

By a Thread

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Is it darkness? _____ doesn't think so. Even darkness contains an absence of light, yet this, this doesn't feel like an absence. It doesn't feel like anything. _____ doesn't feel like anything. But they had been something, hadn't they?

A thread. The darkness, the deepness, the nothingness is sliced by a thread. It hovers in front of _____. Does _____ have a front? Now, they suppose they do. Anchored in a nothing space by this new something. It has color, something else completely new. Color seems familiar to _____, but they can only imagine the one they see now, embodied by the thread.

The thread moves in a direction that _____ decides must be forward. _____ doesn't know whether they follow or if the thread is an extension of their self, the only aspect of themselves. So, _____ goes forward.

This is a mistake.

_____ cannot think to describe this new motion. It is the only other motion they've experienced, other than the following of the thread. If they'd had the words, the understanding, perhaps they might have called it falling, or catapulting, or being sucked down a drain, which they could not quite remember the imagery of.

Regardless, this new motion happens, or _____ makes it happens by trusting the string, and they are thrown into something else. Bright, the complete opposite of the abyss they just

came from. But it is no comfort, this brightness. It hurts. Hurting is new, and _____ loathes it. There are colors now, black and white, but it's all overly saturated.

Something releases from inside of them, and a shrill noise follows. It belongs to them they realize. And now there is sound. They hate that too. It's all too much all at once. They are being moved, not of their own volition, passed between hands. They are anchored to something, no more the undefined consciousness they felt before. Now they are definite.

Finally, they are stable by something else. They are being held by something of them, but larger. Comfort, another new experience. Another resemblance, another creature, they determine. Creature is what they all are. The other creature holds onto _____, pressing along a limb. A pulse. That's what they're looking for, _____ remembers. Though they're not sure how. The limb is an arm, and they are checking for a pulse.

_____ is thrown back, away from all of this. They are again in nothing, but it's different. They have form. They are separate from the nothing, though still residing inside of it. They have limbs, and eyes, and ears. Though nothing is felt or seen or heard. Except, as they nod their head to the same arm, they see the thread. Not black or white, but something else they've yet to understand. The thread wraps tightly around their forearm, almost painfully.

Pain _____ now understands to some extent. Displeased, _____ looks away from their wrist, into the nothingness attempting to see the end of the string. They want to cut it, they

realize. To ease the pain, they want to cut it. Their newly formed eyes follow the string's length, though they are unable to see an end.

Listless, they follow the string, all the while rubbing at its knot around their forearm. It will not untie, will not snap when pulled apart _____ realizes along their journey.

Evidently, the string will also not end.

Time is another thing unfamiliar to _____, so they do not feel it. All they know is a forward motion in search of an end to the string.

There is no end, but eventually _____ perceives something else. They have recently discovered dark and light, and they determine this new thing to be a light. Brighter than they've ever seen, it swallows the space in front of them. They are thrown again, but not like before. With new lungs, they release a sound, not unlike the sound they made in their previous vision. A cry, they realize.

“_____,” is the first thing they perceive, a sound. “_____,” again. They open their eyes to a riot of colors, all new, all begging for _____'s attention. Yet they hold familiarity. They are overwhelmed again, but not so painfully before. They perceive the creature that held them last time, and can now identify features. Eyes, they realize, are a new color. Green. Yes, that color is definitely green. But this green is hostile. These eyes are hostile.

“_____,” says the creature, no longer offering comfort, “What did you do?” Language, they remember. Language is within their grasp, at least somewhat.

“No,” _____ said. Not _____. Jules. Her name is Jules.

The eyes became even more angry at this. The other creature, Mama, rolls her green eyes to the sky and turns away from Jules. This is painful again.

“Stay out of my things, for the last time,” Mama says through gritted teeth.

Jules is surrounded by Mama’s things. She sits on a mountain of Mama’s things. Old cigarette cartons, fast-food napkins, empty Ziploc bags. She has dumped out her mother’s black leather purse, strewn the contents across the room’s stained blue carpet. She had grasped a pill bottle in her chubby fists, had shaken the contents and been pleased by the crisp sound of racketing projectiles along the plastic surface. That’s what had alarmed her mother. That is what had made her rip the bottle from her grasp, look at her with scorn, turn away with fury.

And then she is left with emptiness.

Shot back into the emptiness.

Now Jules begins to remember things. She’s a person. Or was a person. She remembers soft, sandy hair, dark eyes, skin too pale. She remembers later being frustrated by crow’s feet at the corner of her eyes, dry lips, dark spots. She remembers swollen hands that she didn’t want to acknowledge as hers. Chipped powder pink polish. She remembers herself. A nose that she

wishes was softer, smaller; round cheeks; eyebrows that are arched a little too high and seemed to present her as a little disconcerted at any given moment. And now?

Now she cannot see her reflection. But she looks down and see her hands look younger than she last remembered them, more belonging to her. Calloused still, from scrubbing floors and counters, her nail polish chipped. Her stomach still a little swollen as always. She never could manage that perfectly flat figure. Knees knobby, legs still too fatty for her liking, but smoother now. Varicose veins disappeared from her ankles. She remembers her body now, and is certain this one is hers. But had she not been older?

The string still sticks to her arm, wrapped tight as ever. Like a blood pressure cuff. She remembers the feeling. The sting of it is duller now. And still, she cannot see its end.

She does see something else. The light she'd seen before, contained now within a sphere. It seems to float toward her, and she braces herself to be ricocheted back, into what must be the past she realizes now. Memories she had not been able to recall before now.

She lets out a strangled cry, on instinct rather than will. She knows this is wrong. This space she inhabits is unnatural, her very form different from how she last remembered it. Nothing is right.

“Home,” she sounds without meaning to, and internally again, she realizes she wants to go home.

“Home,” a voice separate from her own resounds. It sounds like her, but she knows it was not her mouth forming the words. “Home.” It's the light, she decides. The words seem to be coming from the light, which has yet to engulf her.

“Who are you?” she asks. The light merely echoes her voice. “What are you?”

“Home.” It says again, finally without prompt from her. “What is home?”

She is thrown again, this time whirled into sticky heat, distant buzzing of cicadas. A tall, dilapidated farm house stands before her, white siding peeling, metal roof singing. It’s midafternoon, and the sun breathes raggedly over the grass and trees. The front door, painted dark burgundy, hangs slightly ajar from its hinges. Bugs could get in, but so could the slightest breeze. The occupants of the house, Jules knows, pray for that breeze more than they pray for their own souls.

The window to the kitchen, one that opens out with squeaking hesitation, old paint crunching, seems to wave at her. A figure stands within, busy at the sink. Jules feels her heart lift.

Back again. Returned to the nothing. She wants to scream.

“Who are you?” The light is still there, though has taken the form of silhouette. No features were distinct, but Jules knew it was the light that had spoken.

“What? Who are you? Why am I here?”

“You don’t remember?”

“How do I get home? I need to go home.” Tears begin to run down her cheeks. She watches as they seem to evaporate before ever hitting the nonground she stands on. Nothing seems defined here.

“You need to remember why you can’t go home.” The light’s voice is not harsh, and the figure remains without any true identity, just a silhouette among blinding light. The voice’s drawn out southern syllables resembles her own, and the low pitch she was always trying to force higher, more feminine growing up. This voice was almost identical to her own, but not quite.

Jules thinks, now that she remembers how. She thinks back to the last things she remembers before being here.

Peppers. She remembers she was looking at bright, orange, green, and red peppers at the produce market. It was a local place named after the owners, a family she had grown up alongside. She didn’t shop there regularly. Local meant pricier, healthier, and neither were adjectives she could fit into her daily life yet. Tonight was special, however, or rather tomorrow night would be. She was going to have guests over for dinner the next evening, and she now

needed to get ingredients other than instant ramen, Vienna sausages, and canned tuna, which constituted the bulk of her pantry.

She was a woman with a pantry now, she thought with pride. A woman with a pantry, and a kitchen, and cookware, and a dinner table to invite guests to. It was hers, and now she would finally get to share it with the only person who mattered.

She hadn't decided on particular dish to serve. But the peppers here, more vivid than any she had ever seen, made her decide on stuffed green peppers. It wasn't something she'd made before, but it seemed simple enough in her mind, and something a put-together woman would have for dinner. Now she would need to head over to the chain grocery store to get the meat cheap, but the veggies would be fresh. She couldn't help but wonder if it would be enough to impress Mel.

Mel.

Jules felt the heel of her flip flop skid along the rough pavement outside of the store. She had a nice brown bag—not plastic, paper—filled with her peppers, onions, cilantro, all kinds of flowering greens and crisp vegetables poking out, obstructing her vision. It crinkled as she walked.

What would Christmas be like this year? A Christmas with Mel?

A light shines, engulfing her entirely.

