

Wherever Milk is Sold
Excerpt from a Novel

by

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Two-Lane Highway, Nebraska, 2009:

We'd already been on the road for nine hours, the second day of what felt like a potentially endless road trip away from our home in the suburbs of New Jersey, when the situation, also known as our general ability to get along with one another while packed like three soggy sardines into the family SUV, went from predictably unpleasant to *absolutely unmitigated*. I felt cramped, what with all the cardboard boxes stacked in the trunk, filled with Dad's books and a random assortment of cookware, plus the reusable grocery bags Dad stuffed his belongings into, stacked precariously in the passenger seat next to me, fit to bursting with stray socks and unfolded sweaters. It was just the three of us, Dad driving, Lyle up front, and me in back, nestled next to the large yellow duffle bag of road trip snacks and a first aid kit. The views from the highway changed slowly as we drove, from stretched gray city and billboards for personal injury lawyers to long sprawls of open fields. I tried to cling to my hope that we were just going away for a long weekend, a trip to clear our heads at a giant water park where we could burn our skin and cleanse our lives with industrial quantities of chlorine. I entertained that, maybe, overwhelmed with his sudden responsibilities as a single father, Dad was driving us to a sleep-away camp somewhere in the woods of Kansas. I figured I could take up archery, and maybe Lyle could do a lot of hikes where he observed lizards in a new biome.

We hadn't seen our mother in forty-nine and a half days. Lyle and I regularly asked Dad what was happening during her first week of absence. But he'd answered us with awkward silences, and the occasional teary-eyed outburst that he *knew as much as we did*, and *could we please just give him some time to figure it out*, before he'd inevitably slam the door to the basement where he'd disappear to "do laundry" for hours at a time. We stopped asking. I tried to call Mom once from our landline, but her phone number was disconnected. I asked Lyle if he

thought she was dead. He asked me what the difference was, if she never came back either way and when I couldn't answer, he ran into his room and slammed the door. Nonetheless, I was hopeful enough to hang a note for her on the front door of our house before we left. I was eleven years old.

Hi there Mom,

I'm not sure where you are or really where I am, but I just wanted you to know that we're not here anymore. If you come back to the house looking for us, Dad's taken us on a road trip to somewhere, and we won't be back for a long time. I'm sure he's told you all this. Maybe you're already at the place where we're heading, maybe that's the big surprise he keeps talking about. I kind of doubt it. If you go inside, please water the plants. Dad said I couldn't pack them, but I'm supposed to bring a plant into the first day of Middle School in September. I flushed the goldfish last night so that he wouldn't starve while we were away.

Talk Soon? L

Hanging the note was the last thing I did before I allowed myself, my purple backpack full of granola bars and lip balm, my memory foam travel pillow designed to look like a sleeping sloth, and my well-earned trepidation, to be loaded into the family SUV. I left behind that note, a couple of Christmas sweaters, my dreams of an elaborate summer spent at the public pool with my best friend, Maya.

The issue on that particular day, though, the second day of our road trip, started with the radio. Well, really, I guess, if we're going to be precise about it, the issue started in a doctor's office in Color-Me-Park, New Jersey, six years earlier when Lyle was diagnosed for the first time. We were sent home as a family with many suggestions for future behavioral therapy, a lot of new language for old problems, and collections of individualized informational pamphlets.

Lyle was eight, and I was six. We went to the doctor's because Lyle was in a phase where he refused to do anything during school but read and reread a collection of books about lizards. He wouldn't answer questions, or eat lunch, or go outside for recess, or speak when spoken to. He just read about lizards. Despite showing signs of early intelligence in previous grades, his lack of participation meant he was technically falling behind, and the school threatened to hold him back. So, our parents got involved. Or, more accurately, the school got our parents involved. *He'll talk if they just ask him about the goddam lizards*, I remember muttering as she put dishes away.

But that day on the road, the issue started with the radio. We'd left the house at about noon the day before. We'd driven for seven or so hours listening to Dad's CD collection and singing with forced enthusiasm to the warbling of Leona Lewis and Sara Bareilles and other bravado-voiced women. Lyle asked him to play something palatable about seventeen times in a row. Then we gave up on music altogether because if there's one thing Dad can't stand, it's waiting in line at a coffee shop behind people who are ordering complicated breakfast sandwiches when he has somewhere to be, but if there's two things Dad can't stand it's waiting in line at a coffee shop behind people who are ordering elaborate breakfast sandwiches when he has somewhere to be **and** when Lyle repeats himself. Which he did, a lot.

