't had a real conversation with another human being in days, and something deep within her was desperate for human connection.

She cleared her throat, "Well. That was nice of you."

"Magnolia Grace. It really is you. Somebody told me you moved up to Ohio... You remember me?" Magnolia searched the boy's face for anything familiar, but found nothing. He had teeth just crooked enough that a family with money would've probably gotten him braces, and long hair that reached to the middle of his back--dyed a deeply unnatural shade of blue-black.

“Sorry, I don’t think so,” she said, shifting away from her defensive stance and leaning against the door.

“Danny Blair?” he said.

“...I’m really sorry, I don’t...”

Danny pointed to a similar looking trailer not far down the road. “Don’t blame you. I was still a snot-nosed little brat when you were in high school. Guess I never made much of an impact.” There were several neighborhood boys when she lived here. None of them had, as Danny put it, made much of an impact., “I didn’t really recognize you either, if it helps. Dad had to remind me who you probably were, said there wasn’t no way Garrett Grace had no woman out here otherwise,” he said, with a derisive little chuckle that Magnolia didn’t like. When she didn’t smile, he ducked his head a little and stared at the slowly rotting wood of the front porch.

Danny handed her the six pack, and Magnolia suddenly couldn’t stand the idea of drinking alone in this old house.

“Want to sit on the porch a minute?” Magnolia asked. “I wouldn’t mind catching up on people in the neighborhood.”

Danny stared back at her for a moment, visibly excited at the prospect, and Magnolia wondered if he just wanted somebody to talk to. There wasn’t much of a reason to come back here otherwise.

“Alright, yeah, hell yeah,” he said, and took a seat in one of the old plastic chairs whose bright white legs were now mottled with green mold, “but there’s not a lot to tell. Most people around our age just left.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do,” Magnolia admitted sheepishly, taking a seat near him. “Lost my job. Just needed to get the fuck outta Dodge. Coming up here is just a step in that path. Needed to clear my head for a day or so.”

Danny nodded his head like he’s listening to a devotional preacher, “Hell yeah. Get the fuck out while you can. This place’ll rot you from the inside out.”

“Don’t I know it,” she said.

“I’d leave if I could. If I had a car, I’d be gone already. I wouldn’t hesitate.”

They sat on the porch for a long while. Magnolia pointedly did not offer him a beer, now almost sure that he’s somewhere between too young and better off without it, but Danny leaned over to grab one anyway, and popped the top off on the rough metal edge of the window sill. Magnolia did not stop him. They talked for over two hours, mostly about exactly what she’d expected: an older guy in the neighborhood who got busted for selling his pain pills, a girl she’d gone to high school with who’d either died of an overdose or something to do with her insulin-- Danny couldn’t remember the entire story, but said that she was skinny like she was on something. Magnolia asked about all the less depressing parts of life on the hollow--marriage and babies and all that--but outside of his own family, Danny didn’t know much about it. He told her a bit about his own friends, but was shy on the details. She told Danny all the things she’d like to do somewhere brighter and bigger, and he told her all the cities he wanted to see before he died. That night, Magnolia counted her money again. It was the same number, but somehow it seemed to be dwindling. She didn’t bother hiding the Mason jar this time, just left it on the kitchen table.

That night, she dreamed of being swallowed into a massive sea of living, breathing bodies in a shining golden city. Her thoughts drowned in the noises of the masses--their

laughing, crying, mourning, breathing, living, and dying. Men and women and people she couldn't clearly define formed a giant mass of life around her, clawing at her clothes and crushing themselves to her side so hard that she started to suffocate from the weight. She loved every moment of it, surrendered herself to the snarling masses of the crowd. She woke up unsure if it had been a nightmare.

The next day, Danny came back, and seemed glad to see she was still here. He brought a shitty little wireless speaker and hooked his phone up to it so they could listen to punk songs about leaving your hometown in the rearview mirror. She screamed lyrics she half remembered, and laughed like a madwoman when a neighbor peeked their head out to see what was going on. Magnolia felt like she was in high school again. She regretted throwing away her battle jacket when she moved into her last apartment. It was closer to alright than she had felt in weeks.

That night, she didn't dream at all.

When Magnolia woke up the next morning, she realized with a horrible little groan that she'd now been there for four days. Danny was already standing on her porch with a bottle of whiskey that she was now almost certain he'd stolen from his father. She didn't know if she had any right to say anything about it. She wasn't this boy's mother, and he was not different than she used to be. He took a long drink and handed the bottle to Magnolia. She wiped off the rim, took a long chug of it, and handed it back. She still didn't invite him inside the house.

When he was sufficiently tipsy, Danny asked quietly, "Did your brother really marry a man, or was that just some shit I heard?"

"He did," Magnolia said, a bit sharper than she meant it to be.

"That... bother you?" he asked.

“I’d say not,” Magnolia said, and then, because she’d had a few shots worth of whiskey or because she just deeply, desperately wanted to say it to someone, “I like women. I like men too, but--I’m bi, I guess is the word.”

Danny’s face paled and he laughed at her, “That’s...a hell of a coincidence,” he said. “Beginning to think there’s more queers on this nowhere-ass mountain shithole than anyone wants to admit.” Danny laughed like it was the funniest joke he’d heard in a while. Magnolia didn’t know what reaction she’d been hoping for, but that certainly wasn’t it. She regretted saying anything at all. It didn’t matter what this stupid teenager thought of her or her brother, but the conversation soured her stomach. The whiskey, she imagined, didn’t help much.

When she didn’t respond, Danny nervously changed the subject. There was a look in his eyes she didn’t understand. Maybe he meant to apologize. Magnolia kept up with the conversation the best she could, but her head was somewhere else entirely.

Finally, Danny asked, “Are you ever actually leaving, man?” and Magnolia didn’t know how to answer. Anxiety bubbled up in the pit of her stomach, and the knot in her chest swelled to a deep-seated pain.

“I’m going for a walk, I think.” She needed to get away. From what, she didn’t really know.

“Want me to walk with you?” he asked. “I’m . . . sorry for making shit weird earlier.”

“Nah. It’s--It’s alright. Just need to clear my head.”

Danny nodded, but he looked almost lost.

She dragged herself out of the chair, and expected Danny to follow suit and go home. He didn’t. Danny Blair just sat still and stared into the liquor bottle.

Magnolia walked until her legs hurt, before she saw it, a little brown rabbit in the ditch with its head caught in the plastic rings that come around a six pack of sodas or cheap beer--like something out of an anti-littering commercial. Her heart sunk. It had probably died very slowly, and now several days ago. The rabbit's eyes had gone milky-white and its mouth hung open in a grotesque, painful-looking grimace. On impulse, Magnolia very lightly touched the tiny, bloated body with the toe of her shoe, sending a horde of insects scattering like the swarm of bodies in her dream.

Somehow, that was the breaking point. Magnolia felt the heat of tears running down her face before she even had time to register that she was about to cry or to push them back. She stumbled a little farther into the ditch line, leaning against the guard rail as she shook and sobbed. She stood there for what felt like an hour, and only a single car went by.

She realized, with a dawning sense of horror after it sped by much too fast to get a good look, that it had looked an awful lot like her own car. She pawed at the pockets of her thin jacket for the keys, but they weren't there.

Magnolia half-ran back to the house shaking with panic, every limb on a kind of autopilot under the stress and tension. She tried to convince herself that she was just seeing things. She tried to push it out of her mind, up until the moment she saw the car gone from the driveway.

There was a long, awful pause before she dragged her nails hard down her face. There must have been some kind of a limit to the level of panic a person could feel all at once, because Magnolia could feel herself hit an invisible wall. Her entire body felt like TV static, like blood rushing back in after the circulation had been cut off.

The front door was open. The screen door had swung shut on its own, but the main door was wide open. She went inside slowly. Every mistake she'd ever made seemed to pile into a single moment.

The worst part, somehow, was that there was still money in the jar. Less, visibly less even, but it wasn't empty. She counted it with trembling fingers. Danny had left her with just under four hundred dollars. About half of what she started with. He'd just left it there.

