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The Middle of Fucking Nowhere

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The Middle of Fucking Nowhere

by Vera Heidmann

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing

Linfield College

11 May 2018

Approved by Signature redacted

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The Middle of Fucking Nowhere

by Vera Heidmann

for my brother

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PART ONE:

~ The big house on the hill ~

THE LOST COAST OUTPOST

When I first heard about my brother's arrest, I was at the local gym in downtown Arcata. I was changing in the locker room and chatting awkwardly with a middle-aged woman, who was a bit too comfortable with the concept of naked small-talk when I received a text from Greg; the assistant cross country coach at my high school: "Vera, we are so so sorry to hear about Ben. Let us know if there's anything we can do."

I bombarded him with a plethora of frantic questions: "What happened to him now? Is he dead? Is he in a ditch somewhere?"

"No, he's not dead," he reassured me. "There's an article about him in the *Lost Coast Outpost*. I am so sorry."

Lost Coast Outpost is the local newspaper. It has been keeping Humboldtians informed and entertained since before I was born. Considering that nothing ever happens in a cow county like Humboldt, I've never been one to keep up with the *Outpost*. It's a shit newspaper anyway, and its general audience turns crime into some sort of morbid freak show: "*come one, come all, and see the 18 year old meth addict! I bet you fuckers have never seen a person who completely ruined his life at such a young age before!*"

My brother's crime was the story of the summer in 2016. People I had never met in my life were posting the article on Facebook, along with sentiments such as "wow, *I had this kid in my math class sophomore year*" or "*what kind of parents would let their kid get like this?*"

That was one question that everyone seemed to be asking, and it made me throw my head back and laugh hysterically, not because it was funny, but because it was the

kind of question someone asked when they didn't know what the fuck they were talking about.

“What kind of parents would let their kid get like this?” The doctor mom, I guess, and the stay at home dad. The worry-wart mom who loves her kid unconditionally, and the dad who puts dinner on the table every single night. The mom who works long hours to make sure her kids can have the best life possible, and the dad who is blissfully oblivious to what is going on behind closed doors. The chronically depressed mom, and the dad who drinks too much because what else are you supposed to do when you lose a child? The parents who can't leave the house for months after their son's arrest, except of course to visit him at the county jail every fucking chance they get. Those are the kind of parents my brother comes from. For the most part, completely normal parents. For the most part, wonderful parents.

In this particular moment however, I was angry at them. I had to hear that my brother got arrested for attempted murder from my high school cross country coach. I remember bursting into tears, and rushing out of the gym. I called my dad in the parking lot and said, sharply, like a dagger: “So when were you going to tell me that my brother is a murderer?”

It was uncalled for. But I was pissed, because Ben was going to be put on blast for the entire county to see in the *Lost Coast Outpost*. I like to believe that Humboldt County is generally made up of good, community-oriented people. However, in this moment, I could only see the comment section of the *Lost Coast Outpost* as a void for people to hurl their ignorance and hatred into:

Two Arrested for Attempted Murder After Shooting Up Arcata Home This Morning - *Lost Coast Outpost*

Hope they shoot up battery acid and convulse to death in a crack den. -

AdmiralCheetaGooch

Death penalty. - Pedro

So basically they set out to murder someone and have destroyed their lives. Too much video gaming? Konnor was in the Military. Ben looks like a tweaker. - please educate your kids

That girly looking kid is going to have tits tattooed on his back. Hope he likes the decision he made. - Cluster Bombs for Human Rights

Yes, it has nothing to do with lazy parents who can't be bothered to even check to see that their entitled brats are actually doing homework or anything. -

YourChildrenAreMonsters

It's called meth. - LT_Armstrong

What kind of DUMB FUCK PARENTS did these two meth smoking kids come from?

Throw a book at these kids AND their parents!!!! - So Close

These were the people that passed by my dad in the grocery store, the kids who I sat next to in class every day. My mother, being one of the best doctors in the county, might have saved some of their lives. And they had no idea. They had no idea that Konnor - Ben's accomplice - wrote me a love note on Valentines Day in the fourth grade. They had no idea that Ben is a son, and a friend, and a brother to people who loved the shit out of him; but still, couldn't save him.

Ben was charged with a cocktail of felonies and misdemeanors. To quote the Lost Coast Outpost directly: "Benjamin Isaia Heidmann, age 18, from Arcata was arrested and booked into the Humboldt County Jail for Attempted Murder, Assault With a

Firearm, Shooting into an Occupied Dwelling, Wearing Body Armor While in the Commission of a Felony, Possession of Methamphetamine, Possession of Drug Paraphernalia, Conspiracy to Commit a Crime, Possession of a Firearm While in Possession of Drugs, and Use of a Mask Committing a Crime” (Lost Coast Outpost). He is currently serving thirteen years in prison, while Konnor, who was charged for the exact same crimes, only has to serve seven. I’m not sure why this is exactly. The car involved belonged to Konnor, as did the guns and body armor. Dad says Konnor squealed to the police and put all of the blame on Ben, while Ben actually owned up to what he did. Or maybe Konnor had a really good lawyer, who told him how to fuck over my brother in order to save himself. It’s a complicated and fucked up whirlwind of a story, and I’ll never know what actually happened. Ben can’t tell me anything now that all of his conversations are monitored.

According to the *Lost Coast Outpost*, there can be hundreds of sides to one story. There’s my brother’s side of course. And Konner’s side. And then there are the sides that nobody even considers - my mother’s side, my father’s side, my sister’s side.

This, right here, is my side.

THAT TIME WE STOLE A TRUCK

I am six years old. Ben is four. We are so excited because Mom is taking us to see the new *Winnie the Pooh* movie this afternoon. Hand in hand, she leads us down a sidewalk slick with rain. My brother and I are wearing matching rain boots -- the yellow ones with frogs spattered from ankle to calf. Because we have some time to kill, Mom lets us stop at Toys R Us for a few minutes.

“But we’re just *looking*, okay?” she says to us. “We’re not buying anything.”

She does let us wander around the store on our own though, after telling me to keep an eye on Ben. I take him by his tiny hand, and we find ourselves immersed in the endless rows of shelves overflowing with yo-yos, Beanie-Babies, Furbies, and G.I. Joes. I for one, have always wanted an Easy-Bake oven. The image of perfect little first-grade girls with ribbons in their hair baking perfect little white cakes is enough to convince me that Easy-Bake ovens are the shit. Ben can’t help but touch every toy he passes, his sticky fingers leaving smudges on Hot Wheels, Legos, and action figures.

He has always left little pieces of himself everywhere. Before he got arrested, my mom found a condom wrapper in her car, and, well, Ben was the only one who would have had any use for a condom. He was also the only one stupid enough to leave a condom wrapper in the fucking cup holder, of all places. Now, he drops his bread-crumbs all over the floor of some prison cell. He probably clenches the rusty bars of his cage and smudges them with his own sweat and grime. At least, I hope he does. I hope he twists his hands around the iron bars until red rust flakes fall to the ground like autumn leaves. I

hope he draws his own blood and paints the walls for the sake of proving to himself that he is still alive.

Ben runs his fingers over a beautiful model of a Chevy Silverado. The little truck is bright yellow with big wheels and shiny hubcaps. He picks it up and drives it across the surface of the shelf. Makes it go *vroom vroom*.

“I wish I could get this,” he says to me.

Something wicked comes over me then. I still can’t place my finger on why. “So take it,” I say. “No one will notice.”

His eyes widen. “Isn’t that stealing?”

“So what?” I say. “Just take it. Hide it somewhere so Mom won’t see.”

He quickly shoves the truck into his pants pocket.

During the walk to the movie theater, Ben is uncharacteristically silent. He trails behind Mom and I, looking down at the sidewalk and keeping his hands tucked deep inside his pockets.

“What’s the matter, sweetie?” Mom asks.

Ben can’t quite look at her. “Nothing,” he says.

“Why do you have your hands in your pockets like that?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know.”

“Sweetheart, you’re worrying me. Please tell me what’s wrong.”

He begins to cry. He pulls the truck out of his pocket and hands it to Mom.

“Benjamin! Did you *steal* that?”

“I’m sorry!” He hugs her legs and sobs hard, getting tears and snot all over the pant-leg of her work slacks.

“What possessed you to do this?” she asks.

“I don’t know!” he cries. This is when I realize he is not going to tell on me. I can’t imagine why he wouldn’t, unless he’s planning to get revenge on me later. Or maybe he genuinely blames himself. He’s so young that he may not have entirely understood what he was doing at the time.

And so begins my brother’s life of crime. And here I am: the mastermind.

My brilliant plan to get my brother in trouble ends up backfiring majorly. Mom says we don’t get to see the *Winnie the Pooh* movie anymore because Ben “needed to be taught a lesson.” She marches us straight back to Toys R Us and sets the toy truck down in front of the cashier with a curt “my son stole this.”

My son stole this. Her voice is shallow. Empty. Like a wet-walled cave. She puts her hands on her hips and pinches her shoulders back so that her posture has that pristine, fresh-out-of-the-box look. My mother has always been beautiful, even when she’s angry - even when she’s more disappointed than I’ve ever seen her in my life - She’s the Barbie Doll I never knew I wanted. I mean, she scares the shit out of me, definitely, but she fascinates me all the same.

She makes my brother apologize to the teenager behind the register, who doesn’t seem to give a flying fuck about any of this. I remember Ben’s face - an absolute mess of snot strings and wetness.

It will be fourteen years before I see him cry like that again.

HUMBOLDT (1)

In your shabby shoddy shithole of a hometown, the forest never sleeps. Raindrops fall on leaves like xylophone keys, and the blue jays jaw their philosophies. You walk along the mucky trails, and lap up the symphony like milk.

And when you drive into town, you notice the burnouts dealing in the middle of the street; the high school kids hey-mistering and drinking beer with strangers in the Safeway parking lot. You drive by 9th Street, where people shuffle in and out of dive bars, clouding the entrances of *Alibi* and *Sidelines* with marijuana smoke.

Your parents live in a big house on the hill. They have three mentally ill children, three neurotic dogs, and several indifferent chickens. Their house is full of dusted photographs tacked to the walls, and the faces of you and your brother are grinning, then scowling, then empty. You think about your mother looking over these little snapshots of life with the concentration and observation of an old art professor, how the skeletons will smile back at her wilted face.

They will reach into her heart with their skeletal fingers and shake her. They will ask, *whose side are you on anyway?* She says: your side, yet you die on me, anyway. She will be dusting cobwebs from her children's eye-sockets for years to come.

STILL LIFE: KID WITH CIGARETTE

He is standing on the front porch, slouching against the house and holding a cigarette expertly between two fingers. He takes a long drag and blows a ribbon of smoke into the crisp October air. The ribbon does a half-hearted waltz with the wind, and twists around the branches of his mother's pink rhododendron. The redwood trees rustle with whispers of disapproval. When a particularly powerful gust of wind hits, they bend and creak in anguish -- and it reminds the boy of his father; grumbling and groaning every morning because of his sore joints and the sheer wretchedness of having to start each monotonous day.

He scrapes his hand through his hair, and does a double-take when he sees his sister's car careening up the driveway. He quickly puts out his cigarette, stomping out the butt with the heel of his shoe.

She gets out of her car and walks up the wooden steps to the front porch. She raises an eyebrow. "I didn't know you smoked."

He shrugs. "I didn't really want you to see that," he says.

She says: "Hey, it's your grave. Just make sure Mom doesn't see."