So, we'd given up on music and decided to focus on talk radio, audiobooks, and the weather. We were in a zone with bad service, scanning through channels looking for a forecast—there were clustered ominous clouds gathering ahead of us—when we landed on a news broadcast station talking about a major accident somewhere near Columbus, Ohio, which we'd thankfully, already missed. And one of the broadcasters, talking about the traffic buildup, commented, "The road out there is absolutely unmitigable." And it caught, for Lyle, the way

things sometimes did. He said it immediately after. *The road is absolutely unmitigated.* And I don't know, it must have sounded nice or felt nice because he started saying it again and again in a string until Dad told him to *mitigate that phrase, please.* He stopped for a while. One thousand and two hundred quiet seconds later, he said it again.

For the next few hours of the drive, *this road is completely unmitigated,* became an unwanted catchphrase. Sometimes, we'd make it an hour without anything, sometimes, Lyle would say it three or four times in a row or once every thirty seconds for five minutes straight. We'd been going through a bad round of it when Dad bought the duct tape at the rest stop. The implication was clear. He told Lyle to hold onto the tape as a reminder. But Lyle had gotten bored and, all the while muttering to himself, *this road is completely unmitigated,* had begun to tear stripes of the bright orange tape and use them to make a spider web pattern on the passenger side window. Dad'd taken the duct tape away, swearing at him. Lyle had suggested that maybe if he couldn't control his mouth, he was the one who needed the tape, after all. Dad threatened to leave Lyle on the side of the road.

We were silent for exactly two hundred and seventy-nine seconds, I know, I was counting, when he said it again.

I groaned. I wondered if it was too late to just turn around. I wondered, not for the first, or the sixth, or sixtieth, or the six hundredth time, where the hell we were going, anyways. All I knew, as our father began to swerve the car off the road in freshly unbridled anger, was my back hurt from sitting and that the landscape of Idaho, or Iowa, or Illinois, or whatever other I-state we were driving through—*Nebraska*—was flat and unappealing, and also that we were not going home again, a suspicion which I'd been suppressing since I saw Dad packing our collectible

Smurf-themed drinking glasses into a cardboard box and loading them into the van a few nights ago, because you don't just take glassware on a summer vacation road trip.

Dad pulled the car into the breakdown lane on the highway, jammed on the hazard lights, swearing, and muttering something about *relitigating the mitigating*.

"Get out of the car, now," our father said.

To our left, cars flew by, unaware.

"Dad, this isn't safe," Lyle replied.

"Driving with an insistent gnat of a son giving you a migraine also isn't safe. Out. Now."

"*Dad*," I attempted.

"Oh, don't *start*, Lane," Lyle hissed at me.

He looked like he might be on the verge of tears, which was deeply unusual, and seeing it made me feel like crying, too. He unbuckled his seat belt and got out of the car. I expected Dad to get out, too. I expected him to yell at Lyle outside while I huddled in the back seat, drawing ladybugs in all the open squares of Lyle's sudoku book. But Dad didn't get out of the car. He just turned the radio on, some pop-contemporary station, and for the duration of three songs, we sat there listening to the music while Lyle stood outside, sweating in the direct midafternoon sun. I thought about opening my door to pass him a Gameboy, or a book, or a hat, or a tube of sunscreen, but I didn't. My chest was tight, and I couldn't find anywhere else to focus. Whenever my chest tightened like that, which was a regular enough occurrence during the habitual conflicts between Dad and Lyle, or Dad and Mom, or Mom and Lyle, I always thought I was having a premature, mid-pubescent, medically unlikely heart attack. When I couldn't find anything else to think about, I'd become convinced of ridiculous things.

“Lane,” my father said after a few songs had passed. He turned the volume down. “Could you please pass me Bird?”