What kind of bullshit backwards-ass teen punk morality is that? She thought to herself, through the haze of it all, and then she started crying again. And then she started laughing. She was struck between hoping the engine exploded and wishing him the best. What was this kid's plan? Shit, what had her own plan even been? Next to her brother's note on the table, which she had never moved, there was a new note left behind--written on a Wendy's receipt, of all things.

There were a few lines that have been written and marked out... Then: "I'M SORRY." written in hasty, scratchy letters. Magnolia was still laughing. Still crying. She couldn't make out what the written and marked-out lines above the apology said, but she imagined something like *"shit or get off the pot."*

She couldn't believe he didn't take all the money. She knew she needed to call the police. Her chest still hurt. She caught the reflection of her wild, uncombed hair in the kitchen window. They'd probably accuse her of being on something.

She...didn't want to talk to a cop with hard eyes who didn't believe her anyway. She wanted to talk to Garrett. She called her brother.

"Hey, Gare," the low grumble of her brother's voice took the edge off the ebbing and surging panic. "Ye-yeah, I'm still up at the old house. Mind giving me a lift. I'll tell you what happened to my car when you get up here." In the back of her mind, Magnolia knew she still

wanted to get the fuck out of Barlow--someday, somehow--but the thought had lulled in its urgency. She had time.

Putting Out Fires

His older cousin Marnie's "bonfires" were salvation, as far as Kit could tell. She always called them bonfires, even if the little homemade firepit in her yard hardly fit the title. Still, those embers were always a balm for his tired soul. Marnie's house was the only place he truly wanted to be when he went home to Barlow during the breaks from school. She was older, established, divorced now, but with her shit together enough that her life seemed blissfully uneventful otherwise. The house wasn't far enough from the main strip of town to feel truly secluded in any way, but Marnie had her little strip of property propped up against the mountainside and a hedge of pine trees on each side to separate her from the neighbors. "Cozy" was the word that came to mind. He loved his parents and missed his old room while he was away, but there was a certain veneer he painted over himself for the sake of peace. He was himself, but a lesser, passive version--the one that didn't talk about politics at the dinner table and didn't swear and didn't remind them that he wasn't going by "Christopher" anymore. Staying at home was fine. Sometimes he sat in his car for a long time in his parents' driveway, trying to work up the nerve to go inside, but it was fine.

No one at Marnie's house--gathered there currently was his aunt and his odd little collective of close friends from high school--had batted an eye when he'd announced the name switch. He'd announced it to his old friends in a group chat message, sure, but none of them had messed up even once. None of them had asked questions when he'd changed into a summer dress in Marnie's downstairs bathroom in time for the bonfire, either. He didn't want to make a show of it. Didn't want to have to say anything much at all.

His best friend from the time he was eight, Cassidy, said, "That color green looks good on you." Two other friends, Nina and Jenn, nodded in agreement. Marnie looked a little proud

and maybe a little worried, so she didn't say much. Danny, whose reaction Kit had been the most interested in, wasn't there, even though he'd apparently promised Cassidy he would be. That mostly was the end of it, until his cousin called Ira down.

Ira had, until now, only really been known to Kit as "that boy that's staying with me" by his aunt in her weekly phone calls to him at school and the occasional offhand mention in his friend's group chat. Kit was a little unclear on how his cousin had even met him, but he had a feeling Cassidy had something to do with it. As the only one of the group who wasn't away at college most of the year, she was much more plugged into daily life in Barlow. Nina and Jenn knew him from high school, allegedly. It felt as though he'd been swallowed into the fray of Kit's life when he wasn't paying any attention. When Ira came bounding down the stairs from the little spare bedroom, Cassidy slung her arm around his shoulders, cackling and swinging him around the kitchen like the perfect picture of an older sister. When he noticed the cast on Ira's upper arm, Kit was no longer sure it was a good idea.

"Your man gonna be here for the bonfire?" Cassidy asked, and Ira ducked his head like he was a little embarrassed. They all stood in a wide circle around the little rickety old bar cart in Marnie's kitchen. Kit thought it must feel, to Ira, like having an audience. Nina leaned over and took a sugar cube from the little plastic decorative bowl on the bar cart, doused it in cheap whiskey, and popped it into her mouth.

"Far as I know," Ira said. "He's got a 12-hour shift tomorrow evening, we'll see how long he stays..." The mischievous glint in Cassidy's eye trailed its way up to Kit.

"What about you?" she asked.

"Hmm?"

"Your man," she said, and Kit snorted back a laugh.

“Who?” Kit knew who she meant, but he refused to give in to her teasing.

“Our beloved fuckup. Danny.” Kit didn’t particularly like it when his other friends called Danny a fuckup, even with the endeared little lilt that colored Cassidy’s voice as she said it. It seemed like a self-fulfilling prophecy.

“Is Danny my man now? News to me.” Kit was tired of this running joke. Danny’s sexuality had always been a bit of a question, but Kit was long past being worried about the answer. “He don’t even really talk to me unless he’s drunk. Or high.”

“Said he was gonna be here. Said he misses seeing you,” Cassidy said, then shrugged it off.

Ira looked a little confused. “I graduated with Danny. I always thought he was going to marry that Belcher girl. Whatever happened there?”

“She dumped him,” Kit said. “And last summer he followed me and Cassidy around like a second shadow.”

At that point, Marnie told everyone to go outside and help her get the fire started before it got too dark. Ira caught his attention on their way out, pulling him aside and away from everyone else.

“Hey. Kit. Uh, I hope this ain’t rude to ask, but what pronouns do you want me to use for you?” he asked, nervous like he was waiting for Kit to get angry. “I thought I heard Marnie use male ones but, like, I don’t want to be an asshole.” It was a line of questioning Kit wasn’t unaccustomed to, but not one he particularly expected to get in Barlow. But it was kind of sweet, he had to admit Ira is a little shorter than he is, with a bit of a baby-face and slightly uptilted brows that made him look a little worried all the time. Even when smiling.

“He, him, and his’ works just fine. For now. I’ll keep you updated if anything changes, on that front,” Kit said, hoping he could pass the awkward response off on being caught off-guard. Ira looked at him as if he’d been entrusted with near-sacred information, “Identity is... complicated. I ain’t figured it all out. Just don’t . . . call me a man, I guess? That always feels a little uncomfortable. It’s something I’m still working out.” For Kit, gender was a bit like a live wire in his head that he tried not to touch. If he thought about it for too long, an ache would bloom in his chest. He hoped it wouldn’t be like that forever. *Just don’t call me a man*, he wants to tell Ira, but trying to formulate what he was or wasn’t took away the easy nature of the evening as he’d planned it in his head—where he could sit around the fire with his friends and it wouldn’t matter if he was a man or a woman or, more likely, a grey in-between area that was difficult to articulate.

“Complicated. I get that . . . Yeah, I get that,” Ira said. “Shit with my parents is complicated.” Suddenly Kit could not look away from the cast on his arm. An awful sinking feeling settled in the pit of his stomach. Ira noticed, after a moment.

“Oh,” he laughed, twisting the injured arm like he was inspecting it, “I really messed myself up, huh? Fell off a ladder. Sat in the ER for five hours before they’d give me pain meds.” Kit could believe that easily. Some of the doctors, mostly the ones who weren’t from around there, thought on some level that everyone in town was an addict. Before they could discuss it any further though, Marnie yelled in to ask if they ever planned on coming outside.

Ira’s “man,” as it turned out, was Atlas Walkins. Kit had known Atlas fairly well in high school, since they were in the same grade and orbited the same groups of friends. He was a tall, imposing person even when they were teenagers. Now, he looked a little bit like a child’s idea of a lumberjack--complete with a beard and a buffalo plaid shirt with its sleeves rolled up to his

elbows. Next to everyone but Cassidy, he seemed almost giant. He'd once gotten handsy with Atlas in an abandoned gas station parking lot. It would probably be very awkward seeing him, if it hadn't been less of a connection and more of an attempt to stave off creeping boredom.