Half an hour later, the boy hands her the pack of Camels. "I need you to do something for me," he says. His eyes are big and stretched with something like sadness, or maybe guilt. The girl hasn't seen him look like that since he was a little kid. He tells her, almost teary-eyed, that he wants to quit smoking; and begs her to hide his cigarettes someplace where he'll never find them. The crack in his voice makes her heart tear in half, and the pack of Camels is heavy in her hands, so she leaves the house and sprints

through the woods until her lungs feel like they're going to collapse. She crushes the Camel box in her fist, and hurls it into a ravine.

THE FORTRESS

I am ten years old. My kid brother is eight. We ride invisible stallions with crystal blue eyes and wispy manes that flow like silver cigarette smoke in the wind. We are knights protecting the sacred green Fortress from evil things that lurk beyond the edge of the ravine.

The Fortress is a small clearing in the woods behind our house. It is surrounded by a halo of redwood trees, which twist and grow together blending greens and browns and reds into colors the rest of the world doesn't know about yet. In Spring, the trilliums grow. They are white and clean like untouched snow.

When we are in The Fortress, the rest of the world falls away. Upon entry, we shed our little worries like snakeskin. None of the other neighborhood kids know about it, which is just as well, because as knights of this place we are required to protect it by any means necessary.

There is a paper sign nailed to a tree by the entrance that says "KEEP OUT" in my brother's scraggly handwriting. Wooden planks lie between old stumps like bridges. Our favorite thing to do is swing from the low-hanging branch next to the huckleberry brambles. We never worry about the possibility of the branch breaking. Even as we grow older, somehow, like a mother, it holds us.

One day, my brother fashions a sword out of a long stick and stabs it deep into the mudbank next to the longest bridge. He tries to pull it back out, but the sword won't budge. It is caked into the mud or possibly stuck on a buried root.

I make some remark like: “Good job. That was our best sword.” And Ben says, “you try to get it out then, if you’re so smart.”

I wrap my hands around the stick and pull as hard as I can, but my strength is not up to the job. Ben runs to get Dad, who pulls it out within seconds. Long live the King of our world.

Now, my brother hides in The Fortress and smokes cigarettes. He digs a hole in the ground with his fingernails, and buries the ashy butts like corpses.

The summer after I turn eleven is hotter than usual. Dad sets up a sprinkler in the driveway. Mom pays us five bucks a piece to wash her car. My little sister performs in her first dance show. My brother finds a whole sand-dollar at the beach. Mom offers us fresh pears. We eat spoonfuls of neapolitan ice cream out of the carton. The dog dies. I offer my mom a cup of camomile tea. My brother finds a used needle in the beach parking lot. My sister sprains her ankle. The sprinkler breaks. Mom and Dad don’t sleep in the same bed anymore. My brother fashions a noose out of a leather belt.

My mother makes Ben leave his bedroom door open at all times. She asks about the scars on his arms, and the bags under his eyes; and he yells at her that he’s perfectly fucking fine. “They’re just cat scratches,” he says. “And I’m an insomniac.”

He is fifteen years old when he decides to kill himself from the inside out, slowly - painstakingly - with brown liquor, smiley-face tablets, and fine white powder. The

conventional methods - hanging, wrist cutting, and sleeping pills - never worked for him, as he almost always got caught by our parents. I tell myself that maybe he is too scared to kill himself in the conventional way. If he really wanted to die, he would have done it by now. Drug addiction, in theory, should have given us more time to save him. Slow-motion suicide. It kills your personality first, then your brain and body. It can take a couple of hours if you're lucky, but usually, it takes a fucking lifetime.

Even after his personality dies, my brother's body grows even more resilient. He becomes invincible, almost, like a red-necked, malnourished, manic-depressive, meth-mouthed skeleton of a God - cursed with wretched immortality. "I can't even kill myself right," he tells me one day over moonshine-spiked lemonade and Mario Kart. I run to the bathroom, and hurl my insides out. Ben raises an eyebrow and says, "sorry, I guess I made your drink too strong."

I remember the first day we discovered The Fortress. He was alive then, and scared to death of the trees creaking eerily in the wind. The battlefield was drenched in silence and the blood of evil things. We could never lose a fight, and we couldn't die. Those were his rules.

We picked huckleberries until our fingers turned purple. We swung from tree branches until our arms got sore. We were perfectly content with getting high on the sun, and the laughter; the battle-cries, and huckleberry pie. We raced through the forest on invisible horses, there and gone in an instant.

STILL LIFE OF MY SISTER #1: FUNHOUSE

My younger sister is obsessed with Annie Chun's Roasted Seaweed Snacks. They have to be sesame flavored, never wasabi. This is very important.

When she eats it, the whole room smells faintly of fish. It's almost like living next to a harbor or an ocean-side restaurant. The salty ocean spray rides the wind and lingers where it doesn't belong.

I tried a piece of her seaweed once. It was paper-thin and felt gritty between my teeth, leaving remnants of salt and sesame in the places where floss couldn't reach. I still don't understand the appeal to be honest, but she devours the stuff with as much enthusiasm as a hungry dog or a stoned frat boy.

When I tell her that her braces are full of green shit, she tells me to fuck off.

Jayne has to have her bed made a certain way or else she throws a fit. The one day our mother graciously changed her sheets and made up her bed for her, she screamed as though she were being murdered and tore the sheets off with a ferocity that didn't match her wiry seven-year old frame.

It was the first real fight she had with Mom, and I heard the whole thing from the next room over. I remember sitting in my own incredulous silence, separate from the yelling, which was muted and fuzzy through the wall. I felt like crying I guess, but at the same time I really wanted to listen. I didn't even breathe I wanted to listen so badly.

I don't remember what was said that day. I just know I heard a slap, and then my mother crying. She slammed the door so hard it shook the house and knocked picture

frames from the wall. In the hallway outside Jayce's room, my parent's wedding photo had fallen and crashed to the floor. The frame was in smithereens. My young mother's face looked cracked and distorted as if she were inside a funhouse instead of a chapel.

CINDY

“You might have noticed I’m actually starting to get a little chubby.” Ben almost has to yell into the phone. The sheet of plexiglass between us makes it sound like he’s under water. His round cheeks and orange jumpsuit are smudged with grime. He rolls up his sleeves, revealing a large tattoo calligraphed down his right forearm: “*HUMBOLDT*.”

“I eat way more in here than I ever did at home.” He laughs halfheartedly. “It’s funny.”

“That’s good,” Mom says. “How’s the food?”

“Eh. You know. Can’t complain. I miss your cooking though.”

I glance down at the various etchings carved into the wooden counter, and find myself mesmerized by a solitary unforgiving “fuck.”

My mother hands me the phone, and for the first time in over a year, I make eye-contact with him.

“Hey, Vera,” he says. “What’s up?”

It’s awkward trying to have a conversation through a piece of plastic. And the phone must be unspeakably filthy. For some reason, that’s all I can think about.

“*What’s up?*” I say. “You’re a moron, you know that?”

“Yeah, I know.” says my brother.

“*You have one minute left.*” The automated lady in the phone says. She’s a bitch. My brother calls her “Cindy.”

“I love you sweetie.” Mom places her hand on the plexiglass. “Hang in there, okay?”

“I will.” He presses his palm to hers on the other side of the plastic.

PART TWO:

~ Real monsters ~

RUNNER FEET

"We've got a motto here - you're tougher than you think you are, and you can do more than you think you can."

- Christopher McDougall, *Born to Run*

"What did you *do*?" My mother gasps at the blood seeping through the mesh of my running shoes. She drags me into the bathroom and sits me down on the edge of the tub, peeling off my shoes and socks like cornhusks. A blood-blister balloons underneath my blackened toenail; pulsating almost, like it might burst at any moment.

"Mom, this is nothing." I say. "It's dead. It doesn't even hurt."

The track team had just finished an especially grueling workout on the Humboldt State University track: 800 meter repeats, featuring Coach James Washington's typical repetition of "two more, two more," when really there was only supposed to be one more fucking repeat for the last five 800s. The university doesn't like the high-schoolers using their track, but our high school can't afford a track so we don't have much of a choice. Sweat is still rolling off the back of my neck, salty and soaking my t-shirt. My calves ache, and are caked with red dust from the track.

Mom pricks a needle into the blood blister on my big toe and squeezes it between her fingertips until the puss and blood oozes out. She lets out a sigh of relief, and says "there, that's better."

People used to run barefoot, back before shoes and Chinese takeout. Running didn't used to be a sport or a punishment, but instead was a survival instinct. People were born to run for long distances; we used to track down our prey until prey could run no

more. We used to run so much that a natural sole crafted from callous would manifest on the bottoms of our feet.

In Christopher McDougall's book *Born to Run* - essentially the holy bible of running - he writes about the Tarahumara people, a hidden tribe living in Mexico. The Tarahumara are renowned for their long-distance running abilities. They ran to live, and lived to run. As McDougall so eloquently puts it: "Distance running was revered because it was indispensable; it was the way we survived and thrived and spread across the planet. You ran to eat and to avoid being eaten; you ran to find a mate and impress her, and with her you ran off to start a new life together. You had to love running, or you wouldn't live to love anything else." Running was everything they had, it was a beautiful, painful blessing that provided hope and life and happiness like nothing else could.

Every track meet is the same. The cold, brittle air. The smell of trees and snack-shack coffee. That silence before the start of a race. *Breathe*. The starter shoots a blank and the smell of gunpowder fills our nostrils. The second we start running, our nerves burst open like blood-blisters, and all we have now is the stretch of red clay in front of us, and the prayer that our feet won't fail us.

The two mile race is the bane of my existence. It's long and doesn't particularly hold my attention span, and it's at the end of the meet so you have to hold your nervousness inside of your stomach all day until you finally get to race.

And yet, here I am, running the goddamn two mile again, with that fucking McKinleyville High girl tailgating me in the most annoying sense of the word. My friend

Molly runs just a few feet in front of me, and randomly points out a red-tailed hawk swooping over the track.

“Vera, did you see that bird?” She points haphazardly at the sky.

“What?” I say, perplexed that she’d be pointing out a bird to me at a time like this.

Our coach sees this exchange and yells at us to stop bird-watching and pay attention to the race. I pick my feet up and surge ahead of the McKinleyville High girl, so that I’m running in sync with Molly. I cannot help but think of McDougall’s words in this moment: *the reason we race isn't so much to beat each other... but to be with each other.*

The Tarahumara lived and breathed running. They lapped it up like milk from the puckered udder of vitality - sucked the marrow from it and danced under moonlight with feet that never got tired. They never forgot that feeling, couldn’t forget that feeling. Running was an artform that made itself known by the sounds of feet hitting dirt, and mud smacking sun-loved calves. It was twisting an ankle in the sand, and running on it until it no longer hurt. It was love and creation in its purest form. No flowery words. No hidden meaning. Just raw pain, trembling legs, and bloody toenails.

The fastest mile I’ve ever run was during the last leg of a distance medley relay. Molly had started us off with a 400 meter sprint, then passed the baton off to Emma, who ran an 800 meter, then passed the baton off the Beth, our 1200 meter runner. There was a lot riding on Beth’s shoulders in particular since it was her job to put as much distance as

she could between our team and McKinleyville High's team. The Mack girls weren't as fast as we were, except for their miler, Morgin Coonfield, who routinely and repeatedly kicked our asses in every single fucking race. I was the designated mile runner for the Arcata High team - the last leg, the anchor of the distance medley relay - and I was supposed to face off against Morgin, the fastest girl in Humboldt County.