Bird was a plastic dinosaur Lyle’d had since he was two years old: a T-rex with little scaly green arms and a giant jaw on hinges. Lyle was thirteen then and passed through the stage of life where it was, strictly speaking, socially acceptable to love a toy, but one of his last remaining idiosyncrasies was his continued dedication to Bird, though he has stopped bringing the T-rex to school six months earlier. In truth, I think Lyle only stopped bringing Bird to school, tucked away in his backpack where he thought no one else could see him, because one of his teachers spotted the dino and called our parents in for yet another parent-teacher conference where it was heavily implied Lyle’s potential was being stunted because he was still allowed to use soothing methods which *did not align with his age or aspirations for social cognition and development*.

“He didn’t mean to,” I said as I rummaged around in Lyle’s backpack and pulled out the plastic toy. I released Bird into Dad’s hand.

“Ask him about the fucking lizards,” I barely heard him whisper as he transferred Bird to his left hand and dangled him in front of his face, holding him by just one of his stumpy little arms. “We’re going to Colorado,” he informed me, eyes still fixed on Bird.

“For vacation?” I asked. I already knew the answer.

“We’re going to stay for a while. Maybe the summer. Maybe longer. It depends.”

Outside, I saw that Lyle had all but given up. He was sitting with his back to us on the guardrail, shoulders slumped. I liked where we lived in New Jersey. I liked that there were so many houses packed onto our street and there was always noise from someone’s TV coming from somewhere so I never felt bored or alone, that the smells of other people’s dinners were

always present, thick clouds of bacon or whispers of cinnamon and curry powder, a smog of sizzling garlic. I liked how close we lived to school, how easy it was to walk to my best friend Maya's house, and how many full-sized candy bars we got when we went trick-or-treating. I especially liked it was a place where we could be found.

And I could have said a lot of this, pled my case to Dad, tried harder to convince him to turn us around and take us home. But I knew it was too late, had been too late since the very start when Dad, hair standing up at odd sweaty angles, gym clothes sticking to him from the workout routine he did in our unfinished garage, stomped into the living room while Lyle and I watched a competitive Jenga livestream on the desktop, and announced that *we had three days to pack our bags for a trip and there would be no questions*. He waved a glass jar of cured lemons loftily at us, picked one out of the can, and bit into the salt-brined skin enthusiastically. He made a terrible grimace and grin, shook his head, and announced he hated citrus fruit. And then he told us again to *get packing*. And then he told us both to eat more citrus, he'd read it *was good for dementia prevention*. *Did we know our maternal great-grandmother had dementia?* He'd taken another bite of lemon and audibly gagged.

Before Mom left, Dad had not been the type who would look for help anywhere. He never wanted to bring Lyle to affinity groups, or behavioral therapists, or tutors for fear they would make Lyle feel isolated or important. Mom suggested family therapy once. She'd sounded halfhearted about it herself, even as she brought it up. We were watching the evening news, the three of us, while Lyle spent the night on restriction in his bedroom after an altercation in the grocery store earlier that day, which involved Lyle making forceful comments to the woman behind us in line about the environmental impact of her plastic water bottle consumption. These were the times when our parents felt the most upset by him, I think, the moments when the

dysfunction leaked out of the house and seeped into public spaces. But I often struggled to understand the problem. I knew he was *difficult*. But he was also often right. We watched a lot of documentaries as a family, about preserving the rainforest or saving the whales. And speaking to the lady in the grocery store about her cases of water bottles that day he hadn't even started out yelling. It *had* escalated, but to start with, he'd just asked her: *why did you choose to buy this when there is free water everywhere?*

But that night, after Lyle had been banished to his room, Mom mentioned her friend thought we needed outside support and should consider seeing a family therapist. Dad shrugged her off and said he didn't think Lyle needed to be made to feel more peculiar. He said feeling strange just empowered Lyle's behavior, and what we all needed to do was ignore it and pretend he was normal. *Like Lane does, just treat him like anyone else*, Dad said, punching me in the shoulder. I felt simultaneously proud and guilty. Mom agreed without much protest, though she never learned how to treat Lyle as anything but peculiar, and over time, we all stopped watching whale documentaries and the news.