Instantaneous. She is back. She blinks, adjusting from the shock of light. Before her stands a figure, a dark woman with sharp edges, a gold crown, and long white cotton gown. Her eyes meet Jules with cunning and severity. Her nose is aquiline, slightly turned to the side, and her gold bangles reflect the light that hangs around her form, like cloth draping over a mannequin. She is beautiful, Jules thinks, but not right.

“Who are you?”

“Do I not seem familiar?”

“I don’t know. A little.”

“It’s not important,” the woman insists, her voice smooth and low, reverberating in her bones as she spoke, “Who are you?”

“Jules. Jules Callaway,” she answers, “I don’t know why I’m here.”

“Ah, I see.” The woman’s response gives her a little hope. “We’re still a little confused, aren’t we?”

Jules feels her blood start to warm. Fear has been replaced with frustration.

“Remember me,” the woman says, perhaps sensing Jules’ impatience, “It might help you to remember me.”

Jules was young. She could feel it. She saw little hands, short fingers, though not as plump as before, digging into garden dirt. A plastic shovel lay not far from her, discarded in favor of nimbler, stronger fingers. She was building something important.

Two books lay open on her other side. The first was an old encyclopedia her grandma picked up at yard sale a year ago, after she'd resigned to catch Jules up in school. The page that faced her now, perhaps the most well-worn page in the entire book, contained an illustration of a woman all dressed in gold and white cotton with bright blue eyeshadow, dark black, boxy hair, all completely two-dimensional. It was on the page that began with *hieroglyph*.

Another book sat almost overlapping the other, open as well to a page that showed Cleopatra. It was an actress dressed in costume of course, but Jules was enchanted anyway. This was another book from her grandma, but Jules had begged for it after encountering hieroglyphs. Her grandma, excited this child could take an interest in anything academic, had bought it right away from an old catalogue in which Jules had first spotted it.

The book was well beyond her reading level, but she had only really wanted it for the pictures, and it had plenty in bright colors and attractive detail. Cleopatra's image had been the most interesting page of the entire thing. She opened the book to her section often, tracing the curves of her body and the shape of her hair.

At this moment, she was building a pyramid for Cleopatra in the part of the garden too dry for flowers to avoid her grandmother's temper. Her hands had sculpted a clumpy replica of one of the pyramids of Giza, or so she'd intended, and now, to distract from the imperfections, she was making a moat around Cleopatra's palace, and so no one could invade.

Grandma hated it when she brought the books out into the yard, where dirt could stain white pages. Jules found it was worth the lecture to enjoy them outside. There was a special kind of private freedom out in the country, in the little garden where she played. Green patches of clover and grass, dirt dusting small hands, and the sun breathing upon her shoulders nosily. She took a special pleasure in her things, free of her grandparents' supervision.

Her mind replaced grassy hills with sand dunes and blue mountains with towering pyramids. Cleopatra stared up at her, eyes bright and knowing. Jules admired this very look, and had yet to find anyone who could incite the same excitement that this image did on a slow summer day.

A few pages followed Cleopatra's, and then there was another that caught her interest, but for its morbidity alone. She was only tempted to turn to this page at night, under the light of a chunky red flashlight (borrowed indefinitely from her grandpa) that she kept for reading in her room. The page was saved for moments when the monotony of rural days was especially profound and any emotion, including fear, was preferable over nothing. It was the same temptation she felt in the evenings, just before she was beckoned for dinner, standing before the woods and searching the tree-line for some behemoth toothed animal, a bear or a mountain lion. Her grandpa swore the woods were full of them, and that if you could manage to spot one, it was likely they'd been watching you before you even thought to look. On those evenings, she hoped beyond hope to see anything. Jules dared the woods to grant her wish, listened for snapping twigs, low grumbling snouts. The adrenaline would fill her heart, and pumping veins and clumsy feet would carry her back the house, almost regretting her previous desire. Almost.

In the dark of her room, shadows of branches spilled along wood paneled walls. She would lie in her bed with the book plopped between her elbows, the flashlight in one hand, her

other hand pinching the corners of the pages. She'd start from the beginning, letting her eyes scan across the images, rarely acknowledging the letters. The entire time, she knew where she'd end up. She'd let herself linger on Cleopatra's page, borrowing her bravery. Then, turning past the next few pages with a queen's resolve, she'd come to the page she'd built so much anticipation for. Heavy jewelry, bare skin, a canine face in two-dimensional hieroglyph form. Anubis.

She'd asked her grandmother about that page when she'd first gotten the book, and she had scanned the page and informed Jules that he was the Egyptian god of death. Jules asked who the American god of death was. Her grandma had just shrugged and said that they didn't need one. Their god was multipurpose.

This god scared her. Not in his association with death, but his eerie face. She didn't like dogs. She'd never seen the coyotes that wailed outside of her window at night, but she couldn't help but imagine them this way. Long snouts, snarling grins, and daunting eyes. Bipedal and swarming beneath the window, waiting for the mosquito screen to tear and her little body to tumble into their jaws.

These thoughts filled her mind as she stared into Anubis' eyes, and her blood would rush again. Goosebumps crawled across her arms despite the heavy blanket of heat that draped itself across the entire house. She welcomed the fear for a moment, before the darkness of her room seemed to shift restlessly, and her position within seemed far too exposed. Fuzzy shapes of her furniture seemed to vibrate as she glanced around, eyes wild and afraid. Suddenly, she'd slam the book shut, yank every limb under her quilt, and hold the flashlight out like a weapon. Her pounding heartbeat accompanied the sound of lonely crickets, and the occasional chirp of an animal in the woods beyond. She'd pray to be asleep before the coyotes woke.

Returned. The nothing is still nothing. And the figure before her is slightly changed. It is still a woman, still draped in delicate white dress and metallic bangles, but now a jackal's mask hides her face, snout protruding.

"I remember you," Jules says, "Now, I remember."

"Everything?" Cleopatra, or Anubis, or God, asks.

"Everything."

"What do you make of it?"

"I don't know. Is that all of it? Is that all I get?"

"Some get much less." Jules supposes that's true.

"So, you're *it*? The Egyptians were right?"

"Right about what?"

"About God? Or gods?"

"What makes you think I'm God?"

"I'm dead," Jules states, her feelings as blunted as her voice, "I'm dead. So, what else could you be?"

"I see. How would that make you feel?"

"You sound more like a therapist than a god."

“If I were God? How would that make you feel?”

Jules doesn't know. She doesn't know anything, she realizes.

“So, what's left? What am I? A soul? A ghost?” Would she be stuck here? Is there a way out? Or is this nothingness all she'll know forever? Will she be alone? “And what's this?” She rubs the red string attached to her arm between two pink fingers.

“How should I know all of that?” Their voice adopts a snarky tone, one Jules could feel rising in her throat in her frustration.

“Well, why are *you* here? Is this heaven or hell or is the underworld just an empty void? Is this purgatory?”

“Do you think you belong in purgatory?”

“That's your job to decide, isn't it?”

“What shame do you have that makes you think you're being punished?”

No more than anyone else, she wants to say, but she had never been one to count her sins aloud. Only in private hours, would she let herself dwell on things, alone in the dark when she sobered up a little too quickly, a little too permanently.

Her lips were dryer than her flask, and her vision had started to clear. She was in *her* room. The one on the second floor with a door that her grandma had intended to keep locked forever. Locks in this old house were no match for brute, drunken force, however.

It wasn't anything special, Jules noted, as she sobered up. A twin bed frame with a sunken mattress, a hot pink dresser (she wondered if her mother had painted it herself), and a dirty blue shag carpet. It wasn't how she remembered it. Her crib was gone, the one made of cherry wood with painted yellow flowers. It was moved out of the room and into her own, after her mother. The curtains were drawn shut, but they used to remain open, letting every bit of sunlight into the room, and every silver sliver of moonlight. It was brighter in her memories, foggier, but brighter. Every surface cluttered with mama's—her mother's—things, trinkets and trash alike. They gleamed in her memories.

Some of it was left, she realized. There was a lighter on the night stand, some old jewelry on the dresser, chunky plastic, of course. Ragged purses and scarves hung from hooks on the wall, and a pair of dusty boots had been kicked off underneath the bed.

Surely her grandmother came in here sometimes, like Jules had come in, to look for her mother, her grandmother's daughter, in the things she'd left behind. Surely she sat on the bed every once and a while, and imagined herself in her daughter's body, the decisions she made about what to take, what to leave behind. Jules had been sorted into the latter group. She liked to think it was a hard decision, but she knew better.

Her flask was still empty. And her teenage mind was perhaps empty when she felt for the half of a pack of cigarettes in her back pocket. They really hadn't been hers. Neither was the flask. She'd lifted them both off of a guy she'd gone with. She liked to take things from them after, retribution, or perhaps a souvenir of their attentions. She didn't know, and she didn't care to analyze. She sat herself on the bed, unbothered by the metallic screech of the springs, and felt like she was watching more than doing. She was watching pink painted fingernails scrape the lighter from the little nightstand, watched them fiddle with the wheel. The thing was nearly out

of fluid, likely why her mother hadn't taken it with her, and it took her fingers a few moments to get more than a pathetic spark. She watched her other hand pull a cigarette out of the pack, place it between dry, thirsty lips. She watched as she brought the flame to the end of the stick, just about to burn the edge. She could already taste it.