I cheered like mad for Beth because the more of a head start I had on Morgin, the better. Racing is an altogether terrifying and wonderful feeling, and winning a race is the biggest wash of relief and rush of endorphins I have ever felt. They call it the running high. Oftentimes, it comes to you forty-five minutes into a long run, and if you're lucky, it will come to you during a race. Every runner seeks this high because it makes running *not hurt*. It turns off your mind, and your body takes over, as if it knows it was meant for this - as if it knows it was born for this.

Beth slaps the cold baton into my open hand, and I take off, my nerves melting away into my gelatin calves. I don't think about Morgin - Beth had managed to put 600 meters between us, nearly lapping the McKinleyville High team's 1200 runner. I don't think about my dad and brother watching from the stands, waiting patiently for me to be done so that they can finally go home. I pump my arms and grit my teeth, as my numb legs seem to be moving almost on their own. It's muscle memory, I suppose. I've done this a million times before, and my body knows exactly what to do. In situations like this, I usually focus on not dropping the baton, because if you drop the baton in a relay you're

fucked. We were so close to beating Morgin-fucking-Coonfield, and the last thing I wanted to do was get our team disqualified for dropping the baton.

400 meters. 800 meters. 2:35 at the half-mile mark. I can feel Morgin's presence just a few feet behind me. She's breathing hard, undoubtedly exhausted from making up the distance Beth had given me. My teammates are screaming at me from the sidelines, a chorus of *she's gonna get you! She's gonna get you!* Excuse me, but *no she's fucking not.*

I sprint the next lap and a half and win the race in a blur of burning lungs and throbbing calves. My teammates greet me at the finish line, jumping up and down and throwing their arms around me. James Washington wraps me in a bear hug. He's sobbing and laughing hysterically, saying "*you did it. You ran a 5:20 mile. Good job. Good job.*"

PERFECT

1. Toupee Man

When I was thirteen, a middle-aged man wearing a stretched button-down and khakis pulled me out of English class. He had a toupee that convinced no one and glasses that threatened to fall off the tip of his nose.

Mrs. Holmes let me leave class without questioning it. She was so pregnant at the time, we were all sure she was going to explode at any moment and give birth right there in the middle of class.

I don't remember the man's name. I don't think he ever told me, so I just called him Toupee Man in my head. Toupee Man lead me to the Guidance Counselor's Office where I was made to take a series of IQ tests. The tests were supposed to prove that I was extra stupid or extra smart, but I never got back the results.

When I got back to English, my classmates gave me hell. Lily with the great hair laughed and asked if I was officially a retard. Douchebag Jordan with the backwards hat said they all thought the Toupee Man had forced me into a supply closet and done the unspeakable.

That rumor soon became my legacy. My classmates were bored of calling me things like "skinny-bitch" and "clean-freak" I guess, so from that point on I lived out the rest of my eighth-grade days as "the girl who got raped."

To this day, people are always asking me why I'm so quiet. They wonder why I choose to live life in the shadows, below the radar where no one will notice me. I am telling you now, it's because I'm afraid of monsters. And real monsters - they don't live in the shadows. They live in plain fucking sight.

2. *Perfect*

Recess time was what they lived for. The boys played basketball, and the girls played volleyball or walked laps around the track like prisoners or old people in a nursing home. Lily with the great hair and Sierra with the dreadlocks always walked the track and vented about their shitty lives like it was a competition.

"My mom doesn't care about me at all," Sierra said, flipping her dreads. "She was too busy checking Facebook this morning to drive me to school and she made me late. I swear to fucking God, it's like, this is how the order goes: She cares about my sister the most, and then my step-dad, and then her dog, and then *Facebook*, and then me. It is Un. Fucking. Believable."

And then Lily would say, "I got an A on my math test and Katy crumpled it up and threw it in the trash. She keeps talking about how she wants me to go talk to some old dude about divorce, and I'm like 'Mom, I don't care!' And she's the one with the problem anyway. I'm not about to tell her that though. I mean, how do you tell your mom that she's a raging alcoholic? She never listens."

And then I would try to contribute some little bit about my life like that my Mom was losing all of her hair, or that my little brother was dealing weed on the playground

like a young Pablo Escobar, but they would always cut me off before I could get a word in.

“Yeah, yeah. Keep trying, Vera.” Lily would say, waving my words away with her long claw-like fingernails. “We know your life is perfect.”

And so I stopped trying. They didn’t understand how I could love my mom instead of hate her, and I’m pretty sure they bought drugs from my brother anyway.

A new girl named Amanda transferred to our school one day. She had a nose ring and smoked a lot of weed. She befriended Lily almost immediately and together they would walk around the track and talk shit about people. Stoner Amanda’s favorite victims were Blonde Shannon because she was anorexic and Bisexual Mary because she was overweight. She would make it her personal mission to make at least one of them cry every recess. She would scream at Blonde Shannon to eat at lunchtime--which she eventually did--so some of us thought Stoner Amanda was actually helping her. But Shannon started spending after-lunch recess in the bathroom with her fingers down her throat and her head in the toilet. I only know this because she would go to class afterwards looking like something my dad snaked out of the shower drain.

Mary beat the shit out of Stoner Amanda, which was like something out of a movie with everyone screaming fight, fight, fight until the Yard Duty blew her whistle and we all scattered and left them rolling in the wood chips like junkyard dogs.

3. *Radioactive Juice*

Sometime after that, things started to get bad. It was a war out there, and I made a point of staying off the battlefield. I started spending lunch and recess in the math

classroom with Mr. Barsanti. Although I hated math, Mr. B was my favorite teacher. All of the girls had crushes on him because he was twenty four and had cool hair. I would microwave my pasta in a plastic tupperware container and tell him all of my secrets:

“I’m sorry I suck at math, Mr. B.” I said once. “It’s just that I don’t care.”

He asked me why I didn’t care, and I told him there were more important things to care about. I worried about the monsters running wild outside. I worried about the monsters inside my mother’s body, the ones that gave me nightmares about finding her one day - passed out on the kitchen floor with her eyes wide open.

She had just made chocolate chip cookies, her own mother’s recipe. *Oma*, as I called her. Grandma, in German. Oma, who died of breast cancer just a few years after I was born. My mother had said goodbye to her three different times, but Oma didn’t let go until she was left alone. My dad had urged my mom to come with us to the hospital food court. “It’s been days,” he said, “you have to eat something.”

There were other girls who started taking refuge in the math classroom at lunch. Buck-toothed Susanna and Rich Jenna were Mr. B fangirls claiming that they had a passion for the art of math.

I was annoyed that they were there because Mr. B had basically become my therapist by this point. For some reason, I felt like I could trust him. Maybe it was the hair.

One day, I was microwaving my lunch in my usual tupperware and Rich Jenna scolded me, saying “you know that will give you cancer, right? The radioactive juice in the microwave gets melted into the plastic.”

I told her that I didn't give a fuck and she could shut her whore mouth.

She flipped her stupid hair and said "fine, bitch. What do I care if you die?"

That night, I started worrying that maybe Rich Jenna was right and I would get cancer if I microwaved my food in a plastic container. After all, family history was an issue. I took a long shower and brushed my teeth until my gums bled, but even then I couldn't sleep because my skin felt like it was burning and I couldn't get the thought out of my mind that if I went to sleep, I wouldn't wake up in the morning.

4. Broken Record

I took precautions to make sure I wouldn't get sick, bringing in a cold lunch that didn't need microwaving, and scrubbing my hands until my fingers were chapped. By this time I had convinced myself that the cancer was already inside of me just waiting for a chance to strike, but I wasn't going to give it the satisfaction. Clearly, I was no Aristotle when it came to logic. That ship had sailed--or more accurately, it had sunk into the depths of my deep-blue fear.

Stoner Amanda started calling me names, and White-trash Kristie would push me into the mud on the rare days I actually went outside for recess. I found myself in the spotlight again, type-casted into characters that existed only in the minds of my classmates: Rape-girl. Skinny-bitch. Clean-freak.

I remember one day I went into the bathroom to wash my hands, but I didn't because Kristie was cutting herself in the sink and Amanda was crying and smoking and crying. She screamed at me to get the fuck out. I didn't need any further convincing.

I remember blood hitting porcelain under dim lights where the moths fluttered with fatigue. They rode the thin curve of smoke twisting through the air like a train to nowhere.

Despite my efforts, I had developed a sickness. The nightmare version of my mother lying on the kitchen floor kept spinning through my mind. Again, again, again. Again. Again. Her song of life a broken record.

5. *The Beauty of Imperfection*

At this point, my mother's hair was only just starting to grow back. It stuck straight up in spiky patches like when a little kid chops the hair off a barbie. I admit, I had a hard time looking at her when she was like this. She wore a happy mask constantly, and pretended like she was fine for the family's sake.

She was absolutely beautiful, and I was an absolute fucking asshole. She was getting better, but I was still afraid. I shied away from even the touch of her hand. The darkness inside of me framed her out to be the monster under my bed, but it was just another deception. Monsters don't live under your bed. They live inside your head.

Scars never heal completely. They leave something for us to see in the mirror each day, a distortion that tells us we have lived through something that should have killed us. And so came the day when my mother started smiling again.

She grew strong enough to go on runs with me at the beach on the sundays. The dogs chased seagulls with a joy and determination that belonged solely to them, and I remember her saying: "Everyone should be as excited about life as dogs are."

Every friday night, we would eat pizza and watch an episode of “Buffy the Vampire Slayer.” My mom would let me sit next to her in bed, and sometimes I would fetch her bowls of brownie ice cream.

She told me once that life tends to be imperfect except for the moments when it is so perfect it hurts. “The little things are the loudest memories.” she said. They’re always there, leaving tears in your paper heart.

She was always talking about how life was supposed to knock the wind out of you. It should make you cry when you fall and scrape your knee. It should make you struggle to catch your breath when you’re staring up at the stars, or swimming in the ocean, or saying goodbye to someone you love.

It’s bone-shattering, really. It’s deafening.

THE SOLDIER

I do not know much about war. I imagine constant terror. I hear silence, then the cacophony of explosions, gunshots, screaming, crumbling, dying. Chaos. I see blood and dust. I see carnage and bodies bent all out of shape. So much noise, but it's muffled, as if everything is underwater. I imagine war feels a lot like drowning. Even if you manage to keep your head above the surface, you'll be catching your breath for years to come.

The soldier occasionally does yard work at his uncle's house at the top of the big hill on the edge of town. He also babysits his little cousins because Uncle Gerry is too stoned to pay attention to them. The soldier's uncle is the type of person who yells at their kids in public - or worse, at the Thanksgiving dinner table.

One day, I was making breakfast in the kitchen, and the soldier stormed up to me and said "I hate Uncle Gerry. I told him to stay away from my goddamn family."

"Why?" I asked.

"He says I'm being an idiot for joining the army. He says I'm throwing my life away and that recruiters will say anything to get you to join. And I was like, I want to join because I want to fight for my country. If you don't have any goddamn respect for this country, you can fuck off and stay away from my family."

He lit a cigarette and blew a silver ribbon of smoke over my scrambled eggs. The soldier is always smoking. The air he breathes is dry and hazy like California in the summer.

To the left of the rickety swing se stand three statues of men in iron uniforms. The third one holds a large metal plaque which lists the names of people who died fighting in the Civil War. I have never read all the names, but every now and then I trace my fingers along the bumped rigid lettering. The metal is cold to touch even on the most scorching of summer days.

We used to climb on the statues and run our hands over the soldier's tarnished faces, poking and prodding every eye-hole, every curl of a lip. We rode their shoulders piggy-back as if they were our own fathers.