About a month before she left us, Mom and I took a day to ourselves. *Just us chickens*, she kept saying. It was Saturday night, after a morning where she and Lyle had a particularly tough go at it. She'd made him fried eggs for breakfast but cooked the yolk less than normal so they were runny and bright, and Lyle refused to eat them; in turn, she'd refused to excuse him from the breakfast table, and the two of them spent quite some time sitting in palpable silence as the tilt of the sun through our kitchen windows slowly changed, until, after two hours of stoic stubbornness Mom started to cry, which made Lyle laugh, which made Mom pick up his runny fried egg and squeeze it into her fist, letting it drip, gooey and yellow down her forearms, into her crimson knit sweater, and into the wood grain of the kitchen table, which in turn made Lyle,

unable to stand the sight or smell of the mucus-y yolk, puke directly into his plate. The vomit went all over his other egg, chunks of half-digested lasagna from the night before coated a piece of crustless white toast, and the bile splattered across the table into Mom's otherwise clean plate.

Mom and I left an hour after that whole ordeal, *just us chickens*, without cleaning the kitchen. We started our outing at the thrift store in town. She bought herself a suitcase with a broken zipper and a new winter hat with a pom-pom on the top. We also bought Lyle a couple of new sweaters, though Mom griped the whole time that *it's not as if he'll wear any of these anyways. I'm sure the texture will be unbearable*. And he had, in fact, found them to be unbearable, even after she washed them with his unscented laundry detergent. He threw them, wrapped tightly in a plastic bag, in the trash the next day where he thought she wouldn't see, after she attempted to sneak them into his dresser drawers, where she hoped he wouldn't notice, hiding them among the rest of his sweaters, the ones with approved textures, which were all either developing severe stains and holes or getting too small for him.

At the store, I tried on a silk dress which was altogether too large for me—the chest gaped when I tried it on, and the sleeves dropped off my bony shoulders. I liked it, though, because it reminded me of the women on the covers of the fashion magazines I found myself glued to whenever we were waiting in line at the grocery store. I wanted to know what their skin smelled like, those women. Mom always rolled her eyes at the magazines when she caught me looking at them. I stood in the fitting room that day, squinting through the fluorescent lights and evaluating my prepubescent body at shrunken odds with a women's dress. I imagined the cover models smelled exactly like that dress, like lilacs and an intimately thick layer of body odor no amount of detergent would wash away. She said I'd grow into the dress someday and agreed to buy it for me *as a treat*.

After seeing a movie at the strip-mall, we drove home, and Mom clucked like a chicken periodically, laughing. By then I was starting to get a stomachache from all of the popcorn she bought me, and I didn't join in. When we got home, Dad was lifting weights in the cold, dark garage with a headlamp on, and Lyle was asleep on the couch. Someone cleaned up the egg-yolk vomit, probably Lyle with explicit instructions from Dad, but the breakfast dishes were still in the sink. Two weeks later, we woke up for Sunday breakfast but found nothing but Dad sitting pale, alone, and silent, at the kitchen table. We ate cereal out of paper bowls for the next week.

Back in the car, Dad turned the radio off. "I found some people out there who can help us," he said. To our left, a big rig trailer rocketed past us, carrying thousands of loaves of pre-sliced white bread across the country. "Things will be better soon," he said. Then, holding Bird, he got out of the car. I watched from my seat as he walked around to the front of the hood. He ducked down and disappeared. When he reappeared, he was no longer holding Bird. He walked over to the guardrail and touched Lyle on the shoulder. Lyle jerked, surprised or uncomfortable—both, always both. Dad said something, and Lyle nodded. They both returned to the car. Lyle joined me in the backseat instead of sitting up front. I waved at him as he got in, and he tried to wave back, but really, all he managed was a limp noodle of acknowledgment. I mouthed the word *Colorado* to him, but he just shrugged, not understanding or not caring. Both, sometimes it was both.

There was a crunch underneath our wheels as we pulled away and merged quickly back onto the highway. I cringed. Lyle's head was planted in his lap, and he didn't even look up, look back, or notice the crushed plastic carcass of his last dinosaur as we careened onward. I turned in my seat to watch the speck of green disappear behind us.

Our car had no GPS, so when we pulled off the exit for Breckenridge, Dad had to pull over and break out a paper map. He'd highlighted our intended path in purple pen. We'd been driving towards unfamiliar mountains for an hour already, our ears popping with the pressure change as we went, our car growing muggy with the hot breath of our growing anticipation. I kept my face pressed firmly to the window, watching this new world: open sky and the clean faces of high rumbling rocky slopes. When we pulled into our final destination, the Breckenridge Colorado Center for Wholistic Soul and Self Wellness, The Center as we'd come to know it, the sun was dipping down behind the mountains, casting a copper hue over the sprawl of wooden buildings so everything was buzzing with a faint glow that did, I can admit now, look beautiful; and must've looked to Dad, predestined.