"Sue!" It was a figure in the doorway, pitch black against the light of the hallway. The figure had realized her mistake just as Jules had recognized her as her grandmother. Hair curled about her face in a frenzy, bifocals gleaming in the artificial light.

She was frozen, fingers still on the wheel of the lighter, though she'd had the mind to remove the cigarette from her mouth.

"You," her grandmother said, the rage undetectable in the calm rhythm of her voice, but swarming within the tears in her eyes, "You are not *her*." Not your mother. Not Sue. *Her*.

She didn't know why she'd done it. She didn't know why her grandmother's pronouncement filled her with a sudden frustration. Jules lit the cigarette, and as her grandmother strutted into the room to stop her, she let it drop from her fingers and onto the quilted bedspread. The place where it landed immediately began to burn, but it couldn't turn to flame before her grandmother snatched it away. Nothing but the remnants of smoke remained, and a little black hole.

Her grandmother grasped her wrist with strong fingers and yanked her to her feet. She didn't let go until they'd made it to the other end of the hallway, where Jules' room was. Her grandmother shoved her into the room and slammed the door shut, jarring the slumbering silence that the house had inhabited mere minutes ago.

The motion was familiar. She'd led Jules' little wrist away from her and her mother's old room when Sue had first left, when Jules was about five years old. Her grandmother would find her in those first few weeks, sitting patiently at the door, imagining that her mother's friend would leave soon, or that she'd been done with "mama-time," a mysterious ritual that Jules had no understanding of. But it made more sense to her than her mother being gone, so she'd wait, eyes on the door handle, waiting it to turn, hearing the rusty lock disengage.

Of course, it never did. And her grandmother would gently take her wrist and lead her to her own room, find a toy to distract her, or read her one of the same four books that she'd gotten from a donation bin at church. Her grandmother would talk about anything except mama. And the word, and the person themselves, became myth. She was someone they all remembered, but not something to contemplate in seriousness. Not something to speak aloud. But she was always there, always alluded to in few words. She crept beneath every sentence, lurked beneath the floorboards, grew along the tangled flowers in the wallpaper.

Back to the end. Jules feels it's tightness on her wrist before she sees it. Another red string, this one thicker than the thread that ties around her arm. This one is heavy like rope, and weighs her arm down.

"It's not like I forgot," Jules speaks, "I remember when I hurt someone."

Anubis is no longer Anubis. Jules could not perceive when they'd changed. Now they are a man, in a white robe, bushy beard.

“You look like my grandma’s god.” *Our god*, her grandmother would say. And Jules would nod along. Though she would never admit it allowed, not even at a whisper, *our god* didn’t make nearly as much of an impression.

“But you went to church?”

“Everyone went to church. You should know that.” Everyone in that town. If you didn’t show, if your pew was missing someone, it was noted.

“You didn’t like it?”

She considers what answer to give. Deny God in front of God? Is denying church like denying God? Would any answer send her to heaven?

“I liked it.”

“Liar.”

“I liked something,” Jules admits.

“You liked *someone*.”

She starts to deny it. She should deny it to this Christian god. But he should already know. He should know everything.

It was sweltering. The church house in the summer time was a special kind of hell. Women fanned themselves, men dabbed at their heads with whatever piece of clothing was the driest. Jules’ clothes, no matter how loose, always clung too tightly to her body, and she felt like she couldn’t take full breaths.

It was a punishment. Her punishment. Though her grandmother would use the word ‘redirection.’

“You’re straying, Jules,” her grandmother had said, “You just need a little more guidance.” It was the cigarette incident that had brought this on, though her grandmother had been worried for a while. She’d started searching Jules’ room for tobacco, alcohol, and any other tool of self-destruction. Her grandmother had always tried to make it look like she was tidying up, and her grandfather played along, but they all knew it was a preventative measure.

And this, biweekly church services, was another. In truth, they didn’t go to church more than once a month during the summertime, all to avoid the inevitable heat strokes and smell of too many people squished in a little room where the humid air stuck to your skin like heavy cloth. The surface of the pews would be a reprieve at the beginning of the service, hard wood cool to the touch, but they too would succumb to the heat eventually. But her grandma, much to her grandpa’s dismay, had been willing to bare it to give Jules that extra guidance.

Jules had never loved church the way she was supposed to, at least not the way her grandparents loved it. The singing was alright, and communion was a bit exciting. She liked the strange implied alchemy of a cracker that would become flesh, grape juice that became blood. But that was all she could appreciate. She spent most services staring blankly at the cedar walls, tracing the lines of the singular stained-glass window, which depicted Jesus, arms spread wide, head tilted at an odd angle. When she was little, she used to mimic that tilt, pushing her head against her shoulder. She could never maintain the uncomfortable position for long however, and if her grandmother saw it, she’d give Jules a light smack on the head. She interpreted it as mockery, but Jules liked to think it was empathy.

Jules wasn't little anymore. She was a "young adult" as her grandfather called her, especially when he was trying to get on her good side. She was fifteen, on a bad path, according to her grandmother. But this time in church was supposed to help her reflect, choose something else. A choice her mother never made.

She did spend some time reflecting. When her eyes drifted from the window to the piano sat near the right end of the altar. It was older than the church itself, people said, and they whispered that it hasn't been tuned properly since it was placed within. Jules didn't notice the flawed notes. She did notice, however, when a classmate of hers accompanied the choir every Wednesday service. She couldn't help but notice a few things about this classmate, Claire. She noticed the way her fingers fell like raindrops along the keys, the noise rippling away from the impact. She noticed how tightly Claire's lips clenched together when she was playing, how rigid her posture became, and the way she seemed to slump back into a more natural position when a song was over. She noticed that her hair sprung from her head in tightly wound curls that seemed to create a halo. She noticed dark skin, deep, bottomless eyes, a hooked nose that disrupted all the softness of her face, but made her prettier somehow. More balanced. More real.

Claire was a grade above Jules, but it was a small school and the classes mingled. Claire and Jules had never really spoken as they remained in different social circles. She almost preferred it that way sometimes. She knew that Claire was smart and, as nearly every parent remarked at the services, "goin' somewhere." Jules had a feeling that she could not follow, wherever 'somewhere' was.

She imagined their conversations sometimes, however. They would probably start out talking about school, but then maybe Jules would be able to get Claire to talk about herself, her

favorite colors, snacks, music. And then Claire might ask about Jules about her favorite things, and they would find something they have in common. And then...

Jules never really knew what she wanted after that.

“Liar.”

Jules knew what she wanted after that. But she pretended otherwise. She pretended that she admiration of her beauty was that of a sister or friend, that any touch between them wouldn't cause a riot of shivers along her body and in her mind. Shivers that would stir thoughts she would rather not exist. She pretended that when she let her eyes trail across her body that she was sizing her up in the way that jealous way that she perceived in others girls her age, that it was envy at the core of it.

She felt envious, when she left the piano at the end of the service, and the prayer leader placed a hand on her shoulder, thanking her or telling her she had done well. She felt jealous of her dress, hugging her body, jealous of the ribbons that spun their fingers delicately around her hair. Envy of each kiss her lashes placed on the tops of her cheeks.

Church ended a little too quickly on Wednesdays.

“I hid it the best I could,” she says, twisting the thin little red string along her pinky finger. It makes an indent along her skin, turning the area it encloses white, contrasting the pink of her skin. She reminisces touching the keys that Claire had touched, trying to emulate the position of her hands. She had often let her pinky linger on what she hoped was the last key she’d played, but never allowed enough pressure to make a sound.

The god before her looks younger now too, more like Jesus than God, though the two were often interchangeable in her mind. His head lay on his shoulder, eyes sympathetic.

“You hid it well.”

“I didn’t really though. She found out.”

“Claire?”

“No. Not Claire.” Never Claire.

Prom. A gym. Streamers and balloons of the ugly green and yellow tones that signified their school colors. Her grandmother hadn’t wanted her to go, but her grandpa had insisted on the importance of a traditional high school experience. She’d have to come home early though. Her grandpa had been on her side, but grandma reigned supreme in all things.

The gym was hot, and the little fans they’d placed around the room did nothing but move warm air around and pull strands of hair out of meticulously stacked updos. Jules hadn’t wanted to come really, despite her grandpa’s insistences otherwise. But her latest fling had made a big

show of asking her in front of his friends, and while the thought to turn Paul down solely for backing her into a corner was building in her throat, she couldn't really think of any other reason to deny him. Her grandmother's lectures about her destructive pride were fresh in her mind.