As it stood, Atlas seemed glad to see him. He parked his pickup halfway in Marnie's yard and slowly made his way over to the little gathering of people standing around a patch of lit kindling. If he felt weird about seeing Kit, he didn't show it at all.

"Hey Chris," he said, smiling in Kit's direction. "Ain't seen you in forever, how've you been?"

"He's going by Kit, now," Ira blurted out, before Kit could say anything at all.

"Oh," Atlas said. "Shit, sorry."

Kit snorted, "That's alright, you're fine." Outside of his group of close friends, no one in Barlow really knew. Kit was, ostensibly, still a shortened version of his given name. He was mostly afraid someone would ask, and that he wouldn't be able to tell them the truth--that it sounded less masculine, that it just felt better. Atlas didn't pry. He just settled into helping Marnie build up the fire until it's something worth looking at. Kit felt his phone buzz in his pocket, but didn't pay any mind.

He wished Danny was there. He felt stupid for wishing Danny was there. He was a little chaotic on the best of days, but Kit really did like having him around. Even at nineteen he had a kind of frenetic, punk-kid energy that Kit had always been drawn to when he was younger.

Before long, everyone had something alcoholic in hand except Ira, because he was nineteen and Marnie cared about that sort of thing, and Kit, because even low doses of SSRIs and alcohol did not mix.

Atlas got a little portable speaker and a blanket from his truck. He played Johnny Cash just loud enough to be comfortable background noise and Jenn tried to see how close she could get her hand to the fire without burning herself. Cassidy started singing along to *Ring of Fire* so loudly that Kit was sure the neighbor could hear. The atmosphere settled into something comfortable and easy. Marnie settled back into a fold-out chair and watched them all. Kit had asked her once, why she let all these people hang around the house she had worked so hard for. She had friends, but they never hung around for days like his friend did. She told him she liked being a soft place to land when people needed her.

She had always been like a mother to him, even if she was only about twelve years older. He didn't know how to thank her properly. He just clinked his glass-bottle coke against her beer as Nina and Jenn danced a tipsy waltz around the fire, and told his aunt it was nice to be home.

His phone buzzed in his pocket again, and this time he actually checked it. A call from Danny, probably to let him know why he couldn't make it. Kit ignored it, but promised himself he'd call him back later. Atlas wrapped his arm around Ira's midsection and Ira turned a little to kiss him. Kit wondered if that was the first time they'd ever done that with other people around. Atlas smiled like it was. Cassidy dragged her chair over to Kit so she could sit with him, chattering about everything that mattered and nothing important all at once. The smell of the fire pit clung to the cool air around him. It smelled like living and dying--hearth and house fire. He almost understood why Jenn liked to hold her hand too close to the flames.

"Danny's been calling me," Kit told her, voice lower than the music--Dolly Parton, now--so the others wouldn't hear.

"You think you should maybe answer?" Cassidy said softly as her steel-toed boot tapped the ground to the rhythm of "*Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jo-lene.*" "I know I joke about him

sometimes, but really he has been asking about you. He cares. He's been going through it, but he cares."

"Going through what?" Kit asked. Cassidy looked at him like she couldn't say. Kit hated feeling like everyone else knew something he didn't, but that was the danger of moving away. When he'd lived here it seemed like life in Barlow moved at a crawl, but once he was gone, he'd realized it was at about the same pace as everywhere else. It'd move on without you once you were gone. The reality that Barlow was not the same as he'd left it just a few months ago when the semester started up, even the parts that he'd missed like a phantom limb, hit harder than he expected.

"What? You think he's in love with me?" Kit said. "He ain't." *And what would you know about it anyway, Cass?* He thought, but didn't say. Because Cassidy had never really felt that way about *anyone*. She'd told him once that she thought she was "wired different." They'd never had an in-depth conversation about the words and labels that might fit. Of course, they hadn't talked specifically about his questions about his gender identity, either. He wondered if talking about it made it too real.

Danny called again. Kit picked up.

"Chris--Kit-- Oh thank god." Danny sounded absolutely frantic, hoarse like he'd been crying for days. "I fucked up, I fucked up so bad."

Kit sighed, "There'll be other days to sit around the fire an shoot shit, Danny. I'll be in town all--"

"I stole a car, Kit," Danny sobbed. "I fucked up, I fucked up, I fucked up." There was something in his voice, in the gravity of it, that told Kit he was not joking.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Kit said, sounding like a distant whisper to his own ears, because what else was there to say?

The next half hour was a flurry of hushed-toned panic and dousing the cozy little fire and everyone rushing around frantically but doing nothing that seemed all that productive. A few long moments of Cassidy stomping the embers down passed in stony silence. Stunned silent himself, Kit had handed the phone off to Cassidy who, after a lot of yelling, had hung up and told everyone else what was happening. Kit felt numb. He sat down at Marnie’s kitchen table with his head in his hands, pushing back the rolling nausea in his gut.

Cassidy came up behind him and laid a gentle hand on his shoulder, the way she used to when he’d get overwhelmed by too many people and too much noise in the hall between classes.

“You alright?” she asked.

“Someone I consider a friend just called to admit a crime.”

Cassidy laughed, and it was hard to blame her for finding humor in it. “I mean, yeah. Welcome home, hon. Marnie thinks we should go get him.”

“What?”

“Atlas has been listening to the police scanner thing he keeps in his car. Doesn’t seem like anyone called in a stolen car yet.” Cassidy sat down beside him, she looked so tired.

“Maybe he was just kidding around after all,” Kit said, hopefully.

“Maybe. He gave me a real specific location, though.”

“Going to get him would be a real bad idea,” Kit said. It wasn’t a protest, not really. When they were younger, he’d felt like he needed to be the voice of reason. He’d been quiet and reserved--mostly because of untreated depression--and people thought he should be the one to keep his rowdier friends from doing something stupid.

Right now, though, he really did want to do something stupid.

“Probably,” Cassidy said. “But as much as I give him shit, Danny is like a little brother to me.” She sighed deeply and rubbed at her tired-looking eyes. “You and Ira are probably the only ones sober enough to drive. I’m not dragging Ira into this; he barely knows Danny. You shouldn’t have to get yourself involved. I’m just sorry we’re fucking like this.”

“Who’s ‘we’? Danny’s my friend too.”

Cassidy’s face split into an anxious grin, “Me and Danny. Rest of y’all at least *trying* to make something of yourself. What am I doing, except working at Walmart dragging you all back to this shithole town just to sit around doing nothing until . . . You don’t have to be a part of this mess. You’re *not* a part of this mess. I’ll call somebody to--”

“No,” Kit said. “No, no. Don’t do that. I’ve been looking forward to seeing you all for *weeks*. I got friends at school, but y’all are *family*.” Kit remembered the night he’d driven his first car into the ditch line on his way home from Cassidy’s house. Terrified of what his parents might do, he’d called Marnie. Marnie had called a buddy of her now ex-husband’s, and he’d hauled his car out of the ditch and popped the dents out. Marnie never told his parents, and paid the guy out of her “rainy day fund.” *It’s nothing*, she’d told him afterwards, *you just do things for family*.

Somewhere behind them in the kitchen, Jenn and Nina were still huddled around a bottle and talking to each other in hushed, concerned-sounding tones. Through the ceiling, he could hear Marnie doing something upstairs. Kit dropped his car keys onto the glass top table with a little clatter.

“Alright,” Kit said. “Fuck it. Let’s at least go see about him.” Only then did Kit realize that he was still wearing the dress. “I should change, before we go.” Cassidy opened her mouth

like she meant to say something about it, then snapped shut again with a little click. Changing clothes felt like a little defeat, but if the cops showed up, it would be safer to be the person his parents thought he was.

The drive was mostly silent. Cassidy turned on the radio for a while, but the only Top-40's station you could pick up in Barlow faded into a gospel choir, and as another signal intercepted, she turned it off and leaned back heavy against the seat of his beat-up-but-paid-off little car and sighed. Kit reached over the console to pat her knee.