He repeated the Uncle Gerry story to me about twenty times. He told my sister and my dad too. I guess he thought we cared. I'm not even sure why we didn't care, I guess it was just the pointlessness of it all. He was so damn enthusiastic about something that would kill him, or at the very least leave him scarred in more ways than one. For me it was really a matter of not understanding, but I'm pretty sure the soldier took this for aloofness.

One night, my sister and I were watching TV and we could hear someone crying outside, right next to the window. I thought nothing of it until the soldier stumbled in and plunked down next to Jayce on the couch, reeking of booze and cigarettes. His eyes were rimmed with red and puffed out around the edges like wilted rose petals. He had apparently been crying and smoking and drinking outside for the duration of the *Chopped*

marathon we had been watching, which was two whole hours of us pretending not to hear him. Us ignoring the urge to care.

The soldier told us that he had drank an entire six pack, and laughed about how he had been crying. He was crying for his friend, who apparently died fighting in the army. He was so damn matter-of-fact about it, leaving the tears on his cheeks without a care and bubbling over with a drunken repetition of “at least he died with honor! At least he died with honor!” And I realized - that’s why he wants to go.

The soldier knows he will die young, but he doesn’t want it to be from overdose or suicide. His plan involves getting blown to bits with honor.

“Girls love a man in uniform.” He said one day after a night of guzzling beer and snorting God-knows-what. He had hickies wrapped all around his neck like a dog collar.

I gave him a look. “You’re not even in uniform yet. Calm down.”

My sister absolutely hates the soldier at this point. She wants him out of Humboldt County, and out of her life. Jayce is annoyed because the soldier won’t shut up about basic training, and Uncle Gerry, and how much he hates Mom, and how much he hates his ex-girlfriend.

“Oh my God, just shut up!” She said one day, interrupting the soldier during one of his tirades. “Nobody cares!”

The soldier got very quiet. He gripped my sister hard by the shoulders and shook her back and forth as he said: “You mouthin’ off to me? You being a goddamn smartass?” He let go of her shoulders, and looked straight into her eyes--which are

completely unfazed. She's used to this kind of thing. "I would be careful about mouthin' off to me if I were you." He said. "I can snap your little neck in a heartbeat."

After he left, Jayce told me she had wanted to say something, but thought better of it.

"What did you want to say?" I asked.

"I was gonna say 'I don't care. I hope you die in the army like your fucked up friend.'"

I told her it was good she didn't say that. Of course, she doesn't really want the soldier to die. What nobody says is maybe it would be better if he did.

The soldier made Dad drive him all the way to Reno to get a tattoo. He got "Never Forget What You're Fighting For" calligraphed across his rib cage, which I personally think is cliché, but whatever. It's really all about pain for the soldier anyway.

"Never Forget What You're Fighting For" is important to him, I think, because he's not really sure what he's fighting for. He's not fighting for us, and he's not really fighting for America - although he claims that to be his red-blooded reason.

The soldier wants to fight because he's angry. He's angry at himself for how his life turned out; how he has been reduced to an empty ribcage brimming with billows of smoke and pills that don't cure sickness. He's perpetually pissed off at the world for it's damned need to continue, and he can't understand why his body clings to life like the last autumn leaf while his brain is so ready to let go. The thing he is fighting for then, must be himself: The part way deep inside that is good and happy, and bleeds true purpose.

The soldier wants to prove that he is more than just an addict, more than just a statistic, more than just a ribcage.

What people seem to forget is, the soldier is just a kid. The real battlefield is less terrifying than the one he's already been surviving on for so long. The kid already fights every day of his life; the harsh waters thrash him until he covered in blood and black and blue. And yet somehow he has always managed to keep his head above the surface. The real battlefield is proof that the kid is stronger than the monster.

Before I left for college, I told the soldier "if you die, I'm gonna kill you."

He smiled, and absentmindedly scratched at the words etched permanently into his skin.

STILL LIFE OF MY SISTER #2: DON'S DONUTS

Sometimes Jayce sleeps in past three in the afternoon, and on those days I crawl into bed with her. She is usually on her phone, or reading, or simply lying in bed and staring at the ceiling. She avoids the day like it's a deadly virus, and when I ask her questions like "why are you just laying in bed all day" or "how are you not starving to death," she just smiles and stretches and says "because." On these days, I bribe her to get out of bed with the promise of driving to Don's to get donuts and Sprite.

Our donut shop trips are a sacred tradition in which I buy her donuts, and she makes fun of my utter lack of parallel parking skills. It's not exactly a fair trade, but that doesn't matter to me. Donuts from Don's are a quarter at most and are the best you can find anywhere, especially around midnight when the pastries are fresh out of the oven, and the smells of baking and glaze fill the shop to the brim.

My sister always gets a twist, and I get a cinnamon roll. It's beautiful how that never changes. It is like our donut selections are set in stone. We have to get this and that, it's all part of the donut-hole-y ritual.

Usually she is happy, and she tells me stories about kids in her class--who's dating who, and who's cheating on who, and who's the biggest bitch and whatnot--all the sweet chaos of being in eighth grade. She is a pretty girl, one of the really popular ones. She worries that people think *she's* the biggest bitch in eighth grade. I tell her that's probably not true, and she says "yeah, probably. I don't really give a fuck what people think anyway."

A lot of the time, she talks about eyes. She is endlessly fascinated by them - how they can be so many colors at once. She talks about how her favorite kinds of eyes are blue-grey with splashes of green and amber around the rims. I agree that those are the best kind of eyes, and I am surprised that she notices that kind of detail because most kids don't. She says she is jealous of my eyes which are green in the light, but brown the rest of the time. She is bored by her own dark brown eyes, and wishes she could trade them in for more exciting ones.

On occasion, she doesn't even eat her donut. She sips her Sprite and stares out the window, her eyes full of everything and nothing at once. She talks about an addiction to sadness, how sometimes she loves it so much it makes her sick.

When she is angry she strangles her donut in her fist, crushing it down to doughy crumbs and sugar crystals that dust the table like snow.

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HOLE IN THE WALL

1.) Dust

My brother was hiding bottles and various baggies of white stuff in the holes he had punched out in his bedroom wall. I had known that for years. He covered the holes with posters and pieces of furniture: a piss-colored couch he had found on the side of the road, my old art desk with the slanted surface and colored pencil marks. I would often visit his room to play Mario Kart and have a beer. He would peel back his Jimi Hendrix poster and pull out a Budweiser, casual as ever. I swear, he had a whole bar stashed within that hole in the wall, and because he trusted me enough not to snitch on him, I never did.

Two years later, I am a sophomore in college, and my parents are sobbing hysterically into a Skype camera.

“Your brother’s in the hospital,” my mother says. “He overdosed.”

My heart drops into my stomach. A lump the size of a bowling-ball forms in my throat. “What?”

“He told us everything.” Hot tears are dripping off of her chin. Dad wraps his arm around her shoulder, shaking slightly. “I don’t know if you knew this, but he has been doing meth.”

I shake my head. I knew he had at least tried it, but when he talked about meth, it was with such hatred for the substance that I didn’t think he would try it ever again.

What was it like? I had asked.

Amazing. He said. *And then horrible.*

☆

Ben was constantly punching holes into his own life, always driven by drugs or pure passionate rage. He punched holes into his body, destroying himself until he looked skeletal, almost. He lobotomized himself with methamphetamine and moonshine until his face forgot how to make any sort of expression. I don't think I have ever seen that kid drink a glass of water.

During this time, my heart became heavy and rough around the edges like the walls of a concrete cell. My brother punched holes in it until his hands bled, and little bits of me chipped away until finally, nothing was left but dust.

2.) *Medicine*

And so I started taking daily doses of Prozac. I fasted for days, drinking nothing but three cups of coffee in the morning and a flask full of gin at night. I lost the ability to feel pleasure. I lost the ability to feel anything. I fantasized about killing people. I held my head in my hands and cried because I fantasized about killing people. Once, I ran the blade of a swiss army knife over my face. I imagined what it would feel like to dig in - to cut into the ridge of my cheekbone and slice downwards towards the curve of my smile.

Most of the time I couldn't help but hunch over from the weight of my own heart. Other times, I felt uncomfortably light - my ribcage hollow, my stomach empty. Aside from the fact that it basically turned me into a Prozac zombie with permanent writer's block, the medicine helped a lot. I remember how it felt to start feeling again. It was like being cradled by an enormous hand - my cerebellum was poked and prodded until life

began to slowly and surely make sense again. I was lifted out of bed by my shirt collar, and shoved forcefully into life, and after awhile it seemed beautiful again.

It was and continues to be a fake beauty that I decided to be okay with. It's not happiness exactly, but it's close enough.

3.) *Daddy*

My father is sometimes my favorite parent. I never have to filter myself in front of him, meaning I can say the word "fuck" and drink wine in his presence without judgement. I think my dad is sometimes my brother's favorite parent too. Our dad kept Ben's darkest secrets from our mother, and so there was a lot of trust there, but also a heaping tablespoon of betrayal. Stir it all together and you get a 15 year old meth addict. Bake it at 350 degrees and you get parents who sleep in separate rooms for the next five years. They'll claim it's because they're concerned your brother will kill himself, and so Dad sleeps closer to his room. They'll claim it's because they're worried about your little sister. Mom will say "it's because Dad snores," and you'll believe her, because it's easier.

A year after Ben gets arrested, our parents can finally bear to enter his room. Dad fills the holes in his bedroom wall with spackle and paints over them with off-white. Mom buys a new bed and ocean-themed decorations. When I come home for winter break, she says "do you want to see the new guest room?" You would never be able to tell that a teenage meth addict once lived there, or that our parents raised a kid that shot up a house in a neighborhood two blocks away from our high school.

The day my brother got arrested, Dad kept it a secret. The day my brother got arrested, Dad started hiding a bottle of gin under his bed.

4.) Plastered

My little brother was born a prodigy and an alcoholic. He could speak in full intellectual sentences before the age of two, but failed to stop wetting the bed until he was thirteen. He scored above average on standardized tests, but didn't know how to tie his shoes until he was well into his teenage years. He was born brilliant, and impulsive, and thoughtful, and angry. He was born with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome to a mother that was too drunk and drugged to take proper care of him. My mother, who doesn't drink and has never put drugs in her body, adopted him with the naive hope that unconditional love and care is all any child needs to thrive.

This method seemed to work well enough for me - accidental pregnancy that I was - but it wasn't enough for Ben. Ben needed to be connected to an oxygen tank every week to help him breathe properly. Ben frequently spat up his food, and as a teenager, his appetite was killed by his meth-use. I remember my dad putting dinner on the table every night, and Ben saying "I already ate," even though he hadn't.

Alcohol became a staple meal for him at the age of twelve. He would spend hours in the shower chugging a six pack he had stolen from our dad. He would call me at two in the morning on a Tuesday, absolutely plastered and in need of a ride home. Sometimes, when I heard the phone ringing, I didn't answer it.

HUMBOLDT (2)

Do you remember getting lost at the annual Humboldt County Oyster Festival?

You are seven years old. The plaza is a mass of bodies oozing with fish-smell, the air a billow of smoke, sweat, salt and menstrual blood.

You are sitting under the tree all the kids used climb, the one with branches like the arms of your father, and leaves like paper cranes. People in flowy skirts dance barefoot, and some of them kiss and wrestle in the over-watered grass. A woman with long dark hair slurps from an oyster-shell; she won't stop looking at you, asking with her marijuana-dried eyes if you are lost.