This was her senior prom, she thought, the circulation in her arm being hindered by Paul's nervous grip. He looked good, Jules could admit. He was shaggy most of the time, a little unkempt, but his hair had been combed back with some gel that smelled pleasant, and his normal stained jacket had been changed out for a tuxedo of deep navy. It complimented his eyes, Jules thought.

Her own dress had been chosen mostly by her, though her grandmother had a hand in tailoring it and raising the neckline. It was bright purple glossy fabric that wrapped tightly around her hips, and gave what she hoped was the appearance of a slim, hourglass figure. Though she made it a point to keep an arm wrapped casually around her stomach to hide the ever so slight protrusion of her belly.

The dress was the only tempting thing about the occasion. She'd seen the dress in a Macy's after she'd said agreed to be Paul's date, their first official one as long as you didn't count making out in the back of his truck. She'd fallen in love with the delicate way the single strap draped across the mannequin's shoulder, and had resolved to die in it.

Now, at the event, she wondered how long Paul would want to stay. Her hair was beginning to droop, and she was getting bored of mingling with her exes and their dates. Occasionally, Paul would tell her she looked, "like a doll," and act like he was about to ask her to dance, and then his face would turn red and he'd glance away, pretending to be interested in some banner, or to be looking for a friend.

She was a bit amazed at him, for the first time ever. This normally crude boy, the same boy had wasted no time sticking a hand up her shirt mere days after their first kiss, was now afraid to ask her to dance. It must be the dress, she'd thought. And after a bit, whispered in his ear about the view of the stars from the hill a few miles from her house, and they left the prom with little memory of anyone else there.

“You loved him?”

“I might have. One day,” Jules says, considering another life, another way. There are more of those red strings now, some dangle from her arm, other's cling like static to her thigh, her neck, all the places boys had felt like kissing her, touching her. They tickle her skin with thin, delicate weight, almost as if she could brush them off with a single movement. She can't though, as much as she wants to. They hold on to her.

“You might have.”

In the back of his truck, they resumed what was natural for them. Few words, a little awkwardness, but mostly the closest thing their adolescent minds could compare to passion. Jules enjoyed it more than she'd expected. It wasn't her first time. Her first time had been less memorable than this. Sudden, quick, and full of nerves that someone would catch them out in the dark of a parking lot, attempting to salvage the remains of tactless third date.

This was more private, more intimate, if not a little underwhelming. Paul's hands were clumsy at first, but gradually became more confident, more accommodating. Jules found herself touching him out of obligation at first, and then with more curiosity that led her fingers to trail along his skin with little regard for what they were trying to accomplish. She savored the heat of her skin against his, the near-rhythmic movement of one body against the other. It was almost enough. She almost felt fully there, with him, on a night that would nearly be memorable.

When they'd finished, Paul checked his watch and did not admit the time aloud, but Jules didn't mind so much. She was consumed in letting the moonlight slither across her skin, swinging her legs back and forth off of the edge of the truck bed, stirring the night's air.

Her dress was bunched at her thighs, and she thought that it might be prettier that way. They weren't alone. There were other cars and trucks parked along the field. The hill was notorious in a way, for being the spot for a romantic, though not always completely private, rendezvous. The woods guarded one side, while the corn field on the other was holding the prom's afterparty. Jules was considering asking Paul to accompany her to it when he jumped out of the truck bed and motioned for her to join him.

"To the afterparty?" she asked hopefully. The night's air was fresh and daunting, and she was suddenly in the mood to share it with people again.

"You grandma set a curfew, didn't she? She wants you home soon?"

Not the answer she wanted.

"I'm sure she does, but it's our senior prom. And everyone knows the afterparty is better than the main event." She was looking at him with eyes she hoped were daring and flirtatious,

but she knew they were really begging. Begging him to impress her further, do more for her pleasure, take her to the corn fields and give this night more worth.

“I don’t know, Jules. I think I’d better take you home.”

“Well, I won’t go. So, will you come with me to the party?” She smiled at him playfully, but his expression didn’t waiver and he just shook his head, eyes downcast.

“I’m not going home yet,” she said, jumping down to the earth and beginning the trek over the hill.

“Jules!” He yelled for her a few times, but his voice grew distant as she walked. He wouldn’t follow her, and suddenly she didn’t think she’d see the back of his pickup truck again.

The party was dead, she noted bitterly as she arrived. The corn stalks were high, but the majority of the partygoers remained at the edge of the crops, looking around dazed and curious. Time had passed more quickly than she’d realized, and most of her class had gone home. Someone handed her a beer though, and she drank it quickly, trying to match the intoxication of the people around her. It took three before she could feel anything.

And what she felt was disappointment. She stalked through the corn with irritation at what the night had amounted to. Nothing revelatory, nothing new, nothing that made her heart palpitate with anything but desperation for more than this. The stalks didn’t yield easily, but she wanted seclusion. Or maybe not. Maybe she just wanted to relish the pain of the harsh scraping and bending as she trudged deeper into the maze.

There were a few stragglers; one being a boy passed out on the ground whom she had to step over, and then search for a sign of life. He had merely rolled away at her touch and

continued snoring. She continued on this way for time, looking around aimlessly, occasionally switching direction at random in hopes of seeing something, or someone, new.

Jules hadn't expected, after a while, to come across anyone conscious. The party's peak had come and passed while she and Paul were exploring each other, and she had begun to feel a deep regret not only at Paul, but at herself for engaging in another unfulfilling relationship that had run its course. She was young, and she knew it, but she was still that sort of young that makes a future, any future, impossible to weigh against present joys and pains. She felt like she was dancing at the limit of something, but could find no one willing to go over the edge with her, and that perhaps she never would.

She thought of the way other people hesitated. She wondered if she'd ever care about anything enough to hesitate. If anything would be worth more thought, or if it was all worth it, and she just hadn't realized it yet. If this was all her mistake, not the world's. Her's.

But just at the other end of the field, she witnessed a flutter of bright pink and orange.

It was Mariam Green. She'd moved here in middle school and had been the infatuation of everyone for about a month before they found something else to talk about. She was from up north, New Hampshire or Maine, or something like that, and her accent betrayed her. She had big, owl-like eyes of bright blue that made her seemed shocked at anything said to her, and her dark hair was chopped off at a bob that tickled her chin. Her eyebrows were thick and stern, and there was a heavy dusting of freckles across her red cheeks.

Jules had never really looked twice at her before, but she seemed to take on a new form here in the maze. Her dress puffed and draped lightly around her thighs, almost as if she'd been spinning and trapped the air beneath. Her eyes were lined in dark blue, but the makeup had

smudged to create a cloud beneath her lashes that made them seem misted by the night. Her hair had been curled but now fell into more gentle waves that hovered around her face in the breeze. Her full lips were stained a pigmented azalea pink that matched her dress.

She had never seen Mariam so pretty, she thought. She suddenly wondered if she'd ever really seen Mariam at all.

Mariam had evidently noticed Jules before she had noticed Mariam, and just watched for a moment as she approached almost frozen in place. Jules hadn't meant to gape, but that was all she could do, before mustering an uncertain "Hello."

"Hi, Jules," Mariam replied. It was odd to hear her name out of her mouth.

"Mariam, right?" They had never really been formally introduced. They knew of each other, of course, but otherwise were complete strangers.

"Actually, I prefer Marie," she corrected. Why, Jules thought, was that the most perfect sentence she'd heard up until now? Why did it send a shiver down her spine? Marie continued on, "Who did you come here with?"

"Nobody," Jules replied, almost defensively. Paul had taken her to prom, but had no right to her here after his refusal. Marie didn't look convinced, but merely shrugged her shoulders and confirmed that she was in a similar position.

"Why'd you come, if you didn't have a date?" Jules asked. Marie wasn't the most active member of the student body, not that Jules was in any position to judge. But while Jules let herself mingle, primarily with male students, she wasn't sure that Marie had any friends or connections at all.

Marie shrugged again and replied, “I don’t know. I just thought something interesting might happen.”

“Did it?”

“Of course not,” she said, making a face, “What could have happened?”

They had stepped closer to each other, without realizing it.

“I don’t know. A few years ago, some drunk boys crashed their truck into this field.”

“Exciting,” Marie said with a tight chuckle.

“Not really. Things got a little more interesting when they got out, found another car, and drove it through too.”

Marie laughed, a deep, full on this time. Her voice was low, but melodious, and Jules found herself laughing too.

“You didn’t see an empty truck on your way over here, did you?” Marie’s eyes gleamed conspiratorially. Jules shook her head.

“Nope, not this year.”

They had begun walking together now, towards the end of the corn. Jules’ house was less than a mile away, nearly visible from the edge of the field, but she couldn’t even bring herself to look for it in the distance.

Marie told her about her night, how she’d wandered as aimlessly around the high school gym as she was in this field, had started to drink but couldn’t stand the bready taste of beer. She’d given up on joining the party and had been determined to get the other side of the field and begin the walk home. She lived further down the road than Jules, but hadn’t wanted to catch a

ride with anyone. She liked walking at night, she said, when crickets sang and she could go at any pace she pleased.