Danny and his stolen car sat in a wide spot across the road from the coke ovens. There was a bit of space there, but they'd barely be off the main road. There were a few ways in and out of Barlow, but Kit would always think about the coke ovens when he thought about leaving. The main road out of town passed right by them, and they always seemed to mark the difference between home and everywhere else. As a kid, he'd thought these massive, smoke-billowing structures were factories where they made the clouds. Fifteen years and a minor in environmental science later, Kit looked at the dark smoke pouring up into the atmosphere and imagined the unmaking of the world in slow motion. It made a fitting background for the scene they pulled up on. He'd stolen the damn car, and he hadn't even made it out of town.

Danny got out of the car. Cassidy rushed over to Danny so quickly that, for a moment, Kit thought she was going to hit him. Danny must've thought so too, because he flinched in a way that made Kit's stomach roll with nausea. Like he expected to be hit. Cassidy didn't hug him either, as would've been his next guess. She just took hold of his worn-out T-shirt and let him crumple against her.

“I’m a fuckup,” Danny said, at least that’s what Kit thought he was saying muffled against.

“You aren’t,” Cassidy told him sternly as she pulled away and fished her phone out of her pocket.

“I am. You’ve *said* I am.” Danny stopped speaking long enough to sob again, “I know it by now.” Even in the dim light of his car’s headlights, Kit saw something familiar and personal in the panic in his eyes.

Cassidy seemed distracted by something else. “Shit. This is Magnolia’s car.”

“You know her?” Kit asked.

“Vaguely? We used to work together, gave me a ride a few times--Jesus, why Magnolia?”

“It wasn’t . . . a sober decision,” Danny said. “I just wanted to get out of Barlow. I don’t know. I wanted to open up and she shut me down. I don’t know. I just . . . don’t want to die in this town.” Cassidy mumbled something about needing to make a call and climbed back into Kit’s unlocked car. A truck passed by, and Kit was suddenly and acutely aware of how out-in-the-open all of this was. Even if the owner of the car hadn’t called the cops, someone was bound to eventually.

“Well. Why’d you stop, then?” Suddenly exhausted, Kit sat down on the gravel by the stolen car. Danny sank to the ground to meet him.

“I . . . didn’t . . .” Danny said. “Or, not willingly. Engine started smoking a little. I think I fucked it up.” Cassidy, the only of the three with any idea how cars worked, tried to pop the hood to take a look, but could not see any immediate issue. Danny’s gaze trailed over to the coke ovens, “You think that’s a sign or something?”

“No,” Kit said. “I think you stole a shit car, and got lucky you didn’t hurt somebody. Barlow isn’t purgatory, man. It’s a town with problems everyone wants to ignore, like just about everywhere else.”

“I just don’t know who the hell I am anymore. I don’t know who I want to be.”

“Yeah. I get that.”

Danny still wasn’t looking at him as he said, “There’s a lot of things I should probably talk to you about before you leave.” There was a brief pause. “If, somehow, Cassidy pulls a miracle out of her ass and I don’t end up in jail tonight.” Kit watched the ovens too, the bright orange flames at the top of the stacks slipping up into the night sky.

As if on cue, Kit’s passenger side door opened up and Cassidy swung her legs out.

“Called Atlas. He said that it didn’t seem like anyone had reported a car stolen yet,” she announced. “Still had Magnolia’s number in my phone from when we worked together. Sent a long, pleading voicemail. Cassidy followed their line of sight across the road, until they all three stared into the flames.

“What do I do now?” Danny asked no one in particular.

Cassidy hunched her shoulders in a jerky shrug, “Pray for the best, I reckon.”

“We’ll figure it out.” Kit added, “We’ll have to. Just got to put out one fire at a time.”

Crowded

There weren't any gay bars in Barlow. Obviously. There weren't any other kinds of bars, either, so Nina tended not to chalk that one up to discrimination or anything. There were a few restaurants who'd fought hard for their liquor license in a largely dry county, but the little Mexican restaurant on Main St. wasn't exactly the atmosphere most wanted from a bar. Nina had agreed to come because Jenn asked her to. That was just how things tended to go. She'd even pretended to be excited about it. Jenn might have decided not to go if Nina clearly didn't want to. Nina would pretend to be excited for these little adventures that Jenn wanted, and Jenn would pretend that coming back to Barlow during breaks didn't make her want to die. They'd been doing an odd, winding dance around each other for years now--each trying to accommodate the other and each failing by little measures.

Jenn was working on a graphic design degree at a little artsy college up in NoVa, and even when she came back for breaks, she wanted to get as far away as possible. Nina hadn't even truly moved away, just got an apartment closer to the community college where she was trying to get her nursing degree. She loved Jenn when she was around, but there was no hold to it. It was something neither of them expected to last forever. They weren't quite *together*, but they couldn't quite separate, either. They'd promised one another to stay friends. It was a friendship neither felt they could afford to lose.

She was going to get a job in Barlow--stick around for her niece and her mom and all the other people she loved that weren't going anywhere, and Jenn was going to find somewhere that fit her better and she wasn't going to look back. Nina had mourned that loss already, but that didn't mean she couldn't squeeze a little extra joy out of borrowed time. Even if that meant driving two and a half hours to go to a drag show where the music would certainly be too loud

and there would be too many people all standing too close to her and it would all be worth it if it stripped the glassy, far-off look out of Jenn's eyes. So, she was driving across the state line towards a bar she didn't want to go to, for a girl that wasn't quite her girlfriend anymore.

Which was fine, she told herself. And perfectly rational.

Nina had sort of hoped that hanging out at Marnie's would do the trick, but that had gone sour so quickly that, nearly a week later, Nina was still trying to straighten it out in her mind. Nina's soft spot to land after a hard week of classes had turned into a furious den of emotional havoc.

In the dimming evening light, Jenn leaned over the center console to bump her head against Nina's shoulder and smile up at her softly. The little, affectionate gesture made Nina's heart hurt, even though she knew it shouldn't.

"You think Danny's going to be alright?" Jenn asked, because the last they'd seen of him he looked like he'd been wrung dry.

"Eventually," Nina said. "That lady said she wasn't going to press charges, right? Just got to figure out how to pay to get the car fixed and shit."

Jenn shrugged. "I guess that's nice of her..." she said. "I heard she got fired for showing up to work drunk or high or something like that."

"Oof."

"Cass said most of her family died not too far back, too, and she just started drinkin' herself to death." Jenn didn't move her head from Nina's shoulder. Jenn had dyed her hair a deep, dark-red color nearly a month back, but the black roots had begun to show. Nina wondered if she'd let her help her dye it again before she left for NoVa in a few days.

"That's fucked."

“Everything is always fucked back home. Are you surprised?”

Not everything, Nina wanted to say, *and not always*, but she didn't want to press the issue. She knew she wouldn't like where it led.

The bar itself was fairly innocuous from the outside. It was a sizable white building with a simple neon sign that read “Rumors” with a little rainbow on one side of the “R.” Nina had been there a few times with her friends, but she'd never remembered much about it. This marked the first time she wouldn't be able to drown her social anxiety in Jack and Coke. Inside, it looked much more like the kind of place you'd want to spend your time. Rumors was always surprisingly nice, for a gay bar in a less-than-metropolitan area--though it was certainly a bigger town than Barlow was. Not huge or extravagant like some of the clubs she'd seen in movies, but leagues better than some of the shady little spots closer to home that her acquaintances from school had dragged her to.

The older man who checked her ID made pleasant small talk, and it was early enough in the night that it wasn't too crowded when they got inside. Nina felt alright, even comfortable.

“God. It's dead in here,” Jenn mumbled. “I don't know why you wanted to leave so early.” Nina shrugged her shoulders a little and headed towards the bar to get something non-alcoholic to drink while Jenn staked out a table. A little group of older men was gathered at the bar talking and laughing amongst one another. They had the air of comfortable regulars. They had the sort of comfortable air that her little group of friends had begun to cultivate before the smattering of college acceptance letters had spread them across the state. She bought herself a Red Bull and returned to Jenn at the little table she'd managed to find for them.