The band in the center of the plaza bangs loud on steelpan drums, so when she comes up to you and asks with her oyster-soaked mouth if you are lost you can hardly hear her.

Let's go to the police station, she says, and holds your hand in hers, gingerly, (as one might hold a half-ripe peach). One time, she says, back in '98, a trucker walked into the Arcata Police Department and pulled from his pocket a severed breast - packaged air-tight in a Ziploc bag. The dark-haired woman leans down next to you, close, so that you can smell the oyster juice and wine on her breath; she is whispering something in your ear but you don't hear what she says, you hear your mother's voice from nearby - sweet and salty.

Your name on her lips is like the curl of a tongue on the inside of an indigo-violet shell.

PART THREE:

~ Ragdoll ~

THE METH ADDICT

My mother always squinted at my brother's little girlfriends with the disgust and contempt that she usually reserved for when the dog took a shit in the house. He was and always will be her precious little boy, and she would be damned if any high school girl was going to take that away from her.

Every girl Ben brought home was a carbon copy of his first girlfriend. Dimples. A silver hoop in her right nostril. Blonde curly hair like a halo or a crown. He loved her like a junkie loves his fix - spending every waking hour with her, giggling behind a half-open bedroom door, sharing beer bottles and bong rips. She was a feathery wisp, that girl - a shy little bookworm who hid behind hoodies and too much black eyeliner. She was cool, I guess, because she liked Buffy the Vampire Slayer and her favorite author was Marcus Zusak. Despite what our mother would say about her - she was way too good for Ben.

To be honest, most girls were too good for Ben. As the older sibling, I was supposed to protect him from all the pretty girls who chewed him up and spit him out like Bazooka Joe bubble gum. But I realized early on that he wasn't the one that needed protecting:

Girl from our high school: "Hey, are you Ben's sister?"

Me: "Uh... Ben is *my* brother, yeah."

Girl from our high school: "Well, just to let you know, your brother's an asshole.

He hit my friend."

When I think about Ben these days, I do not see a person who is violent or angry. I see a skeleton sitting hunched in a concrete box. He makes tally marks on the walls and keeps his head down, and that's all.

But I remember the holes he covered up with Jimi Hendrix posters in his bedroom. I remember going to school one day with a black eye.

That was an accident, in the same way that getting addicted to crystal meth was an accident. My brother never did anything half-ass, I'll give him that. "Taking the SAT's" meant getting a near-perfect score. "Messing with our little sister" meant chasing her around the house with a kitchen knife. "Going to a party" meant snorting cocaine off the nipples of some unconscious girl. "Getting out of Humboldt County" meant joining the military. I think his impulsiveness was a side effect of the meth addiction - as was his compulsive lying and skeletal frame. Meth was a parasite. It used his body as a host and devoured him from the inside out. He soon transformed into someone I didn't recognize, and by the time he turned sixteen, he was filled to the brim with crystal; his eyes glassy, his brain like styrofoam packing peanuts.

It's like watching your brother die from the inside out. It's like he's getting mauled by some vicious animal, silently. Slowly. And there's nothing you can do about it.

Is Ben's impulsiveness a side effect of his meth addiction? Or is it actually the other way around? He was impulsive even before he started loading himself with substances. He was the type of kid to jump into the deep end of a pool without knowing how to swim, the type of kid to climb the tallest redwood tree he could find and then call for help when he couldn't get down. This is the kid who got a near-perfect score on the SAT. This is the kid who wrote his girlfriend honest-to-God love letters, the kid who cried from guilt after stealing a stupid yellow truck from Toys R Us.

Before my brother painted his life black and grey, he lived every moment with beautiful and inexplicable vividness. He sprinted, blind and fearless, into the darkness, swinging life around like a straw-haired rag-doll, until one day he smacked her hard against a telephone pole and her head popped clean off.

STILL LIFE OF MY SISTER #3: DYSFUNCTIONAL

The first time Ben got arrested, Jayce and I stayed huddled in my room. Again I found myself holding my breath and pressing my ear against the door. We listened to Mom wailing curses at our brother, each “fuck” a tidal wave. She was crying again. With age, I find that gets harder to listen to.

Jayce started firing questions at me. What I was doing, listening at the door like that? What did Ben do, and why did Mom call the cops on him? Her questions interrupted my listening, and I was only able to pick up bits and pieces of the loud conversation downstairs.

My brother hyperventilating: “I’m having an anxiety attack!”

My mother yelling: “Don’t bring that shit into my fucking house!”

My sister sat on my bed, sighing and fidgeting. She asked if I wanted to play *Battleship* or *Uno*.

I raised an eyebrow at her, wondering how she could think about board games at a time like this, but I figured it would be a nice distraction. I grabbed the *Battleship* game from my bookshelf and blew off the dust. As we played, she asked if she could spend the night in my room.

I said yes, and we set up a mattress next to my bed with the sheets arranged just the way she liked them.

The mattress is still there today, but like *Battleship*, a thin layer of dust has fallen over the covers. When I'm home, it fills my nose with an antique smell. It is almost like living and sleeping in a museum. Don't touch the artwork. Don't mess up the bedsheets. Let the dust settle and make its mark of time.

I remember pacing in the kitchen one night, counting my footsteps, and swearing under my breath. My sister had previously jumped out at me from behind the door with her hair hung in front of her face like the girl from *The Ring*. It not only scared me shitless, but it somehow triggered the completely unrelated idea that she was going to kill herself.

And so I paced back and forth, unable to stop because if I stopped, my sister would die. There was no logical reasoning behind this, but I believed it with all my anxious heart and broken mind. After about thirty minutes, I began to get light-headed. I yelled for Jayce to come to the kitchen, and I made her promise not to kill herself that night.

She said I just needed to calm down, and she hugged me so that I could stop pacing. I sunk to the ground as a result of dizziness, but she didn't let go. She held me even after I stopped shaking, and together we sat on the kitchen floor.

She started telling me dramatic stories about her classmates, and pretty soon we were talking and laughing again like everything was normal.

That was all I could ever ask for, really. For my little malfunction to be forgotten. I didn't want to be patronized by my mother or analyzed by some psychiatrist. I just wanted to be normal.

My sister could understand that better than anyone. She reminded me about the time she hit mom over bed sheets, and how she can only eat popcorn while wearing plastic sandwich bags over her hands. She told me again of how she loved sadness like drug. She wished she could smoke sadness like a cigarette and exhale it like silver ribbons, making people cough and scowl in disapproval.

The kitchen has fallen silent. When she holds your hand it is clean and warm, and when she looks at you it feels important, like you matter. Her eyes don't hold judgement. They are wild, and bright, and alive. Like art. Like the sea.

THE MIDDLE OF FUCKING NOWHERE

*"You and me
We've been stepping around the truth
For a long time.
I'd have thought you'd be tired of this by now -
God knows I am.
There's been a lot of damage
Some we can't even see,
Whatever you do to do
You also do to me,
So please stop killing me."*

- Dad wrote a song about Ben and gave it to Mom for Christmas, which was beautiful - or extremely harrowing, depending on how you look at it.

Where he went is a place with no substance. Nowhere to escape to except little California ghost-towns dotting the drought-soaked desert like freckles. All you can think about is how his face is sallow and caked with dust. How his teeth are ground into little grey nubs; his saliva like paste in the corner of his mouth. You think about the track marks that crater his forearms; his tattoos, his drippy nose, his eyelids so heavy he might be asleep. He might just be asleep.

High Desert State Prison. Middle-of-Fucking-Nowhere-Ville, California. 5:30 AM shower and breakfast. He returns to his cell by 6:30 and goes back to sleep. There's a

toilet next to his bed. There's a *fucking* toilet next to his bed. He wants to call home, but the trustee in charge of the phones only lets other inmates make calls in exchange for instant coffee. He wants to write letters to Mom and Dad, but the trustee in charge of outgoing mail is apparently known for stealing stamps. The prison is almost always on lockdown, for one reason or another. People say the problem with prison is the gangs, but I think the problem is that prison is so boring and brutal that people have to form gangs to survive. The problem is that things like real milk and Snickers bars and instant coffee are luxuries.

Last time I talked to Ben on the phone, he said he was "running with the gays," which I guess means he's in a gay gang. He says being in a gay gang in prison is basically like having a target painted on your forehead, but he also reckons it's better than joining some skinhead white supremacy group. Ben was recently moved into a single cell because he got attacked by his cellmate. Actually... no. His cellmate didn't just attack him. He tried to rape him.

Ben doesn't really talk about this much. He won't share the details with me, or Dad, or Mom because he thinks we won't be able to handle it. And that's fair, I think, because we do suck at handling it. When I first found out about Ben's sexual assault, I started getting angry at people I didn't know, with their marshmallow-soft poodles and perfect babies displayed all over the internet. They eat up digital "likes" on Instagram until they become obese. People can be such fucking barbie-dolls and diet coke-heads sometimes. They don't want to know what's real anymore.

Dad is the one who tells me about Ben's almost-rape. He had heard about it from our old babysitter, Laney, who Ben apparently writes letters to more frequently than he writes any of his family members. He does this because Laney isn't related to him, but she's trustworthy, and she's only five years older than me so she understands what it's like to be in your early twenties. I mean, I also understand what that's like. But he hardly writes to me. He doesn't want me to know about the shit he goes through on a daily basis, which is reasonable, but I feel like not knowing hurts more than knowing.

Dad keeps telling Ben to just "fly below the radar" while he's in prison, but that's not something that comes easily to him. Unlike me, he doesn't believe in keeping his head down and edging around the bullshit. No, he always has to be right in the midst of it. My parents have spent a long time trying to figure him out, as if he's anything more than a black hole sucking at the sanity of our mother, or a canyon overflowing with I-don't-fucking-knows. I don't know, *and I don't know him*, and they don't know him.

All I know is, there is a silent scream hidden within the corners of my mother's mouth. All I know is, we are stuck in different middle-of-fucking-nowhere. All of us wretches, worn down and permi-fried, hanging on to the legs of our father on Christmas day.

HUMBOLDT (3)

You go with your parents to a Christmas tree lot the day before Christmas Eve. All you want is to buy your mom a nice tree because she loves Christmas, and she's used to real trees from her childhood -- the ones that smell like wood and dew and wild. You search frantically for a tree that fits your budget. Maybe you can hide the bald spots with the ornaments you made in elementary school. When you find the perfect tree, your mom inspects it and says it's pretty darn good. You insist on buying it for her this year because she's always done so much for you, and it's Christmas after all. The family selling the trees lives in a rusty trailer next to the lot, and you pay them in cash through the shotgun window. The man takes your money with a toothless smile and asks if you would like to purchase any meth with your Christmas tree. You decline and he is really very nice and apologetic about it as he straps the tree to the roof of your dad's car and wishes you a Merry X-Mas.

As your dad drives through the streets of Eureka, you notice all the familiar places - the comic book store going out of business, the run-down shopping mall, a hotel-turned-crack-den. You notice the tweakers sitting on the curb of the rain-loved sidewalk. They pass a pipe back and forth, the bowl a fiery pinpoint that illuminates red in the rain and the fog. You remember that time you tried to walk alone from the Bayshore Mall all the way to the Broadway theater to meet your dad and brother. You

remember how you got so scared of the junkies sitting on the curb that you sprinted into the nearest coffee shop and called your dad to come and get you.

On the way back from the Christmas tree lot, your dad stops at that same coffee shop. You sip hot chocolate through a candy-cane striped straw, and watch the cars drive by through the fog-stained windows.