“I like night better too,” Jules said excitedly, though she hadn’t meant to come off so enthusiastic, and immediately toned her voice back down, “No one expects anything from you at night, really.”

“Not a bad way to see it,” Marie agreed, “Evening walks are the one thing I like about this town. It’s so quiet, but in a better way than during the day. Less...sad. When the buildings are empty, you assume its because they’re closed, not closed down.”

“Yeah, my grandma talks about every new business opening like it’s gonna change everything, and then she acts like it’s a shock when the building’s vacant again within the year.”

“You think this place is doomed?”

Jules thought for a moment.

“Not doomed...just...stuck, maybe.”

“Well, I’d like to be somewhere a little less stuck by this time next year. We’ll all have the chance. The choice. If we want it.”

“I want it.” Marie hadn’t asked her as a question, but she still felt prompted. To separate herself from those that had been born here and would die here, from those whose idea of the future never make it across the county line. She wanted Marie to see her as separate from everything. Jules wanted to be singular in her mind. Even if it was a false notion. As if anyone was getting out of here. As if they weren’t all going to have kids too-young, marry too-young, or

die too-young. As if there were more options in a place where methadone clinics and churches outnumbered the hopes and dreams of anyone living there.

Marie offered her a small smile. "Me too."

It was silent for a time after that. The silence was a warm one, comfortable. She was sure Marie was a little tipsy, just like her, and she tried to keep her distance as best as she could as they reached the outskirts of the field. Her house stood looming, just beyond the hill, and she saw the kitchen light on. She was in trouble, certainly. But she couldn't summon the resolve to leave.

"Wanna dance?" It was a statement not a question. Marie already knew the answer, she'd realized. Just like Jules already knew the answer.

She didn't answer. Instead, Jules took a step closer, uncertain of the sort of dancing Marie had wanted. She wanted to ask how close, but for the first time in her life, she didn't know how to make the first move without ruining the moment.

Marie's hand was on Jules' and she was suddenly cold. She pressed her hand against Marie's waist, relishing the warmth of the skin of her exposed back. Jules watched her for a moment, searching for a sign of discomfort or hesitation. Marie looked back at her; eyes swimming with moonlight. She knew about Jules. Like how Jules knew about Marie.

Jules was shaking. Marie's hand was on her shoulder now, and she had pulled Jules in. She was wrapped in her arms. Jules was tempted to pull away, sneer or make a joke about being too drunk. But she wouldn't. She wouldn't dare.

There was music in the night, grasshoppers chirping and an owl echoing in the forest nearby. She felt the brush of corn stalks, occasionally scratching at her arms as they gently

swayed together. They were out of rhythm with everything else. Not here though. Not with each other. Just for a moment.

Jules couldn't help the next part.

Marie had pulled away to look at Jules for a moment, eyes expectant, and Jules banished everything else from her head. Before she really understood what she was doing, her lips were on Marie's. Soft, hesitant. She pulled away first, looked at Marie's face for a sign of anything. But Marie was a mirror. And then their lips met again, hungry this time.

She let her hands travel along Marie's spine, feeling the slight curves of her waist. Marie's hands trailed her jaw, pulling towards her throat. Further, she thought, she wanted to go further. Her skin was fire, and she wanted to burn.

The material of their dresses rubbed, and Jules had a thought to remove the barrier, but she couldn't make herself break from Marie, not even for that. She wanted nothing altered. She wanted nothing to end.

“Of course, that never could have been.”

Never. Never had her limited teenaged mind imagined that her grandmother would come down to the field looking for her. Of course she knew about the field. She'd grown up here too after all. Never could she have imagined the look on her face, as she stood at the top of the hill, a hand on her glasses, as if their entanglement had been a smudge she was trying to erase from the lens. Never could she have imagined the blank look on her grandmother's face as Jules met her eyes, and the quiet way her grandmother retreated back to the house, slow and resolved.

"We were just dancing," she wanted to say, but the lie died on her lips.

Jules watched, Marie at her side, both frozen. She hazarded a glance to her right, to Marie and the night that had ceased to breathe. They didn't say anything for a time, but once she was certain her grandmother had ventured close enough to the house, Jules turned away from Marie and followed suit. She didn't look back, though she thought she heard the sounds of stalks bending and breaking behind her.

"We didn't talk about it. We never talked about it."

"But she knew?"

"Yes. I don't know, maybe she always knew. She never wanted to see it, though. I never wanted anybody to see it."

"What happened after that?"

"I left." Tense silences, the truth of what had happened suffocating the air out of every

room he shared with her grandmother. It was intolerable. Or, at least, that's what she'd told herself.

"Where did you go?" She remembers going to every local business in town looking for a job just days after graduation. She'd used every bit of money she'd saved over the next year to put a down payment on a ratty apartment two towns over.

"Does it matter? I came back. I was always going to come back." The thought was bitter, but it was true. Despite all the imaginings of her young mind, she was never destined for New York, London, Tokyo. She never let anything like that be more than a thought, a dream. She held them to close to herself, never letting them beyond her own mind, and they became impossibilities before she realized what she'd done. She'd held it all too close.

"Your mother?"

"I was never looking for her." Her absence was too much in Jules' life to make her want to fill it with anything, even the original woman. Her presence was too strong in that old house. It was part of what chased her away, even if she had not been found with Marie.

"Did you keep in touch?"

"I tried."

"Did you?"

Winter settled on her hometown gradually for a few weeks, and then in a sudden burst of finality that cloaked everything in fresh white snow. Jules had called home a few days before this, asking if her grandparent wanted to see her new apartment. Two weeks had passed since she'd moved out, and she hadn't spoken to either of her them since. Her grandpa had been the one to answer the old landline, had greeted her with joy, and then covered the speaker, likely to ask her grandmother's thoughts on visiting her.

"I'm sorry, Jules, but it looks like we'll be snowed in for a little while," he'd said after too long minute's muffled silence.

"That's alright." A few more moments, and then, "What if I came back for a visit? Maybe I could shovel the driveway?" A peace offering perhaps.

He'd said yes without consulting her grandmother this time, and hung up the phone with a quick I love you.

And now, she sat in the living room, a blanket spread across her legs and a cup of bitter coffee in her hands. Her grandpa was sat beside her, and her grandma was in his easy chair, swapped. Her grandpa was doing all the talking, asking her how she liked her new place, what the drive was like, how her new job was suiting her, all of the pleasant things she'd expected from him.

"Any young men piquin' your interest?" he'd ask. Fatal, she'd thought. She looked over at her grandma, who was looking at her grandpa with wide eyes.

She hadn't told him. Grandma hadn't told him. Otherwise, he wouldn't dare.

“Not right now,” she’d said, aware that he’d notice the apprehension that was filling the air. “I’m not that worried about all that right now.”

“Ah, you’re young. You’ve got time to settle down. Time to give us great-grandchildren and all that.” He’d said it with a teasing twinkle in his eye that made Jules return to focusing intensely on her cup of coffee.

“There’s time enough to change your mind.” It was the first thing her grandma had said beyond a light, cold greeting. “Or not.”

Or not? She wanted to ask, but it was getting late, and she suddenly wanted a drink.

“I visited, but it was always like that. It was always so...cold.” Her grandmother never wanted to see her new apartment, her new life. Never wanted to travel out of town with her, and never spoke of her journeys away from home with anything but barely-disguised disdain.

“You never talked about it?”

“Not directly, no.”

“So, you came back. Why?”

“It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter where I went and it doesn’t matter what brought me back. It was always gonna happen that way.” *I never stood a chance.*

She'd traveled around a few states, never venturing any further North than Maryland. She always came back to the little town, just outside of the one she'd grown up in. She'd worked as a waitress at first, then a bartender, cook, switching from place to place each time she grew bored of it, or felt claustrophobic after making too many attachments. When coworkers became friends, strangers-lovers, life-real, she left. Went home. Regrouped for a bit, and then left again once she'd saved enough. The only thing that brought her back to that town for good was the knowledge that it had been irrevocably changed. Despite all her attempts to keep it the same as she'd left it in her mind.

The strings. She is covered in them, and she feels heavy. They wrap around her, tying her to something she could no longer see. If she let her eyes follow them, they merely led on into the dark, endlessly. They disappear in every direction, turning the void into a web with no obvious support, no discernable shape. They vary in weight, thickness, even pigment. Some are thickly braided like that of rope. Others are sewing threads, light and fuzzy. Some, many, are frayed and seemed ready to snap at the barest pressure. She can't move, not that she knew where to move. They tie and drape and cling to her.

She can't feel frightened. She feels tired.

"It looks like it mattered."