They just talked for a while. The music wasn't too loud yet. It was less than a private conversation, but it was alright. She felt alright. Jenn left her at the table to go get her first drink, but she felt alright.

She hated how much she missed high school, when she and Jenn spent almost every day together--finding little hideaway spots on the top of the mountain where no one else was ever likely to see them and spending hours just the two of them. Nina had always loved the mountains, the way they felt like a place out of regular time. She was comfortable there, pulled up into a little hollow.

Jenn didn't come back with her drink. Nina looked around for her, afraid to get up and lose the table, and caught a glimpse of her in conversation with a tall person in a very expensive-looking dress. After a while, she moved on to someone else, then to the now sparsely populated dancefloor. Nina wondered, bitterly, why Jenn had bothered to get a table if she had no intention to return to it.

It wasn't long before a crowd started to filter into the bar, closing in on Nina as she fiddled with the buttons on her shirt idly. Too many people. Too much noise. All around her, patrons greeted each other like old friends. There was a community gathered there, not as massive as it would be in a huge city, but present. Real.

One wall of the bar was covered in reflective, metallic tiles that acted a bit like funhouse mirrors. Nina caught a glimpse of herself in one of the tiles, and thought to herself that she looked a bit like a teenage boy who'd been stood up at prom--in her button-up shirt and carefully pressed dress pants. There was nothing stopping her, she thought, from leaving the table, from following Jenn into the crowd and enjoying herself. She'd driven there to hang out with Jenn, hadn't she? Everyone else seemed to be having a good time. She studied her own hands for a

moment, dry cracking skin from too much hand sanitizer at school and rubbed raw to almost bloody from the way she couldn't seem to stop picking at herself. The little stamp the man at the door put on her hand to show she'd paid entry was supposed to be a little rainbow, but in pure black ink it looked more like a crooked, upside down tree.

"You're alright, you're alright," she told herself. A song she didn't recognize started to play, and a group of women at a table nearby started screaming excitedly. She kept staring at her hands. Jen would leave to go back to school in just a few days. She was wasting this opportunity to hang out, Nina reminded herself.

Someone brushed up against her shoulder unintentionally on their way to the dancefloor, not hard enough to hurt, but enough to make her yelp. She felt the point of contact humming against her skin. Everything was too much, too heavy, too unlike how she'd imagined the evening going. She took another sip of her Red Bull, and imagined being the sort of person who might say "fuck it, I'll drink anyway and figure it all out later." She imagined a less practical Nina, one who didn't strive for a respectable job that let her help take care of her parents, one who'd followed her girlfriend to college instead of promising they could still be best friends. Where would that Nina be now? Would she still be alone in this bar?

She felt like she'd been sitting there for hours, even if it had probably only been thirty or so minutes. Nina had been here before, been to plenty of bars before, but she'd never been so *aware* of her own presence in one before. She left the table behind.

When she found Jenn, she was dancing with a tall blonde woman. Their dancing wasn't exactly sexual in nature; they looked less like new lovers and more like new friends on spring break. They had their arms wrapped around each other's shoulders, bounding up and down and singing along off-key. Nina felt a creeping, horrible jealousy settle over her. It wasn't even that

Jenn was dancing with someone. (Or maybe it was. Her emotions in that moment were difficult to put into neat little rows.) They weren't together, not really. She supposed she had no right to be jealous of anything Jenn. Most of it, she thought, was over how comfortable they both looked. There was an energy in the bar that Nina felt disconnected from, unable to tap into the way everyone else seemed to be. There was a sort of a community contained there, vivid and alive and somehow not for her.

Jenn saw her eventually, and tried to beckon her over and onto the dancefloor. Nina balled her hands into fists just to feel the pinpoint pressure of her relatively short fingernails digging tiny half-moon impressions into the flesh of her palm.

There are moments in which a person realizes that everything that comes after will be different. As Nina stood alone in the bar, unable to push herself forward and pretend anything for Jenn's sake, the bubbling jealousy in Nina's stomach solidified into that realization. She didn't move, couldn't move.

Someone in a floor-length ball gown, carrying a giant tray of Jell-O shots, leaned in close and asked, "You okay, hon? Looking a little lost." Nina blinked up at her, and guessed from the extravagant nature of her makeup and outfit that she was probably one of the performers for the Drag Show later.

"Sorry. Feeling a little lost."

"Get some air," the drag queen told her, resolute but comfortable in a way that reminded her oddly of Marnie. "You got to take care of yourself."

Nina nodded, unable to formulate anything in her head into verbal communication, and rushed out through the crowd and into the silent parking lot. She climbed into her car, started the ignition, and then started up the air conditioner--more for the white noise than the cool air. She

rubbed at the black stamp on the back of her hand until the edges faded and it became an unrecognizable black mass of ink. It reminded her of the inside of the bar--too messy to make out the details.

Nina's mind was back in Barlow for a minute. She wondered if her mom had remembered to take her medication. She wondered if Danny had ever gone back to his father's house or if he was still crashing on Marnie's couch. She wondered if Marnie's would ever stop being a stepping-stone for every homeless queer kid in the county, if she'd ever stop taking people in and trying to make sure they came out better on the other side.

Was she better yet, Nina wondered? Was she even on the other side? When did she get to stop feeling lost?

It didn't take all that long for Jenn to follow her out. Nina figured it wouldn't.

"Do you want some company out here?" Jenn asked. "Or would you prefer if I just left you alone?"

Nina's instinct was to tell her that she'd prefer to be alone, on the off chance that she'd go back inside and enjoy the rest of her evening.

She decided the truth was probably better. "I think I'd just like to go home."

Jenn slid into the passenger's seat. "Alright," she said. "We can go back to Barlow. That's fine." Jenn took Nina's hand and squeezed it tightly on her own and held on as the car pulled away from the parking lot, the way she used to when they were *together* and would just drive around the backroads for hours and hours. There was a phone number written on Jenn's other hand, but Nina only caught a glimpse of it before Jenn covered it with her sleeve.

“I’m sorry,” Jenn said. “Sometimes I can’t tell if you actually want to do something or if you’re only doing it for my sake. I don’t mean to drag you along. I thought if you come along to dance with me, everything would be alright.”

“I just wanted to hang out a little while longer,” Nina said. “I thought it wouldn’t matter where.”

Jenn’s grip squeezed a little harder. “I still care about you, you know? That didn’t stop because…”

“I know. I care about you too,” Nina said. “But I’m just not sure that’s enough.”

“Enough for what?”

“Enough to keep coming back to.”

When they got a bit closer to town, Nina started taking the backroads, but they didn’t say much to one another after that. After she dropped Jenn off at her parents’ house, Nina drove up the mountaintop towards her own parents, pulled over for a while into a little gravel parking area where she and Jenn had once shared everything about themselves. It was quiet now, blissfully uncrowded. Later on, she would call Jenn and see if she wanted help re-dying her hair before she left. For a while, though, she just looked at the smudged stamp on her hand. There was hand sanitizer in her backpack in the trunk, but she thought it might be better to let it fade on its own.

Strays

August Fairchild had always thought that nicknames were a telling thing. Even the strange ones could mean something. Like Pigeon. He'd always liked that people started calling him that. They called him Pigeon because his heart bled for lost things. Because he fed the pigeons that clustered in little congregations on the sidewalks. Because it'd never felt right to him--pigeons were one of the few truly domesticated birds. Would anyone have batted an eye if he fed the stray dogs and cats? People made strays and then called it charity to love them. To call something a "stray" had always seemed, to him, to be more of an indictment of whomever had abandoned it than anything. There was nothing shameful in being a stray, but plenty in creating one.

His great grandmother had kept pigeons--and chickens, but pigeons were the things she felt were truly worth living around. She'd told her granddaughter, his mother, that they liked people as much as a cat or a dog did. They were meant for the warmth of human love, but even in her day people had begun to think of them as pests.