STILL LIFE: WITHDRAWAL AT 2 AM

I think there is something so beautiful about a lock of hair that has fallen out of place. Or how, at 2 AM, there is nothing to grasp hold of but the neck of an empty bottle. There he is, lying lopsided, disheveled, on a piss-soaked futon. The dog has tucked herself underneath his arm. His mother has lain a blanket over both of them.

The boy digs his fingernails, caked with dirt, into the matted fur of the dog, who burrows her head into the crook of his neck and makes him sneeze. The boy shakes violently, soaked to the bone with cold sweat, cold urine, warm blanket, warm dog, white meth, white mother. Treading water. Drowning, almost. He can barely breathe.

The boy couldn't breath on his own for the first six months of his life because his birth mother filled his fetus with alcohol and meth before he was even born. His real mother had to connect him to a machine that breathed for him. He needed a special formula too, one that was chocked full of medicine instead of Malibu rum.

It doesn't have to be beautiful. The sweaty hair, the disintegrated teeth. His fingernails dug into the scruff of the family dog at 2 AM. The difficulty of doing the simplest thing in the world - breathing. The struggle to stay alive, or his inexplicable resilience. There is no beauty here, except perhaps in his naïvety or stupidity, or his stubborn need to fuck his life over again and again and again. It doesn't have to be beautiful though. And he doesn't have to be beautiful. He doesn't have to be anything except alive.

PART FOUR:

~ Heart-shaped box ~

MY BROTHER IS A FISH

My mother put my brother in a heart-shaped box and played classical music on repeat. Torture by Bach and Shostakovich. Little mid-western boy. Cheese-head, pot-head, meth-head motherfucker trapped in a music box. Ballerina dances around in circles, her pink feet nailed to the floor. She is banished to a life of *dance for grandma, dance for grandma*. Don't stop moving, or you might drop dead.

He can't really be dead, right? The family dog. The Great Aunt. My mother runs ten sometimes fifteen miles a day. She has not consumed a single drop of alcohol since her son tried to kill someone. My brother is in a box again, this time with concrete walls engraved with "fuck you"s. He took a switchblade to my mother's stomach and gutted her. And so, my mother is a fish. She'll never be the same again, now that her insides are outside.

My brother fasted for three days, and for three nights he binged and gutted himself like a fish. His contents seeped out, spilled all over the hardwood floor. My mother sewed the seams along my brother's sides and around his neck. Ragdoll. Headless ragdoll. *You play too rough*, she said. One time, we salted a bowl full of banana slugs, and so she put us into our respective little boxes and threw the keys into that junk drawer in the kitchen - the one full of old batteries and Halloween-themed napkins. My mother is a hoarder. She always wants to save everything.

HUMBOLDT(4)

Three years after graduating from high school, you are 21 and home for the holidays. Your high school friend, Sahul, who's a year younger, calls you up and asks you to buy him alcohol. No one in your friend group really started drinking until college, except for Beth and Molly, who were oftentimes offered wine and liquor by their parents. Molly wasn't particularly a fan of this, but Beth seemed okay with it. She has a taste for beer that you still don't understand, as beer mostly makes you feel too full and bloated. No, you unfortunately have more of a taste for margaritas, and so that's what you end up buying for your underage friend during the winter break of your 21st year.

"I brought tequila and margarita mix," you say, as you walk into Sahul's house indiscreetly carrying the bottle of Jose Cuervo. His mom is out of town. Two other guys from your high school are sitting on the couch, wide-eyed and eager. They are naive little fuckers - one a catholic sex freak and the other a fresh-out-of-the-closet, sweater-obsessed cinnamon roll.

After three or four or five margaritas, the four of you are wandering around Arcata, drunk and in search of pizza. Someone says they've never had pizza from Don's before. *You've never had pizza from Don's before? What the hell is wrong with you?* So of course, you have to go to Don's. This night feels important. You feel like a teenager again, except now it's legal to drink. You feel like you're back in high school, shooting the shit with your old friends. That feels really fucking important. It's a feeling that, in

this moment, you could have sworn you were never going to get back. And here you are, drunk off your ass, and invincible. Sweating out tequila, and pretending to pole-dance at the elementary school playground. And God, it's so fucking stupid - but it also couldn't be more beautiful.

THE STONER

It was easy when my brother was only into smoking weed. Weed is baby stuff. He once got so high that he spent three hours telling me about how fucked up Sea World is. And it is fucked up - I just didn't expect Ben to be such a beacon of information on this particular topic. It's the only time I can remember him being truly passionate about something. Maybe he should have been an animal rights activist or something. Anyway, I loved stoner Ben. He was friendly, and he always seemed so happy. It was wonderful to see him like that - animated and wide-eyed and just fucking alive for once.

The Arcata plaza is crawling with stoners - long-haired and draped in layers of tie-dye scarves. Many of them are homeless, and use patchouli oil to cover up the smell that often comes with not showering for a few months. My mother calls them "plaziods" because she thinks she's more civilized than them, when really they just have a different definition of civilization. A stoner's philosophy is short and brilliant: Smoke weed. Be happy. Don't be an asshole. The so-called plaziods have discovered something sacred and beautiful - something that my brother would never be able to experience.

He never really fit into a community, which was one penalty of living with our straight-edged parents. He didn't belong with the plaziods, but he also didn't belong with the preppy rich kids who ate in their cars at lunch time and blasted the worst top 40's. The latter probably would have been me, except I hated most people in high school and didn't have a lot of friends. The only difference between my brother and I is my decision

to eat lunch alone in the library versus his decision to smoke joints behind the gym with the rest of the burnouts. It's basically like there are two paths rejected kids can go down: We can dive into academics, or turn to drugs. Either way, we were pretty fucking miserable.

And high school was so boring for someone as smart as my brother. He turned his middle finger to the bullshit and started using his grand IQ to figure out where to get the best weed, or how to hit three keggers before curfew. As bad as this might sound, I miss this Ben. At least he was in high school instead of prison - nevermind the mentally ill man who used to stand in front of our school holding a sign that said "High Schools are Prisons." And come to think of it, the high school actually did use prison bells to indicate the end of class, but hey - we got to go home at the end of the day. My brother doesn't get to go home, not for a decade at least. He's going to miss his entire twenties, which honestly sucks more than anything. There are no flowery, ultra-descriptive words for how much that sucks - it just does. Every kid looks forward to their twenties. Every kid looks forward to the kind of college nights you think only exist in movies, except these perfect nights really do happen, and they're weed and wine fueled and wonderful. Every kid should get a chance to be a kid, and every college kid should get a chance to be an idiot. I wish I could explain this to my mother, but the words never come out right. It's no use anyway. She went to college when she was 16, and so she was never me and never will be.

She is even less the stoner, who is so good at hiding that he almost disappeared into his piss-soaked futon. It was like he didn't know what to do with the love our mother

smothered him with, and ultimately he didn't have much of a choice but to sink into it. Our mother was never a child because she was born a genius, and my brother was never a child because he was born a junkie. They are the same in the sense that neither of them had much trust for anyone. There could have been some sort of bond there, except they couldn't trust each other. The stoner - the junkie - was paranoid and skeptical, and the mother was way too fucking concerned about trying to make things perfect. She couldn't mold the stoner like she molded me. I always let shit happen. My brother made shit happen. I looked up to him and out for him the best I could, but there came a time when I had to let go of his hand, and I found out the hard way that he wasn't as strong as I thought he was. Like my mother, he was faking the happiness. Like my mother, he was being alive and hating every sober minute of it.

Having a stoner brother is also easier to explain than having a meth-head brother. When I told my friends, casually, that my brother smoked pot, they were full of unnecessary concern and apologies. That was years ago. When I told my friends - not so casually - that my brother was addicted to meth, they didn't seem to know what to say. One of my best friends, either Emma or Beth said: "Oh shit, I had that kid Konnor in my calculus class" when I sent them a link to the infamous Lost Coast Outpost article. Beth then said, after actually reading the article: "just realized the full significance of this. I'm so sorry Seabiscuit," which was the goofy nickname my mother had super-glued to me for the entirety of my high school cross country career. It's okay. I understand that there really isn't any "correct" response to this. And I'm not sure why I sent my friends the article in the first place. I don't know what kind of reaction I expected or wanted from

them. There was so much anger there that I didn't know what to do with. My parents told me to keep Ben's arrest a secret, but even now, I find myself looking for any possible opportunity or excuse to talk about it.

ONE PARTICULAR PHONE CALL

After ten months of sitting in a max security cell at High Desert State Prison, Ben got moved to Corcoran State Prison, the infamous home of Charles Manson before he died. Ben has been moved around a lot. First, he was thrown in San Quentin for processing. Then, he was bussed to High Desert State Prison on the border between California and Nevada. Now, he's at Corcoran, although he says he's trying to get moved to yet another prison near Sacramento. He's desperate to be close to home, but the closest prison to Arcata is Pelican Bay Prison in Crescent City, which is known to be one of the most brutal prisons in America. Go figure.

I've grown to dread my mother's phone calls because she only ever calls to give me updates about Ben: "He got in a fight." "He's in solitary confinement." "He got moved to a different prison." Fucking etcetera. She recently diagnosed him with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome - which if anyone had taken the time to pay an ounce of attention to Ben - should have been blatantly obvious. And I love my mom. I really do. But it's really fucking hard to love her now that her mind has become one-tracked. She stretches herself between the roles of doctor and mother - both full-time unfuckupable jobs in which fucking up is all too inevitable. She finds herself worrying about her son before she even opens her eyes in the morning. She finds that in letters to him, she doesn't know what to say.

I never know what to say either. I'm not sure if I can pull out the piece of college-ruled notebook paper and pull off the extra bits along the serrated edge, and

address the envelope with my brother's prison number, and put a fucking God Bless America postage stamp in the right-hand corner. After all that, I'm not sure if I can bring myself to take a pencil to the page - you're not allowed to write in pen, or else they send the letter back - and write "hey moron, heard you're up in Manson's crib now," or "I'm so worried about you. Are you doing okay?" I mean, both sound fucking stupid, right? I should just ask him what it's like in there, but there's a big part of me that really doesn't want to know. I always find myself telling him about what's going on in my world, the free world. He likes to hear about that stuff, I think. It provides a distraction.

The prison community is an extremely interesting dynamic. You have to create a family inside that space because chances are, you might never see your real family again. One has to find the balance between making the most of prison life while not getting completely sucked into it. Join a gang if that's what's necessary for survival, but don't carve a fucking swastika into your forehead, unless you're as insane as Charles Manson. My brother already tattooed devil horns onto his scalp while he was at the Humboldt County jail, which I guess is fine as long as he has hair. This should have remained a secret, except my mother had the unfortunate privilege of seeing his devil horns during a visit. Ben is such an idiot sometimes, honestly. Or he's brilliant in all the wrong ways.

At this point, it's really an endless plethora of I-don't-knows. I don't know what kind of gang he is going to join next, or when he'll inevitably get into his next fight. I don't know if he'll prosper as a prison tattoo artist, or if he'll slit his wrists with a contraband razor blade. I have no fucking idea about any of it, but I want you to know that I am always waiting for one particular phone call from my mother. I am on the edge

of my seat, waiting for her to say, with a mouth full of tears: “Ben is dead. You never come home so I had to tell you over the phone. Your brother is dead.” I’m going to be ready. Whatever comes next, I’ll be ready.