The strings seem to stretch, names whispering and entwining themselves into the threads. Hazel with her kind eyes and bitter words. David with his scratchy beard and praising lips. Monique smiled brightly in her mind, with laughter that had excited music in her heart. Jasper, a more passionate friend than lover, but with strong hands and a gentle voice parade in front of her eyes. Acquaintances, friends, flings, and romances flit before her, within her mind. Each time a

new name forms from her thoughts, she feels herself began to reel into memory of them, but she can't quite touch it. She can't touch any of it.

Mel.

"Mel." God is different now. God is layered. Now she sees a conglomerate of all the people she'd loved. She had really loved them all. She realizes that now. They are all layered on top of each other, some incomplete visage, no hard lines, no definite end. They move slowly, some layers lagging behind the others. God is approaching. Jules feels tears drip down her chin.

"Remember Mel." She says it. Not God. She wants to remember Mel.

"Melanie," she said, "But I like to be called Mel."

Jules was transported back to a summer night for a moment, but she downed a pickle-back and looked back at Mel with a sly smile.

"But why? Melanie's so pretty."

"Ditzy more like it. Common."

"Suit yourself, Mel," Jules shrugged. The bar, somewhere South of Charlotte, was at its peak. It was crowded enough that you couldn't get by without a light brush from a stranger, but not so crowded that there was no room to dance. Jules thought it a perfect balance. She had gotten off a few hours ago, packed her things, and was saying goodbye to Charlotte. And North

Carolina as a whole. It was time to go back home for a bit. She owed her grandparents another visit.

Melanie. Mel. Was just a girl at the bar. Pretty, with long, inky black hair and bright eyes, but nothing spectacular. Nothing that had made Jules do a double take. But the man Jules was hoping would take her home tonight for one last rump in the state drank too much, and had gone to sleep it off in his car.

Jules had gotten the sense that Mel had been bored too, and might be interested in something simple and brief.

“Jules,” she said, after Mel prompted, “Like shiny rocks.”

“Ah, I like yours better. Short for something?”

“Nope. My mom kept it simple.”

“Ah, what’s that like?”

“I wouldn’t really know.” She often dropped these things on strangers, like a bowling ball through the floor. No mom. Alcoholic-in-the-making. Alcoholic-past-the-making. No real home. It was better to define herself in these ways somehow. She not only accepted these things, but swung them to the front of every conversation like a shield.

Mel had taken a moment of pause, like they all do.

“Well, you wouldn’t be the first girl with mommy issues I’ve slept with.”

Mel had beaten her to the chase. Not like they all do.

Jules hadn’t meant so smile so big. She really hadn’t.

“She was the one?”

“Please, like it was ever going to be that simple.”

“But you loved her? And she loved you?”

“Yeah,” Jules responds, drifting off again. “Yeah, and that’s close enough.”

Mel had a type, it turned out. Jules learned in the next few months that she liked piecing broken things back together. Mel had not been the first person to try to fix Jules. Jules was no wounded bird. She had turned her broken wings into weapons. and had no qualms of poking those who did more than take notice. Mel found this out the hard way, and soon stopped her obvious attempts at home-grown therapy.

Jules had fallen in love with many strangers much quicker than she had fallen in love with Mel. She was lovely, certainly. Her eyes were dark brown and foxlike, glimmering as if she knew more than you at any given moment. Her lips were small but soft and expressive. She had even, tan skin that Jules had envied from their first encounter, but she hadn’t felt the instant pull she’d felt with a million other people.

And Jules hadn't wanted to stay in North Carolina any longer. She was due home soon. But instead, after that first night with Mel, she wondered if maybe she'd missed something here. The night life wasn't terrible in the cities, and there was natural beauty too. She didn't often let herself indulge in that kind of thing, hazy purple mountains, dark looming trees, and yellow fields. It was too familiar, too heartsick. But Mel was a city girl, never seeing much of it other than parks and green spaces in New York. She'd come South for that very reason, to try at a connection with nature. Jules soon learned that she was a terrible hiker, squeamish at every bug and reptile, but she felt a special joy when Mel was speechless at a simple view. Covered in stands of grass, leaves, bug bites, but her eyes watery as she looked over a lake shining with starlight, or at the edge of a hill, the setting sun crowning the grass with golden halos.

Mel took on a new life in those moments. Like during their first hike together, a little trail called Huckleberry. It was only an hour and a half away from Jules' hometown. Quite a longer drive from Charlotte, but worth it. Mel's hair messy and glossed with sweat and sun, cheeks pink and puffy, and her shoulders back, as if she was being pulled forward by something she couldn't see. She looked at the scenery so familiar to Jules with a fresh gaze that she wanted to borrow. Embody. Embrace.

Jules wanted to show her everything in that moment. She wanted to take her to her home. She wanted to sit with Mel, listening to the quiet dialogue between the trees, the chirping song of cicadas and the whispering of the creek in the woods behind her grandparents' house. She wanted to show her how to catch crawdads and use sticks like dowsing rods to talk to the dead. She wanted her to hear her grandma's gossip-ridden half-truths of everyone in the town, and her grandpa's legends of the people that used to live in the forest, building rudimentary tools and buildings that you still might find remnants of if you went in far enough. Even today. She wanted

to tell her of the ghosts she invented, the way they became palpable at night, and seemed to stand at the edge of the wood, waiting to be seen by the living. Exchanging stories and lives.

“Why didn’t you? Take Mel home?”

“It wanted to. But I waited too long.”

Jules and Mel had been together for five months. Jules took up a bartending job at the place they’d met, and Mel had been working at a bank. Jules moved in with Mel almost instantaneously, in what she thought would be a bit of a halfway house between now and her next locations. But it had begun to feel like more. The little studio apartment was barely enough Mel alone, but Jules hadn’t brought much with her. Just some clothes, a toothbrush, and a few cosmetics. Mel insisted that it seemed like she didn’t even exist, but Jules more than made up for it with her presence.

The way it happened hadn’t felt real. She was working, had just opened the bar and was bracing herself for a busy night. It was a Saturday, and Mel had promised to come by at six after she’d closed up the bank to help if she needed it. Or, more accurately, sit at the bar and look pretty, giving Jules a kiss when she needed it. Jules had been irritated at Mel’s obvious laziness

at first, but she'd learned to find it endearing. Or at least endearing enough not to be upset when she inevitably encountered it.

Jules had poured for a few regulars, waiting for the rush, when a familiar face sat at a table near the stage where local bands sometimes played. It had taken her a minute to recognize him, but as soon as she had, she walked over, almost mechanically, to say hi.

It was Paul, with a full-grown beard to replace the patchy one she remembered. He was in an old flannel that reminded her of the ones her grandpa used to wear, and steel-toed work boots. He looked manly, a little unkempt, but handsome, she thought. Someone she might have flirted with a few months ago, letting herself find comfort in the long, drawn-out syllables and deep, graveled voice of the men from her hometown.

He'd seemed just as shocked to see her, had done a double-take. It had been over ten years, she'd realized, looking at him. Ten years she'd spent in a whirlwind that she could barely recall now. Jules wondered how he'd spent it. She felt a bit proud of how she'd grown into herself just as well as him. She wielded her body with more confidence, had learned to make up for gangly limbs and lack of slim figure with the right clothes, the right cosmetics, at least for the most part. She'd learned to tease out thin hair to make it seem fuller, and figured out how to layer it herself to make it frame her face in a pleasing way. She supposed she didn't look like the girl he'd taken to prom and ultimately disappointed to terribly. Though she was sure that she'd disappointed him in equal measure. Disappointed everyone, she realized with a short, sharp pain.

"Jules! What happened to you?" She assumed he meant where had she disappeared to after school, but she liked to think that maybe he meant how happy she looked now. Or as close to happiness as she'd felt since she was young.

She briefly described her life up until now, leaving out the exact reason she left, or that the relationship she was now so committed to was with a woman, not a man. Paul had been sweet, but that didn't always mean accepting, or at least not often enough that she was willing to risk ruining the idea of him she kept in her head all these years.

She learned he'd settled down a few towns over, not far from here, and was at the bar to meet some coworkers. They all worked at the local factory and were discussing a strike. Paul let her in on the fact that the strike was all talk, and it was really more of an excuse for them to all get drunk together and believe they'd kept the secret from their wives.

"Who'd you end up with, Paul?" Jules couldn't keep herself from asking. She suddenly felt she needed to know everything about everyone from back home.

"You remember Chelsea Diggs?"

"Shut up." Chelsea Diggs had been a sweet pastor's daughter who Paul and his stoner buddies had openly mocked on more than one occasion. Paul seemed to know exactly what she was thinking.

"Yeah, it was a year or two after we graduated, and I was just....stuck. I didn't have much going for me. I could barely keep a job, and I was sick of bein' high all the time. Bruce, Sean, all of them, they were just so content lazin' around, doin' nothing. I stopped seeing them all together, and kept tellin' my mom I was gonna get it together one of these days. 'Course she didn't believe it. Said she was gonna kick me out if I didn't figure things out in the next year."