People on the old hollow now called her a granny witch, though she would've likely spat on somebody if they had called her that while she was still living. She was a *good Christian woman*, in her own words. They'd even put it on her tombstone, under an intricately carved little angel. He supposed people didn't name it like that back then. They just knew that Old Mary had dowsing rods if you wanted a well put in, and she could divine the future in the coffee grounds left in her cup, and you went to her if you were having a baby and were too poor for the doctor. She became a local legend--both for her utility and strangeness and for her longevity. She died when he was three.

Pigeon had never known her well enough to love her, but he was sure that her blood sang mountain hymnals in his veins. He'd had to inherit some of his strangeness from somewhere. The people on the old road certainly thought it was something in the bloodline--if not the well water. So he fed the pigeons, and he had opened a little used bookstore even though it never made much money, and he had loved the strays.

Honestly, he always thought he could have married a woman and been perfectly alright with it. Gender was one of those things that had never mattered too terribly much to him. That might have made his life a bit easier in the long run, but he and Garrett had fit together in a way that felt almost cosmic. His husband never minded his strangeness and had never batted an eye when Pigeon asked to bury what remained of the deer carcasses from his hunting trips in the woods. It wasn't about being respectful. Deer had no reverence for human burial practices, of course. Killing only what they would eat and thinning the population was respect enough. It was just nice to return something to the earth. Everything was connected like that, invisible ley lines that spread out like sprawling nerve endings across everything and everyone.

The bookstore gave him a good outlet for feeling connected to other people, at the very least. It didn't even have a proper name, just a hand painted sign out front that read USED BOOKS AND MORE in rounded, cartoonish letters. Garrett's sister had painted it for him over a decade ago when she was still in high school. He wondered if he should ask her to touch it up before she moved out to Bristol. The shop sold a lot of books, but also a lot of other things that might be a little less easy to come by in Barlow: bundled sage, tarot cards, tapestries. He also sold some things one might find in a typical head shop, because even though Garrett's job meant he didn't need to turn much of a profit, he did still need to keep the lights on. Some of the younger people in town would hang around, rarely buying anything but looking through the

books and chatting with him and, on a few memorable occasions, asking if he had anything they could use to feed the little swarming masses of birds--mostly pigeons, of course--that hung around outside the building.

He said yes, of course. There was a bag of bird seed out in his car. Pigeon liked to take care of the strays.

Pigeon thought he knew who Ira Horne was the moment he walked in the bookstore. Ira's father had once told the local newspaper that Pigeon's store sold drug paraphernalia and satanic materials to children. The first part was horseshit, because he always carded before he sold someone cigarillos or a pack of rolling papers. The truth to the second part, he supposed, depended on whether or not one considered crystals and books about wicca and herbal remedies to be "satanic materials," and a not insignificant portion of the population did. Pigeon had been a part of perfectly lovely conversations about the nature of the universe with many a believer, but he had a feeling he and Pastor Horne would never find much productive common ground. That was alright. You couldn't live any way that would please everybody.

But you could hope they wouldn't send their kids in to fight their battles for them.

For a moment after the little bell tied to the door chimed, Pigeon braced himself for an argument. He'd feel bad about it later, but in his defense, the boy was wearing a church camp T-shirt with the sleeves rolled up to fight the late summer heat.

"Are you August?" Ira asked, coming up immediately to the counter.

Very few people had called him by his birth name since he was a teenager, and it was jarring enough that he took an extra second to reply, "Wh- Yes. I am."

Ira perked up immediately, “Great! Great. A lady at the library told me I should stop by-- dark hair, glasses, said she was a friend of yours.” Ah. That explained the name then. Lou had been one of his closest friends since school, but she was, unfortunately, terminally too serious. She said the nickname made her feel like she was talking to a child.

“That’d be Louise,” he said, with a little smile. “If you see her again, tell her I appreciate that she’s sendin’ people my way, I suppose. What did you need?”

“I’m looking for, like, books on sexuality. Your friend was super helpful but said the library was a little limited in what they had. I guess they don’t want too many church mamas yelling ‘think of the children’ all the time.” Pigeon felt a little pang of guilt for making assumptions. He supposed Ira probably hadn’t gotten anything resembling *the talk* if what he knew of his father was true. Maybe he just needed a sex ed. textbook to make sure he knew what went where. He looked at least eighteen, but Pigeon had known worse cases of sheltering. It was usually the preacher’s daughters, though. Most people like Pastor Horne didn’t *actually* give a damn what their sons did so long as they didn’t catch a reputation as a deadbeat. Unless he was gay, but Pigeon wasn’t going to pry there. He and Garrett had been *together* for months on end before they could put words to it. Pigeon had never minded much himself, already comfortable being a town oddball and prepared fully to be a town pariah if necessary, but Garrett hadn’t yet been prepared for what the world could do to a person. He was lucky that the Graces took him in. Of course, that was the late nineties. Things changed, even in Barlow.

“Ah, yeah. It’s budgeting more than anything else but... Yeah.” Pigeon motioned toward a large shelf near the back of the shop. “There’s probably something back there that’ll work, unless you’re looking for something specific. Don’t have much of a filing system, exactly. Feel free to just dig around.” *Books about sexuality* could mean a lot of things, but there was

something in the barely-there nervous lilt to Ira's voice that made him unsure if he should press the issue too far.

Ira pressed two fingers to his forehead in a little joking salute, "Got it. I'll let you know if I need anything."

Ira spent a long time back in the stacks. It wasn't a large building, Pigeon remembered faintly when it had been an upholstery shop, so he didn't exactly need to hover in order to watch Ira pick a few things off the shelf he'd been directed to and move on to the next one. Every now and again he'd find a book, pull his phone out and look at it for a while, and then decide if he wanted to add that one to the growing pile. Finally, he moved on to some of the shelves of trinkets and other non-book items.

By the time Ira returned to the counter, he had a fairly large stack of books and few of the other miscellaneous items.

"Sorry," Ira said, a little sheepish. "This is a lot. I've been bored as hell on my breaks at work."

"No, no! I appreciate the business." Now that he got a better look at the stack of items, the picture cleared a bit. Ira had picked out a few books on local wildlife, a few on local legends and ghost stories, a few fiction novels that Pigeon had only heard of, one sizable tome on world religions, and, more tellingly, a few of the Johnathon Katz books on LGBT history that had come directly from his own collection. He's not sure why he was curious as to Ira's preferences other than he enjoyed that moment of shared connection about something like that. It was nice to remember that the world was always more varied than people gave it credit for if you were open enough to look for it.

Beside the books, there was also a handmade bracelet with a thick leather cord and wooden beads dyed to be a muted rainbow and a hand-carved bear keychain. His sister-in-law had made those too, before the lingering depression had stolen so much of her spark to create things.

“Those are for my boyfriend,” Ira said, loud and clear like he really needed to say it to somebody. Pigeon couldn’t help but smile.

“I’m sure he’ll like ‘em,” he said. “My husband’s sister made those. I’m sure they’ll both be glad they found a good home.” There was no real reason to mention Garrett in that moment. Not really. The flash of recognition in Ira’s eyes was worth it, though.

When he was ringing up the world religions book, he couldn’t help but mention it. “Your Pastor Horne’s son, aren’t you? He told the paper I was corrupting the youths once, said he’d hate for his own children to get exposed to such filth.”

Ira grimaced. “Yeah. That sounds about right. But you’re a little late.”

“Is that right?”

“According to him, I ain’t his son anymore. I can’t live in his house unless I want to lie to myself forever, and I’m pretty sure he blames the internet and my friends for all the corruption. It don’t matter,” Ira said with a derisive little laugh. Pigeon’s dislike of Ira’s father took new shape. There was nothing shameful in being a stray, but plenty in creating one.

“Well,” Pigeon said, nodding towards the world religions book. “Don’t blame you much for exploring your options, then.”