PART FIVE:

~ Beautiful ~

INVINCIBLE

We are invincible. Our legs burn like justice, but we can hardly feel it. The lemon-drop sun melts through the trees, and illuminates the universe in dew-dropped leaves. Green. But not like emeralds - no, it's more complicated than that. The forest is the green in the eyes of a girl everyone loves.

Beth makes it her personal mission to stomp through every puddle she sees, soaking all of us in the process. By the end of the run, our legs are caked with mud, so we wash off in the river before heading back to school. We do this for Sophie, so Mike - one of the assistant coaches and Sophie's over-attentive father - won't give her a hard time. He blames us for the deterioration of her running career, which is deflating slowly like a balloon that refuses to acknowledge its imminent death.

Mike is a retired ultramarathon champion now living vicariously through his daughter - who up until now was somewhat of a prodigy. She could run a five minute mile by the time she was ten. Any parent would be proud. Somehow, though, it was never good enough for Mike. She needed to be half-a-second faster. She needed to be at least five steps in front of the pack at all times. It wasn't about fun anymore, it was all about control, and power, and *winning*. If she won, he won. If she lost, it was the end of the world. He put so much pressure on her that by the time she was sixteen, she hated running with every fibre of her being.

I know he killed the runner inside of her, because I was there to witness the murder. We all were. Now she runs like a corpse, an empty shell, and he screams at her always as if she can still hear.

This is why we keep returning to the forest. It somehow knows us better than we will ever know ourselves. We go where Mike cannot follow. These twisting hills and puddle-soaked trails belong to us. Our legs burn, but we can hardly feel it. It's like proof that we are alive.

A runner is dead. Two are majorly injured.

It's October and raining when we get the news. Hit and run. A mother, a wife, a teacher, a runner. The driver is still on the run from the law. Six Rivers Running Club has set up accounts for those who wish to donate: Medical fund, medical fund, memorial fund.

My favorite assistant coach, Greg, does not show up for practice that day. His friend is suddenly a seven-digit number attached to a memorial fund, and there's nothing he can do about it. She is a name in the paper, a face in a picture frame hanging on the wall. It happened so fast, so fucking fast, a mother, a wife, a teacher, a runner, a friend. A hit and run. And Greg does not show up for practice that day.

When we ask Greg's son Kevin why he's not here, he says Greg is quitting the team. He can't do it anymore, not after what happened. And definitely not with Mike around.

"He's leaving us alone with Mike," he says. "So we're basically fucked." Kevin is more pissed off than anyone.

Mike doesn't say one word about the dead runner. He doesn't even seem to notice that Greg isn't there. He sends us off on a run in the forest - a brutal workout with

a hill Molly has dubbed “the bitch” for good reason. Ordinarily we would have been thrilled to take on the challenge of “the bitch,” but without Greg here, everything feels wrong.

We don’t follow the crowd. We go off-road and trail-blaze through the razor-sharp ferns and branches until we come to a small clearing closed off by an ancient hollowed-out stump. We huddle in a little circle next to the stump - Me, Beth, Kevin, Sahul, Emma, Molly - blocking ourselves from the cold like penguins. We don’t say much. Some of us are crying. Some of us stare at nothing; like the old tree, we are petrified. Kevin is hitting the blackened stump with a large stick, chipping off bits of charcoaled redwood and soggy green moss.

There is a lump in my throat I can’t swallow. If I do so much as breathe, it will break.

After practice, I call Greg. His phone goes straight to voicemail, and I immediately start sobbing. I leave him a tearful voicemail saying how I was really sorry about what happened to his friend, and that the whole team was really upset. I tell him he has to come back and coach us. “You can’t leave us alone with Mike,” I beg. “Please.”

The next day, I wake up to a text. He can’t coach us this season. It doesn’t make him happy anymore, it makes him tired and broken. He would be there to watch us run at the State Meet, and he would try coaching again in the Spring for track season, but there was nothing he could do to save us right now.

I tell him it’s okay and that I understand, although I don’t at the time.

We can deal with the “right now” on our own. That’s why we run anyway, isn’t it? To get through the now, to skip ahead to whenever the burning doesn’t hurt anymore. Something always hurts though, I think. Whether it’s right now, or three years from now when Greg sends me the text that began all of this: “Vera, we are so so sorry to hear about Ben. Let us know if there’s anything we can do.”

Running is such a mental game. I truly believe that it has taught me more about myself than my mother or school ever could. Somehow, it has simultaneously toughened my outsides and softened my insides. It has given me friends and joy and perspective on all of the different and complicated sides of life. It has made me feel higher than drugs or alcohol ever could. I am so grateful that I started running, and I’m even more grateful that I haven’t stopped. I have myself to thank for that, which is a weird feeling. I don’t think I’ve ever thanked myself for anything.

The most important thing running has taught me is that I’m tougher than I think I am. I can do fucking anything, and I can cope with fucking everything. What happened to my brother is the biggest and saddest event I have ever had to grapple with. My mother has started running daily, ever since that hot day in July when he got arrested. Like my brother, she is serving time. For 4,745 days, 113,880 hours, and so many fucking minutes - she will run for him. There’s an interconnectedness there that she’s still looking for, as if her son might be in the salty beach wind or the rustling of the redwood trees. There’s something that feels so perfect about this. Maybe even to the point where it hurts.

ASPHYXIATION

A boa constrictor kills not by asphyxiation, but by cutting off blood flow to the brain. It squeezes and molds you like playdough. It wrings you out until your body gives up completely, and crumbles like a stale corn muffin. The death takes seconds, but it feels like years. The boa constrictor can smell fear with a flick of its monstrous tongue. It knows your smell long before you even know it's there: Rust. Iron. So much blood.

When I was in the fifth grade, I bought a pet vine snake named Verde. He was a slick scaly whip about the length of my forearm and the width of my little finger. I played with him everyday after school. He would twist and pour through my fingers like sand, and flick his forked tongue menacingly.

He died about two weeks after I bought him. Maybe it was because he never ate his crickets, which lay dead next to his corpse--a tiny graveyard. His eyes were milky glass. There were rips in the usually flawless seam between his stomach and his backside, where heaps of brown guts overflowed like feathers from an overstuffed pillow.

My dad scooped up the corpse and wrapped it in a paper towel. I made a little coffin for my snake out of a tissue box. My mom was gardening at the time, and when I walked outside and told her Verde had died, she dug a hole next to my favorite cherry blossom tree, and together we had a memorial service. I lowered the coffin into the grave and sprinkled it with pink petals. My mom wrapped her arm around my shoulder and told me about her own mother's funeral, and then we stood silently for some time just

watching the little mound of dirt and feeling the sun pouring down on our skin like honey. I put a rock over his grave like a tombstone, so I could remember.

When my sister was four years old, she lived in an orphanage in China. Her bed crawled with bugs and snakes that bit at her arms and legs at night. Black lizards scaled the walls like lightning. She could hear them. And she would lie still and listen to the scuttling and the biting and the babies crying in the darkness.

The first night we brought her home, it was like she couldn't stop crying. She didn't sleep at night. I only knew this because I shared a bedroom with her. The constant crying eventually got to my mother's sanity, and she began saying things like "fine! She can go back to that hell-hole for all I care!"

The hell-hole in question was China. My mother saw herself as my sister's savior, but in Jayce's eyes, she was somewhat of a villain. She had ripped her from that hell-hole -- that hell-hole that served as an absence of home -- and yet it *was* home. Jayce had family there, and our strange pale faces did not serve as adequate substitutes. We were like snakes in comparison to the people she knew at the orphanage. We were slimy and suffocating. We fought for gulps of her love, sinking our teeth into any shred of happiness she displayed during those first hard months. She had been malnourished from living in the orphanage. My family overfed her with love and desperation. No wonder she felt overwhelmed.

About a month after she had been living with us, I bought Verde and set his tank up in our room next to my bed. I was not yet aware of my sister's fear of snakes, so I was

surprised and disappointed when she didn't immediately warm up to my new slithery friend. For three nights, she wouldn't even step foot in our bedroom, and my mom kept saying "I think she's afraid of Verde," and I kept saying "Verde wouldn't hurt her. She just needs to meet him."

But she wouldn't. And then he died. And she was relieved.

One time, I found a cinnamon-skinned garter snake half-crushed in the middle of the road next to my house. His tail lay flat and crooked, barely attached to the rest of his body. Still alive--the snake flicked his tongue lazily, and began inching towards the side of the road.

There is a ravine across the street from my house where people dump their Christmas trees and hide little baggies of white stuff in abandoned mole-holes. The snake, I assume, had a home there. Perhaps he had come up for a sun-bath on the sizzling pavement, but instead was nearly sliced in half. Perhaps the injury drove him mad with rage, for he would never be able to slither again. Or he would, but it wouldn't be the same. Or maybe the poor fellow wanted to die. He had had enough of the monotony of his snake life, the constant shedding, the noisy crickets, the quiet mice.

In an attempt to be a decent human-being, I scraped his broken body from the street and started carrying him to the side of the road where he would be safe. Without warning, the bastard whirled his head around and clamped on to the sleeve of my sweatshirt, jaw unhinged.

I screamed, ripped the serpent from my sleeve, and flung it into the ravine.

A garter snake must shed its skin every four to five weeks. They're old skin becomes too small and tattered, and so they must replace it with a shiny new outfit -- which is something we do every time the season changes. When the summer sun is too hot, we can peel off our clothes and put on a bathing suit. If we are lucky, Dad will put out the sprinkler and we will run through it, squealing when the cold water bites at our permanent skin.

Sometimes, I feel trapped inside my own skin. It's like I can't breathe, and the sun becomes so scorching that not even the sprinkler can help me break free. On these days, I think about what it would be like to be a snake. They are kind of holy in way. Reborn constantly from a scaly tomb.

I take solace in the fact that our skin chips off in microscopic flakes like dust. We are reptilian in that way -- holy, almost -- and I hold on to that.

Sometimes the snake is a thing that lives inside of me. It squeezes my brain until the gunky bile oozes from the seams that once held me together. It slithers under my skin and makes me feel filthy and unworthy of life - it makes me afraid of everything. I cannot kill it. There is no ravine to chuck it into.

The snake feeds on my life. It is lumpy with rituals and nonsensical thoughts. It is like a tube-sock filled with tennis balls, yet still it lumbers and eats away at all that is left of me.

I sometimes think that the snake in my brain is beautiful. It could be something that lets me see the truth, something that makes the layers peel away like dead skin. Sometimes I can feel everything, and sometimes I can feel nothing at all, and the world is so incredibly raw and complicated and fragile. But arbitrary.

When I was a senior in high school, my friend Molly started dating the guy she had been in love with for over a year. He was nice to her. They ate lunch in the senior quad everyday, with the sun beaming over their faces like light from Heaven. He wrote her poems and novel-long Instagram posts about how much he supposedly loved her.

He pushed her against the wall at a party once when he was drunk. He started yelling more and smiling less. He was rude to her friends and to her mom. He would cut himself in private, and tell her she was all he had. She *had* to stay with him. She was the reason he was still alive.

He was eventually accused of raping another girl, and so she finally scraped him off of her life like charred gunk from an old barbeque. He was a snake, half-crushed in the scorching road -- torn between the urge to kill and the urge to die. Ravenous for something too big to wrap his jaw around.

He was proof that Hell is here on Earth, and the sun that shines down can burn us like wildfire. The Devil, as it turns out, does not look like a snake or a little red man with horns. The Devil is, in all likelihood, incomprehensibly beautiful.