Paul's mother was a fine specimen of hard-ass Appalachian woman. The whole neighborhood was terrified of her, which made it so shocking when Paul fell in with a bad crowd and defied her over and over again.

“That sounds like her,” Jules said. She hadn’t missed it much until now. The ties she’d felt with nature, yes, but the people? She’d convinced herself it was the entire reason she’d left. The town was too small. She didn’t fit right.

But for a moment, she wanted to cry a little. Just thinking of how different everything must be. How she might let herself slide back into it all, remarking to her grandparents how different it felt to live there again, after all these years, and laughing at how hushed and serious her grandma would talk about everybody with her grandpa, as if she were the sole guardian of all of their secrets. It had been close to a year now, since she’d last visited, spending a particularly frigid Christmas around their hearth, pretending like the distance between them was a matter of miles, not worlds.

If they could just talk.

Paul went on to talk about how he’d started going to church again at his mother’s mandate, had formally acquainted himself with Chelsea at a picnic after the service, and how she had made him laugh harder than he ever had in his life in the first five minutes of their conversation.

They had kids, three of them, and they’d settled down around here after they both got a little bored of everything back home.

“Who could’ve imagined that?”

“Not me, not when you knew me anyway,” Paul said. She had a difficult time picturing his white-picket-fence-family, but she didn’t feel jealous. Not like she imagined she would if she’d encountered her ex-lovers, no longer in love with her but happy with someone else. She was happy for him, genuinely.

She wanted to stop herself from asking, but she couldn't.

“And my grandma? Grandpa? It's been a while since my last visit. How are they gettin' along these days?”

“Of course, I'd imagined it,” Jules says, “I knew they might have gotten sick, or hurt, or any number of things while I was gone.”

“So why didn't you check on them more?”

“I didn't want to know. I wanted to keep them how I remembered them. I wanted them to just....crystalize.” They're even closer now, the figure, the blend of every single person she'd ever known. She still can't move.

“Why didn't you tell Mel?”

“I'm not—I wasn't good at any of that. Serious conversations and sappy talks.”

“She deserved to know.”

“She deserved much more than that.” *You all did*, she wants to say. But she can't make her mouth form the words.

She got back to her hometown a few days later. She'd left Mel a note, more than she'd done for anyone else, saying that she had to go home to take care of things. She didn't know if she'd be back. But she wrote it. The words she'd never really managed to say convincingly to anyone. She'd scribbled out '*I love you*' with more feeling than she'd ever experienced, and almost tore up the note then and there to wait for Mel to get home. She could explain everything and beg her to come with her. But she was resolved to keep things tidier than all that. She needed people to stay where she'd met them. She could keep them there in her mind, perfect and ageless, like characters in a story, waiting for her to open the book up again.

So, she came home alone, to the house she was raised in. It wasn't quite right. Her grandpa had died suddenly, due to an undetected heart condition. Her grandma had followed just a mere day later in her sleep. An aneurism, the doctor's called it. A broken heart, is what everyone who knew better called it. She always thought she'd feel it in her gut if something happened to them, but she'd been wandering around all this time without a clue that they were gone. Four months. Four months they'd been dead, and she had no idea.

They'd tried to find Jules, apparently. They'd all asked around but she never told a soul where she was going, when she went off like that every so often. She'd always just assumed she'd have time to tell her grandparents, and anyone else who asked, about it later.

She wondered why her grandma didn't call her the day her grandpa died.

She wondered if she'd given her any reason to call her. Any reason to think she cared enough. Or maybe it was just so sudden. Maybe her grief-stricken heart hadn't been able to break the news. Jules hoped it was the latter.

The house seemed to be a vacuum, even though nothing was all that different. She thought of the ways in which it would get worse, become less and less like what she remembered. Her grandma had had such a routine, repainting the porch every three years, sending her grandpa on the roof to repair any damages every four. Planting new flowers each season to give the effect that something was always blooming, in spite of the weather. Now it just looked so hollow, the sun bleaching all the color from the wood, no lights in any room. It would only get worse. She didn't bother going inside.

The mortgage wasn't paid off, and Jules had made no attempts to claim it, so the house was foreclosed. After she'd spent some time standing outside, trying to imagine it as the place she'd loved so much as a child, filling it with light and warmth in her mind, she left for the one bar in town to erase the picture from her mind.

Some people recognized her, and many more didn't. She seemed as strange to them as they did to her. Without her grandma they all felt so distant. She remembered them, but the connection was gone. She sat at the bar, ordering as many old fashions as she could with the money she'd brought, and sorted her options out in her head.

She could try to buy the house off the bank.

No. She didn't have the money. And even if she did, she didn't want it now. It was beyond recognition.

She could leave again.

She could go back to Mel.

No, she really couldn't. Not now.

She could order another.

And another.

Another.

Jules passed out at the bar. It was the first time since she was a teenager that she'd done so. She ended up in the police station and was allowed to sleep it all off before being released.

“What did you do?”

“I just...was...for a little while.”

She had enough money for a hotel for three nights, so she stayed at the one on the outskirts of town. She applied for a job on the second day, an Italian diner ran by a family that had just moved to town a few years before. They didn't know her. They hired her on as a cook at first, and then offered her waitressing part-time as well. She took both jobs, and began searching for a place to stay.

That took a while, so she couch-surfed. First at one of Paul's old friends, who'd told them she would be coming to town. And then at one of her high school teacher's houses. Mrs. Akers had retired recently, and remembered Jules with little fondness. But Jules promised to help with chores when she wasn't at work, and Mrs. Akers found that to be enough reason as she couldn't move like she used to. After a few months of saving, Jules was finally able to get a place at one of the income-based apartments downtown. It was shitty, at best. A studio with no washer or dryer, so she had to wash her clothes in the bathtub and hang them out to dry on the patio. The next-door neighbors drank more than she did, and were constantly fighting. She listened to it through the walls. It was better than television, these people who were somehow more miserable than her.

She was rarely sober, but managed to save money anyway. She didn't want anything else. Her car, a beat-up sedan, was still running by some miracle, and she had no desire to get anything more reliable. It had lived alongside her this long. She'd bought it after the second town she'd lived in so many years ago, had saved for it for seven months. She had gotten ripped off, but it didn't matter. It was still here. She didn't care to buy new clothes, makeup, try anything other than the occasional adventurous cocktail at the bar. She couldn't see past anything right in front of her.

“How long? How long did you live like that?”

“A few months. I wouldn’t have been able to tell you at the time though.” She is so, so heavy now. She remembers how time seemed to stretch and bend in the background of it all.

“What changed?”

“Not a thing. Certainly not me. Except one day I was more lonely than usual. I was the bar and saw this woman that I genuinely thought could have been Mel. And I wondered...”

“What you would say?”

“Yeah, I thought of what I’d say.”

“And?”

“And I realized how badly I wanted to say it.”

Jules started to remember the rage in Mel’s eyes that day. Nearly half a year after that last night they’d spend together, the last sleepy morning kiss. She looked almost the same. The same gentle confidence, the same eyes filled intelligence and curiosity. She was living in the same apartment. That was where Jules found her, knocking on the door like stranger.

Jules had started to say she was sorry, but before she could say more than a few words, Mel started to yell, cry, and scream. She told Jules all of it. That she’d tried calling and asking around at her job. That she’d tried over and over again to figure out where she’d gone. That she

had waited for her to come back for so long. She didn't stop. And all Jules could do was hold her in shock.

"I'm sorry, Mel." It was all she could say, with tears of her own. "I'm really sorry."

Once they'd both calmed enough, Jules explained what had made her leave. She explained all of it for the first time, to anyone. The moment she'd heard the words leave Paul's lips; it all broke apart. She broke apart. It was inevitable. She hadn't known if she'd ever fix things with her grandparents, but she just assumed she'd find the right time someday. That one day she'd feel whole enough to close the distance between them. The permanence of it all hit her so hard.

"Why didn't you ask me to come with you? You know I would have. You know I loved you."

"I knew. I know. I just didn't want it to change. I didn't want us to change."

"You're the reason we changed."

"Yes. I am. But I had been so good at pretending up until now, Mel. I could just pretend that when I left you, that when I left anyone, they'd just go on without me. And I could just keep thinking of them as going on that way."

"That's selfish."

"I know."

"And a lie."

"Yeah, I know."

"You can't hurt people like that just because you're hurting."

She stopped responding. There wasn't anything she could say to change any of it.

Jules left not long after that, after Mel insisted that Jules get professional help. Jules had promised she would, and Mel gave her a new phone number. Mel said that maybe if Jules were feeling up to it, she could visit again soon.

“She didn't want you back?”

“Why would she have? I abandoned her.” She can't help the bitter laugh that broke out, “Runs in the family, I guess.”

“But that wasn't it?”

For a few months that was it. Jules looked for a therapist like she said she would, but it had really only been a half-measure, just to say that she had. The only one was in a city thirty miles away, and Jules didn't consider it a serious option.