Ira laughed, scrubbing his hand hard down his face. “That’s the thing,” he said, “I don’t think I am. I just like reading about it now that I’m not walking on eggshells. It’s stupid, but, I think I’m just as much a believer as I ever was. Almost definitely not Baptist, but like, some

nebulous idea of *Christian*.” He flicked at the decal on his shirt. “I even miss fucking *church camp*, of all things. I knew my dad was going to take a lot of shit from me when he found out, but I never figured the ways it was going to hurt.”

“I’m sorry,” Pigeon said. “Are you safe? Do you have somewhere to go?”

“Yeah,” Ira said. “I got good people around me. Really good people. I’m all good on that front. And I’ve been watching this hippy-dippy progressive preacher who live streams all his sermons. Even though all these people that love me got all this trauma around religion. Isn’t that dumb?”

Pigeon had once cleaned his great grandmother’s dowsing rods in the cool running creek water and laid them on her gravesite. He had returned the dead to the earth when he could. He had worshiped the mountain air. He had no adherence to any particular religion, but he knew as well as anyone the power of ceremony.

“I don’t think that’s dumb at all,” he said. “And I’m sure your friends don’t hold it against you.”

Ira smiled, but didn’t reply. Pigeon finished ringing up his order. It came out to around twenty-five dollars.

“That ain’t much.”

Pigeon shrugged, “Used books. Couple of those paperbacks were only a dollar.”

“Thank you, Mr. August. I’m...glad I stopped by.”

“I’m glad you stopped by too. Tell your friends to come by,” he said. “And call me Pigeon. ‘Bout everyone other than Lou does.”

Ira’s eyes widened in recognition, like he’d known the nickname more clearly. “That’s. Familiar. Are you, uh, related in some way to a lady named Magnolia Grace?”

Pigeon nodded, "My sister-in-law. The one that made that bracelet."

"Well. Goddamn. Small world. Small town, at the very least."

"Tell me about it."

Ira shifted his weight from one foot to the other, crossing his arms over his chest and glancing down at the chipping linoleum floor. "I'm, uh, friends with the guy who tried to steal her car back in the spring. I'm tangentially related to that whole... mess, I guess."

Pigeon laughed, "Small town indeed." It felt like more than that though. This encounter felt like something necessary, something cosmic.

"Well. Tell her thank you, for not pressing charges and all that. I really do think that helped Danny get his shit together a little."

"Honestly? I'm sure she'll be happy to hear that."

"Probably rescinds that invitation to invite my friends to drop by, though, doesn't it?" Ira asked, putting the books quickly into his backpack.

Pigeon shook his head. He'd originally agreed with Mag's decision not to get the law involved so long as the kid got her car fixed, even though Garrett had been skeptical. He'd wondered if it had been a bad decision for a while now. He was starting to have hope about it.

"Not at all," Pigeon said. "Tell them to come on. Danny too. Don't matter to me."

He'd always looked after the strays, after all.

Connections: An Analytical Essay

When I started this project, I didn't really anticipate that I would be finishing it in the middle of an unprecedented global pandemic. If you'd asked me to list the possible challenges for completing my last year of academia, it probably wouldn't have even made the top ten. Still, as I worked to be productive in the midst of very, very uncertain times, I became even more convinced of this project's importance to me. Because all I have wanted, for the past several weeks of social distancing and unavoidable self-isolation, has been to drive back to my hometown and see my friends there. In high school, I would've done anything to get out of my hometown of Grundy, Virginia. Now, I'd do anything to return for a little while to the people there that I love and that love me. This story cycle was conceived of as a way to tie together my interest in LGBT and Appalachian representation, but it has evolved to be that and more for me. Ultimately, this is a collection about connections--our connections to place, and our connections to each other.

The fictional town created in this collection, Barlow, is not Grundy, though pieces of it carry over. It isn't really intended to be anywhere in particular, and the stories collected here are not true ones with the names changed. Still, I wanted to resonate with experiences I and many others have of these towns--often complicated, rarely wholly positive or wholly negative. Dorothy Allison writes in the afterword of her novel, *Bastard out of Carolina*, "There is a difference between fiction and nonfiction deeper than technique or intention. I value both but genuinely believe that fiction can tell a larger truth" (316). That was my hope and intention for this collection: fiction that presses up against a larger truth.

Identity is often shaped by a sense of community. Place and sexuality are not fully separate aspects of a person's identity, but rather deeply connected and influenced by one

another (Black and Rhorer). LGBT people exist everywhere, even in small Appalachian towns, and often they find each other, love each other, and build their own sense of community. This doesn't mean that their relationship to place is not occasionally complicated or fraught.

Throughout the various stories, characters deal with their connection to the town of Barlow in very different ways.

Atlas Walkins, for example, is a character struggling to articulate how he feels about the old house, how he feels about Ira, and what those emotions and desires will mean for the future. A lot of Atlas's complicated emotions in the first story were inspired by the poem "You Are Jeff," which also tackles male desire in the absence of words:

You're in a car with a beautiful boy, and you're trying not to tell him that you love him, and you're trying to choke down the feeling, and you're trembling, but he reaches over and he touches you, like a prayer for which no words exist, and you feel your heart taking root in your body, like you've discovered something you don't even have a name for.

(Siken)

Atlas is someone who, throughout his life, has struggled to feel seen and understood. As a child, this manifested in his "acting out" and moments of destructive recklessness. As an adult, he is often quiet and reserved--not sure how to tell Ira that he loves him, or if he should say anything at all. This is further complicated by his relationship to his great aunt's house, which is one of the few places he has ever truly felt comfortable. At the beginning of the story, he is unsure of how serious Ira is about the relationship, and so admitting his own investment seems like a dangerous thing.

Ira is from a strict, religious household, and experiencing his first taste of adulthood and the freedom to do as he pleases. As the son of a Baptist pastor, he may not be experiencing a

complete crisis of belief, but he is certainly tackling the idea that he will no longer be welcomed in a religious community--much like Asher Sharp, the protagonist of Silas House's novel, *Southernmost*, which also tackles homophobia in rural Appalachian churches. In House's novel, an evangelical preacher feels forced to try and escape his small Tennessee town with his son after being ousted from the church for defending LGBT rights. Sharpe loses his connection to the community and struggles to maintain his faith in the process. House's Asher Sharpe feels so ostracized by his community and wonders where "that God" has gone: "So far up in the trees Asher couldn't feel him anymore? Or just completely gone?" (64). Ira wants to maintain the connections he's built--with Atlas, with his new friends, and with the town he grew up in. He looks through the box of old toys and tries to get the pictures from the shelf to get to know Atlas better. In a way, he succeeds. In the end, through the haze of injury, he makes it clear that his feelings run deeper than the surface level attraction Atlas worried it to be.

The protagonist of the next story "Family Tradition," Lou, is someone longing for the safety of tradition. She remembers her grandmother's cooking and the predictability of weekly family gatherings fondly. She wishes to embrace traditions that she feels have been shut off to her. However, she has no confirmation that her family has shut her out from them. Through the scene in which Lou and her girlfriend, Nora, cook together, I wanted to depict Appalachian culture as both varied and accessible. The two women do not have a homogenous experience of the "true" Appalachian weekend breakfast--a long and storied tradition in the region. Rather, they share traditions that have varied by family and individuals. Nora makes chocolate gravy--which is a real thing, and it absolutely is not for everyone--and Lou finds that it is not to her tastes, but is glad that she made something nostalgic of her own (Sohn 31). The gathering of

friends recreating the weekly family meals shows that, in spite of homophobic social norms that may push them away from it, LGBT people have a right to their own cultural traditions.

Lou exists in a liminal space of neither being full “out” to her family by outright telling them she is a lesbian, but also making no attempt to pass for straight. In the end of the story, Lou’s mother acknowledges her relationship with Nora and gives her the recipes from her grandmother, showing that she is attempting to rebuild the bond between them. Whether or not the rest of the family supports her, Lou takes the beginning steps to reopen communication with her mother. In seeing her grandmother’s recipes, full of mistakes and correction, and inevitable change, Lou also learns to be kinder to herself.