Molly couldn't see past his beauty. He captured her. He tempted her with empty promises, and wild sex. He cherished her; he sucked the happiness from her like it was

sweet honey, and she just went along with it. I think it was because she had never been cherished like that before. He was the first one to really love her -- he loved her enough to hurt her, and to hurt himself. She hated it, and she loved it. She found a beauty in his darkness that nobody else could see -- it was like a fairytale almost, or a story you might hear in the Bible.

And then she couldn't take it anymore. The fairytale ended unhappily ever after, and she was finally able to see the truth. She realized that the boy was darkness, and she was naked, and both felt shamed.

Eve plunges her teeth into Adam's neck. Adam gags her with an apple. She wraps her legs around him. Adam laughs. He bites. She scratches. He chokes her with her bra strap. She claws at the sweaty blankets. He drags his teeth slowly down her breastbone, marking his territory. She exhales and falls to his side. Breathless.

The apple has rolled off the side of the bed and sits on the floor, forgotten. The room smells like musk and rotten fruit.

Sometimes the snake is a thing that moves inside of you. He infects you with his venom, and it intoxicates you, it terrifies you. You cannot help but quiver and shake. You melt in his hands and he molds you like playdough, he makes sure you know just how much he fucking loves you. He adores you even as you begin to slip through his fingers like sand, even as your eyes transform into opaque glassy marbles. You die a

little for a minute or a month or a year or a life, and he fucking loves it. And you always remember.

Snakes come in all shapes and sizes. Long or short or fat or skinny. Some of them have curves when they move, and others dart straight and fast at their prey like arrows. I've known snakes with long spindly hair and anorexic frames. I've fallen for drug-addicted snakes with cocaine nose-jobs, snakes that smoke cigarettes, snakes slithering on the edge of suicide.

Maybe it is something that fills the empty spaces. I take solace in pain. I've always loved fairy-tales and so I am perfectly and pathetically willing to soak in the delusion that I am loved, that I am beautiful, that I matter.

I find that the more I take solace in pain, the more empty I feel. This is something that has taken me a long time to learn, and I am still learning how to step away from it.

When I return home, I will go for a drive out on the back country roads. The cows will hold an eerie stare as I pass, and a snake will make his journey through the drought-soaked grass.

I will drive all the way to the beach, the one with the river that overflows with seals, and the rabbits that leave hieroglyphs in the warm sand. I will look down at their footprints and I will marvel at the stories I'll never know the ends of - the letters that will soon be washed away by the tide that softly fucks the shore, always.

I will stare out at the ocean and wait for a gentle solace. I will take it all in and breathe the salt-kissed air, knowing that someday I will shed this tired skin; and then maybe, finally, I'll be beautiful.

BLACKBIRD

Our dad takes us to the park every Sunday, to feed the birds and get fresh-baked donuts from the shop on the corner. I always get a cinnamon roll the size of a large dinner plate. Ben always gets some jelly-filled thing that oozes at the sides and makes a mess of his hands and face. Dad likes the maple old-fashioned donuts because he knows my brother and I don't like them, so he can enjoy every bite for himself.

Sunday is our favorite day of the week. Sometimes, Dad even takes us to the Sequoia Park Zoo to see the prairie dogs and flamingos. The prairie dogs are my favorite. Ben likes them too, because they're cute and playful. We never grow tired of seeing the prairie dogs, even though we see them almost every sunday, until one day when the prairie dogs aren't there anymore. They have been moved to a different zoo - a cleaner zoo with more money and bigger habitats. The same thing will happen to my brother some day, if he's lucky.

We are sitting at a picnic table in the Sequoia Park Zoo food court, eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and sipping from Capri Sun pouches. Dad has made the sandwiches himself and brought them from home, because zoo-food is expensive. My sandwich is sliced diagonally with the crusts cut off, and my brother's sandwich is cut in half, and spread with more jelly than peanut butter. Dad's sandwich is more sloppily made, with peanut butter seeping through the sides of the crust. He used to make our sandwiches with wonder bread, but now he always uses wheat bread. Mom says it's healthier.

My brother is not very good at sitting still. He runs circles around the picnic table, chasing pigeons and seagulls. I sit at the table with my dad and eat my sandwich in rushed silence. I do this because I'm not a child, and I've observed how grown-ups eat, and it's with haste and neuroticism. When you're an adult, eating slowly is a luxury. If you have time to eat, you probably don't have children.

Ben's sandwich sits untouched on the picnic table, next to a pile of bird crap. My dad and I think nothing of it - he'll eat if he's hungry, who cares - but when a seagull lands on the table-top and gulps my brother's sandwich down in one bite, we are rendered speechless. We watch the seagull, as it flies onto the roof and attempts to gulp down the mass of bread and peanut butter.

"Looks like he's having a hard time choking it down," Dad says.

"Well," I say, "it is whole wheat bread, so I can't say I blame him."

Ben sprints up to the table, his smile falling from his face when he sees the empty spot where his sandwich had been. "Hey, where did my sandwich go?"

My dad points to the choking seagull on the roof.

After the zoo, our dad would often take us for a walk in the park. Our favorite thing is feeding crackers and bits of bread to the ducks and blackbirds that reside at the lake. Ben and I sometimes chased the seagulls that loomed over the lake like vulchers, because we didn't want them stealing bread bits from the smaller birds.

One on each side, we held our father's hands and watched a family of blackbirds celebrating the birth of a newborn baby. I remember what his hands felt like - comforting

and big like baseball gloves, but rough and scratchy as sandpaper. Dad taught us how to skip stones across the lake. He said it only worked with paper-thin stones, held skillfully between two fingers. I never really got the hang of it - even today, I suck at skipping stones - but I can usually get a stone to skip one or two times on a good day. Ben didn't even try to skip stones. He preferred to pick up the biggest boulder he could find and drop it into the water with an unceremonious plop.

Something happened then, that made us sad for months afterwards. A seagull dived into the sequoia tree where the blackbird family was nesting, and snatched up the baby in its big yellow beak. The nest fell to pieces, and the blackbird's mother chased the seagull around the lake in an attempt to save her baby. Dad even tried throwing chunks of bread at the gull with the hope that it would make him drop the baby blackbird - but it was too late. The bastard had swallowed the little bird whole, and the mourning mother retreated into the branches of her tree and gave up.

"That's the circle of life," Dad told us later. "Sometimes, you get snatched up."

"Why?" Ben clings to his forearm, practically hanging off of him.

"It's just how it is. Everything dies. You guys know that."

I think about that baby blackbird a lot. It was so young, and like my brother, it never really had a chance. I still don't really want to accept my dad's philosophy on the whole thing, which is essentially that shit fucking happens and there's not much you can do about it. And I think it's okay to be sad about it, or mad about it even; but I'm not sure that does any good in the long run.

My family's blackbird was born addicted to drugs and alcohol. He was genetically wired to end up spending the best years of his life in prison. It's not fair, and it's not easy to accept. It's heartbreaking and stupid and fifteen different flavors of fucked up. There is not necessarily nothing we can do about it though. We can continue to write to him, and look forward to phone calls from him. We can still think of him as a brother, or a son, or a friend, or a fucking idiot - because he is still alive. He has not been swallowed whole by the big wet maw of the prison system. Not yet.

HUMBOLDT(5)

The redwood forest, pockmarked with burn scars and charcoal-black stumps, stands tall and rain-loved in the heart of Humboldt County. Ben and I hide in the hollowed-out stumps. We make them into homes by molding rocks and sticks into furniture-like structures. I remember scraping a large chunk of bark from a nearby redwood, and using it as a door. Because my stump-home was hollowed-out, I considered the hole in the top my sky-light. Sometimes, my brother and I pretend like we are soldiers at war, and we take turns perching on the stump's rim as a look-out while the other carves the names of fallen fellow soldiers into the charcoal-burnt bark: *Joseph*, the neighbor boy who had a crush on me, and therefore was dead to my brother. *Krytsal*, the neighbor girl who was my best friend before Ben claimed her as his own. And of course, *Boy-T*, the completely fictional but bravest soldier of us all. My brother always named everything Boy-T. He had a goldfish named Boy-T that seemingly refused to die, even after our catfish ate its eyeballs.

We are laying across the top of a massive petrified stump - me, my brother, my cousins Hans and Mark. The stump, though dead, has young redwood trees sprouting like haphazard fingers from its mossy roots. Snow-white trilliums and little red mushrooms with white spots surround the stump as if worshipping the once-magnificent giant. My brother picks one of the trilliums and gives it to our mother. She puts the flower in a jar next to the kitchen sink, and for days we watch it wilt.

Several years later, men in yellow hard-hats are logging the forest by our house. My brother and I spend days ranting and raving about this, because the redwood forest is supposed to be our place. It serves as a sanctuary of some sort, a place we can always return to and remember how fucking wonderful it was to be a kid. One day, Ben walks up to one of the loggers and starts talking about how much he loves the forest, how he used to play here when he was little. The logger, who isn't a monster and therefore can't essentially tell a kid to fuck off, tells my brother to pick three trees he wants to save.

"Pick three," he says, "and I won't cut them down. You know, unless my boss finds out." And his boss does end up finding out in the end. The trees get chopped down and tied into neat little bundles. I admire Ben for trying to make a difference, though. I was too shy to ever do anything like that.

Beyond the sea of auburn wood lies a town that smells of meth-piss and cow shit. I love it more than anything, and my brother loves it more than anything, and simultaneously, we want everything and nothing to do with it. We want to get out of this place, but everytime we leave, we end up longing for that familiar smell of the drugs, and the shit, and those enormous trees. We long to return to the ancient hollowed-out stump - the one with our names carved into its bark, indefinitely. We want to feel the charcoal-cooked bark underneath our fingernails. We want to claw at that shit, and climb to the top of our little world, and look over everything we have ever conquered.

Someday, if my brother gets out of prison alive, we will climb to the top of that old stump and breathe in that fresh ashy California air. We will fall in love with our middle-of-fucking-nowhere.

Again, and again, and again.

☆

Afterword

I want to start off by saying that I can't believe I actually wrote this. After what happened to my younger brother Ben, I wasn't sure I would be able to write with the same enthusiasm ever again. I do not want to claim that having a family member go to prison for thirteen years is the worst thing that's ever happened to our familial unit, or that such an event is life-ruining for everyone involved. That is not the point I am trying to make by writing this manuscript.

I have written this manuscript in an attempt to make sense of what happened to Ben. This is my perspective and my story. By writing this, I am forcing my point of view to be taken into account. Siblings of family members in prison are the least considered victims of the chaos that inevitably follows the arrest of their brother or sister. Siblings of felons are not taught how to cope with things like this, nor is their opinion or perspective taken as seriously as that of the parents. We are often brushed aside and forgotten in the wake of the explosion said felon has caused. Parents are usually too grief-stricken to pay attention to their children who still live in the free world. My parents feel like they have lost a son. I feel like I have lost a brother. There's a difference, yes, but it fucking sucks either way.

Lastly, I want to make it known that Ben has given me full permission to write about his experiences, both in prison and in the free world. We exchange letters back and forth relatively frequently, and he is doing as okay as he can be.

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Lastly, I would like to give a shout out to the Humboldt County people I have mentioned within this thesis. Thank you! You have made my time in Humboldt County more than bearable, and I love and care about you more than you know. I have changed some of your names within the manuscript in order to protect identities. Some names have remained the same. In no particular order, I would like to thank Greg Goldsmith, Louis Goldsmith, Elise Ford, Sara Davis, Zoe Ziegler, Kush Rawal, and of course, the legendary James Washington.

Oh, and Konnor Wright? You can go fuck yourself.

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