Jules and Mel kept in touch in small ways, occasional phone calls to check up on each other, exchange bare details of their lives, and for Jules, to reassure Mel that she cared. But she figured it was far too late for that.

But Jules went back to Mel's apartment that Summer. It had been originally to get coffee and talk in person. But it resulted in Jules asking if Mel wanted to see her hometown. They'd been talking about her grandparents again, what it would have been like for Mel to meet them.

"I'd always wanted to introduce you to them, my grandparents," Mel had looked a little surprised, so Jules continued, "It's too late for all that now. I know. But maybe...I don't know...maybe you could see my home?" It felt strange, staking her claim on it that way. But she didn't know how else to say it.

Jules had been even more surprised when Mel smiled and said, "I'd love to."

"So, you did it? You took her home?"

"Yeah, I took her home."

They were friends now. So, Jules thought it'd be a good start to start small, with a simple day of exploring, dinner, maybe a walk along the woods later in the day. Mel said that since she wasn't interested in therapy, she should start journaling. Mel went with her to the little office supply store, watched her buy a new notebook and a purple pen, and then insisted on spending

the afternoon at the restaurant Jules worked at, eating undercooked alfredo and catching up. Jules as

“What do you think of it so far?” They hadn’t seen much, and it wasn’t like there was much more to see. It was mostly long, winding roads bordered by fields and woods. The shops stood on small strips, most empty from the same troubles that had plagued the local economy for years. No business. No attraction. No tourism. No money. So, no business. No attraction. And so on.

“It’s small.”

“Yeah, I wasn’t lying about that.”

Mel laughed, “No, you definitely were not.”

“So, why didn’t you move back to the city after I left?” Jules hated saying those words. *After I left.* She knew she had to own up to it though. Show Mel she understood. But she remembered talking with Mel about it sometimes, going somewhere further North where there was more to do, more people, more everything. Mel had seemed excited at the idea.

“I guess I liked the views out in the country,” Mel said, eyes a little foggy, “I still do.”

“I remember, “ Jules said, “I remember the way you looked back then. I think about—” Jules stopped herself.

“Yeah,” Mel said, saving her the trouble, “Me too.”

“Did you show it all to her?”

“I tried.”

Mel came back a month later, insisting that Jules take her on a hike, or on a picnic. They ended up doing both. Mel was still dramatic, whining at every incline, convinced an invisible rock in her shoe was slowing her down. Jules let her complain, playing along. But she stayed silent, when Mel looked around in slight wonder at the way the light filtered through the leaves and branches of trees, painting new shades of green along the forest floor. Jules hadn't meant to start with the stories. But eventually, her grandpa's words began leaving her lips, and as they walked, Jules sketched out the veiled world in the woods for Mel. The ghosts, the animals they couldn't see, the people she'd invented as a child; how they all lurked quietly during the day and became restless at night.

By the end of their hike, when they arrived at an open field, Jules was breathless and Mel was entranced.

“Write it down,” Mel said, as they unpacked the sandwiches they'd brought for lunch.

“Write what down?”

“All of it. The stories, your life. You should write it down.”

Jules had laughed and said maybe.

That night, after Mel left, she tried it. She started with a scary story about bears that had once been people, something her grandpa had frightened her with one night after they'd made a bonfire. She'd claimed to have seen them later, and her grandpa had smiled and told her it meant that they were going to get her next.

She didn't like writing as much as telling. But it felt good nonetheless to see the words on the page, and before she'd realized it, it was four in the morning and she had written through a third of the pages in her little notebook. She'd texted Mel right away, asking if she wanted to go shopping at the office supply store next weekend. Mel just sent a smiley face, and then a time she'd be free.

"Mel fixed you?"

"I'm sure she likes to think so."

"What was it?"

"I don't know. It wasn't any one thing. Seeing Mel helped. Talking about it all helped. And the writing. But it's not like I ever stopped drinking. I never went to rehab."

"But you got better?"

"I guess I did."

She really was better. It took a year before she could afford a new place. Mel had offered over and over again to help her clean and decorate, but Jules insisted that even if her old studio were clean and furnished, it was beyond saving. She moved into a one-bedroom place in a nicer complex further uptown. It wasn't fancy and it was still cramped, but it was better. She still drank a lot, but she was more comfortable sober when she was with Mel, out in the woods, or writing.

Mel had shown her pride in her progress by visiting more and more often. She stayed the night sometimes, and Jules didn't dare make a move on her. Jules loved her still, even more than when they'd been together years ago. But Jules knew what abandonment felt like, and had no reason to think that Mel would risk her heart again.

Mel had seen other people off and on, before they'd reconnected. No one had stuck for her. Jules had joked, one night, after they'd devoured a pizza and marathoned a few movies, that Mel had been the one for her and that she was done with romance altogether. It had been a joke made in defense, after Mel had teased that Jules had a crush on a coworker, a guy far too young and far too loud to be remotely interesting. But it had made Mel look at her with sober, dark eyes and go home earlier than usual. Jules regretted it bitterly in the hours after she left.

“When did she start to love you again?”

“I don’t think either of us ever stopped loving the other.”

Mel didn’t visit for a while after that, and Jules worried that she wouldn’t visit again. Jules stayed mostly sober though, in spite of it. She didn’t want to hurt anything else. Not the careful friendships she’d cultivated with a few people at work, not the easy acquaintanceship she’d maintained with her neighbors. She never went back to church, and her absence was noted, but her harmlessness made it difficult for reproach. She found herself reconnecting with some of her grandparents’ old friends, the ones that still lived. She politely begged them for stories about their lives, about when they were young, or even more recent ones spanning the years she’d missed out on. She felt they were alive in their words and in their memories. It hurt, but she clung to it all with desperation.

It was a month before Jules saw Mel again, at the door of her apartment, bags in hand.

“Could I stay here for a while?” Mel asked.

“What happened?”

“Nothing. I’m in-between leases, and I just—”

“You can stay,” Jules didn’t let her finish, “As long as you want.”

“And that’s how it happened?”

“What?”

“All of it?”

“Yeah, all of it.”

Jules is hardly aware of the thing before her. Not God. Or Gods. Too all-knowing and unknowing at once for God. Too contradictory. Too like her. She is wrapped in memories of Mel’s soft touches and ringing laugh. She remembers her pouting, and crying, and asking too much of Jules most of the time, but repaying her with the silly quips and sweet gazes that made Jules feel like she’s floating away from the earth.

“I suppose I *am* floating away from the earth now?”

“I suppose. It’s unfinished though, isn’t it?”

“I don’t think it was ever going to be finished.” The strings squeeze her tightly, too tight. But it’s almost comforting. They seem to connect to her veins and skin and ligaments, and she feels them pulse with every beat of her heart, getting slower and slower.

“I’m not dead. I’m dying, aren’t I?”

“Yes, so I ask you again. What do you make of it all?” They take a new form now. The layers of loved ones, God, Jesus, Anubis, Cleopatra, are all gone. Now they are just a silhouette in front of a blinding light. Her silhouette.

She doesn't have time to think. So, she just says it.

“We were just dancing.” All of us. Every single one
of us.

They are satisfied enough, and the light engulfs her one last time.

Jules was in a familiar kitchen, off-olive green cabinets and warm yellow light hanging above the island she sat at. She was trying to read, but the radio on the counter was too loud. She was eleven years old. A sappy Elvis song keeps breaking her concentration.

Her grandmother had been doing dishes. They'd just finished dinner and she couldn't sleep unless the kitchen was spotless after a meal. Her grandpa was drying each plate his wife handed him, and putting them in all the wrong spots. She would yell at him about it later, as she always did, but they were both creatures of habit, and the pleasure of their routine was everything.

The night wasn't special, except her grandpa had had a few too many beers and was singing along with Elvis as if performing a private concert just for the two of them. Jules was less than impressed. This was made worse when he suddenly spun her grandmother around, bubbles and soap splashing across the counter top. Her grandmother, instead of admonishing him, giggled and clung to him as he spun her around and around. The kitchen was too small and they bumped the island several times.

Jules glared. They had all but forgotten she was there, and she slammed her book shut and jumped off of her seat.

“Oh, come on, Jules,” Grandpa said, seeing she was about to leave.

“Hon, we were just dancing,” her grandma chimed, before grabbing onto her hand and twirling her in kind. Jules had wanted to stay angry, but the motion made her head spin, and she found herself giggling in spite of her wishes. The kitchen was often too hot, but as the night air filtered through the window and was swirled around by spinning bodies, the heat settled on their skin with a new gentleness, welcomed by beating hearts and smiling mouths.

Jules doesn't see the truck before she walks out into street, thoughts of Mel and peppers and the future consuming her mind. She doesn't see anything, except for a blinding light that engulfs her suddenly. Jules is twirled away, the strings falling, the tension broken as she leaves. They drift on, the shape of her vaguely alluded to by their curves and knots. They linger, even as she does not.