However, not all connections are so easy to repair. *Magnolia Grace* is a study in grief. A kernel of this story has existed in three separate incarnations, all written after the death of my own mother. *Magnolia’s* grief is almost personal in that way, a distorted shadow of my own. “Rotten,” the latest form that *Magnolia’s* story has taken, ends far more hopeful than each of the others. *Magnolia* wanted to come out to her parents about her sexuality, but now that they are gone, she feels as though there is forever an unfinished conversation, a piece of her that they will never know about.

Magnolia has no healthy way of coping with her grief, so she tries to escape it. Before the story begins, as she hints at and later stories address directly, she tried to escape with alcohol. When that only complicates her life further, she tries to leave town altogether. Dorothy Allison articulates a similar desire in her essay, “A Question of Class,” where she writes, “Change your name, leave town, disappear, make yourself over. What hides behind that impulse is the conviction that the life you have lived, the person you are, is valueless, better off abandoned, that running away is easier than trying to change things, that change itself is not possible” (19).

Allison writes that this desire is often more destructive than homophobia or discrimination itself because it makes attempting improvement nearly impossible. Of course, not all those who move away from a rural area are simply trying to escape from something, but I think there is an occasionally unhealthy obsession with the depiction of small, rural areas as “dying” places not worth saving.

While Magnolia’s desire to start over is genuine, the way she goes about it only makes change more difficult. She needs connections in her life, needs the people that love and support her standing behind her before she can truly move on from Barlow. Listening to her rebellious urges makes her feel better for a while, but it gets her no closer to her actual goals. There is a difference between moving away and running away. Magnolia is shutting herself off from her brother and friends, trying to burn bridges as fast as they will light in the hope that this will force her to never turn back.

Focusing on her own pain at the expense of her connections to anyone else is what ultimately leads to the main conflict of the story that has aftershocks reverberating through each one that follows it. Magnolia wants to open up about her sexuality to someone, anyone, but when the conversation does not go exactly as she envisioned it, she shuts down again. When Danny attempts, poorly, to open up to her and discuss his own complicated relationship to identity, she interprets his flippancy as a personal insult. Danny does no better in understanding her point of view, and the miscommunication between them--along with a bit more self-destructive substance abuse--leads Danny to steal from her in his own misguided attempt to run away. Danny provides a sort of mirror for Magnolia to see her own unproductive reaction to trauma reflected in someone else. By admitting that she does need other people and calling her brother, Magnolia shows that she is at least trying to rebuild the connections she has to the people that love her.

Danny, struggling with his own inability to cope, doesn't get far either. He has the same desire for escape that Magnolia does, and also handles it poorly. From Magnolia's point of view, Danny is just another kid from the hollow she grew up on. He is easily stereotyped or overlooked. Danny's anger towards his situation was inspired, in part, by the character Bone in *Bastard Out of Carolina*:

No hunger would make me take anything else of theirs. I could feel a kind of heat behind my eyes that lit up everything I glanced at. It was dangerous, that heat. It wanted to pour out and burn everything up, everything they had that we didn't have, everything that made them think they were better than us (Allison 103).

In the face of poverty and abuse, Bone begins to steal from the local department store in order to take some sort of control over her situation. To Danny, Magnolia's reluctance to leave feels like gloating--she has the opportunities that he does not, and she isn't taking them. The car theft was an important enough action that I felt I should follow it as it reverberated outwards, as Danny's choice had aftershocks on the people that cared about him. Bone is referred to as white trash and ostracized by much of the community. However, Bone is able to find complete acceptance within her own extended family that fulfills her need for connection in the face of extreme hardship and poverty. In the following stories, Danny finds similar support from his friends that help him to get back on his feet.

The following story, "Putting Out Fires," provides a different perspective on Danny's actions. From Kit's perspective, Danny is far more a victim of circumstance than just simply a teenager lashing out in misplaced rebellion. Danny, too, needs people who care about him in order to get his life back on track. Kit understands, as someone also trying to settle into an

understanding of his own identity. Kit sees more to Danny than outward appearances, and wants to help him grow past his mistakes.

Kit's relationship with his friends and his cousin Marnie shows how important support and community can be in someone's life. Kit is non-binary, a concept articulated particularly well in *Nonbinary: Memoirs of Gender and Identity*:

Jacques Derrida introduced the world to the concept of Deconstructionism. The world, according to Derrida, was not black and white, and infinite shades of gray started to rally behind him. Queer theory emerged, gay and lesbian studies started to think beyond mere sexuality, and the concept of gender started to wiggle free from the confines of biology. [...] If an object is not green, it doesn't mean it is yellow; it can be blue or red or purple or grey, or a vast range of colors in between. I am not trapped because gender is no more binary than the color wheel, and green has never been either black or white. (Govoni 12)

This is a fairly wide-reaching umbrella term that encompasses many, many gender identities, but it is the most specific one I would use to describe Kit's relationship to gender. Within the story, Kit describes himself as feeling not quite like a man or a woman and chooses a more androgynous sounding version of his name. In the company of his friends, he does not feel he has to define himself in any specific way. He has the opportunity to be genuine without the need for specific definitions.

Most representation for non-binary characters is fairly recent, though the identity certainly is not. Non-binary author Mason Deaver's novel, *I Wish You All the Best*, follows the character Ben as they come out to their strict, religious parents, are kicked out of their childhood home, and find a safe place to land with their older sister. Likewise, Kit feels that he cannot be his whole self in his parent's home, and takes refuge with Marnie--where he is accepted. In Kit's

case, I chose not to have him use gender-neutral--often singular they--pronouns because that is not every non-binary person's experience. Many use the pronouns they were assigned or a different set altogether, and that does not take away from their experience. Kit realizes that the rural area he grew up in is not likely to be fully accepting of his identity, but there are people there that he loves and trusts to know him fully. He tries to give back some of that acceptance by helping Danny and refuting the idea that he is a "fuckup" by nature.

The theme of being conflicted about connections to a person or place continues within Nina's narrative in "Crowded." Nina is very much defined by her relationship to place. There is little question, for her, about staying in place. Her ex-girlfriend Jenn, on the other hand, is ready to move on from Barlow. Jenn is not exactly running away in the way Magnolia and Danny attempt to; she is moving on. The difficulty arises in the incompatible nature of Nina and Jenn's life trajectories. Deborah Tall writes of a sense of place in *From Where We Stand*: "Maybe we need different places for different phases of our lives. Maybe cherished places remain alive inside us even if we have to move on--our attachment to the earth not thinned, but widened" (48). This is true of Jenn's relationship to the town of Barlow, but also to Nina. They certainly needed one another at a certain point in their lives, but our connections to one another shift and ebb with time.

The fact that they will both likely have to move on does not invalidate their relationship to one another. They are, ultimately, not quite compatible with one another--in terms of both distance and personality. Jenn feels ultimately limited by the town of Barlow, and Nina feels comforted by it. Neither of their experiences or plans for the future are *wrong*; they are simply individuals with individual needs. Separate paths forward do not change the fact that they were important to one another and likely always will be. A relationship's end does not take away from

its importance. There are very few permanent states of self, few relationships that will go unchanged forever. This is what Nina realizes as she looks at the stamp on her hand at the end of the story--that cutting ties will not lessen the connection that was there. I felt it was important to include a story about the end of a relationship, along with narratives like Magnolia's that don't feature romance or a relationship at all. There is more to LGBT identities than relationships and more to LGBT representation than love stories.

The final story in the series, I realize, stands less on its own than the others, but it is intended to refine the connections that have been built throughout the story collection. "Strays" acts as a sort of epilogue for the rest of the collection. Pigeon is a character who is very much aware of his connections--he loves all the "strays" created by an unsympathetic world and he feels deeply connected to the natural world. Ira, a character featured heavily in the first story, comes back into the narrative here, connecting back to the beginning and hinting at the progress in his and Atlas's relationship. Through his conversation with Pigeon, Ira shows that he has grown more comfortable with himself, his religion, and his sexuality. By inviting Ira and his friends back to the bookstore, Pigeon further solidifies the connections between them all.

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