The Center was situated at the end of a long driveway. There were painted signs with yellow arrows guiding us as we pulled in. I peered through the trees. There were small log cabins just visible beyond them. We finally reached the parking lot for a very large bare-beamed wooden building that could have been any luxury hotel or event center, save for the one stained glass window in the front, which depicted a camel on the mountains. There was a sign in front of the big building that read *Nucleus*. This, was The Center.

There were questions I wanted to ask. *What's a nucleus? What is this place? Can I go play on the swings over there? Do they have a bathroom here? Does Mom know where we are? Are there any more snacks left other than the banana chips?* But as we parked, I left our silence undisturbed. At that point, our record for sustained successive silence was four thousand seven hundred and seventy-three seconds.

Breckenridge Colorado Center for Wholistic Soul and Self Wellness, Breckenridge CO,

2009:

Lyle and I did not actually set foot inside The Breckenridge Colorado Center for Wholistic Soul and Self Wellness on the first day. We stayed in the car while Dad went in alone to register himself. He returned fifteen minutes later, carrying a canvas tote bag with a camel screen-printed on one side. The tote was filled with our onboarding foods: celery sticks, sliced cheddar cheese, premade quinoa salads and slightly burnt sourdough bread rolls. The point was to ease our bodies slowly onto the diet regime, a little bit of food at registration to whet our appetite, a promise of the whole-food-whole-nutrition-holistic-whole-soul-healing-and-wellness that was to come.

And then we were driving again, on our way to the Mountainside Motel, a lightly dingy establishment located awkwardly in the suburbs of Breckenridge, a mile down the road from a gas station.

Dad told us we'd be staying, *indefinitely*.

"Indefinitely," Lyle whispered under his breath as the three of us loaded our essentials into our new home base. The room was musty and dark, with heavy gingham patterned curtains over the windows, and photos of elk on the walls. But it had two beds, one with a pullout extension so Lyle and I could share, a mini-fridge we managed to fit a decent amount of food into, a cable TV, and a clean bathroom with grapefruit scented soap.

"Indefinitely," I agreed as I thudded my backpack down onto the floor next to one of the twin beds. Lyle put his own duffle bag down on the opposite side. We both sat on the bed. I felt exhausted, though we'd done nothing but sit in the car for the past twenty-four hours, and the

idea of doing anything but turning on the TV and lying in the bed with the air conditioner blasting curled under the polyester blend quilt as though it were a cocoon, seemed impossible.

“Indefinitely,” Lyle said again, absently, as he rummaged in his backpack.

“At least for the summer,” Dad said sharply, sensing the potential for another unmitigated situation if he let us grow too attached to the word. He began unloading food out of the new canvas tote from The Center and set up dinner for each of us on paper plates: thin sliced turkey and dark brown rolls topped with baked oats and flax seeds.

Our room was one of about a dozen at the motel, set in a long, log building. The motel included access to a collection of hiking trails, which were actually very short paths in a sparsely populated forest full of boulders and aspen trees and patches of dirt and white wildflowers. The air was thin, and I found I lost my breath even on the short walks. There was a woodfire powered hot tub, but the bin where we were supposed to be able to purchase logs was always empty. We asked the owner of the motel about it once, when we saw him outside checking on a pot of pansies. But all he'd done was laugh and pat himself on the stomach before going back to dead-heading his flowers. There was a grill and a firepit around the back that some of the other guests, mostly hikers and mountain bikers stopping off during their soul-searching-self-actualizing-outdoor adventures, would gather at in the evenings to trade stories of woe. Early on Lyle and I would join the other guests out at the fire pit at night while Dad enjoyed some *sanctuary time* alone in the motel room.

“Where are your parents?” one woman, a sunburnt mom from Florida who was there clearing her head after her son was arrested for shoplifting at a RadioShack, asked us. We'd been at the motel for five days.

“Dad’s in the room,” I gestured. The marshmallow I was toasting expanded and then turned into goo and dripped down into the fire. I reached down to the bag and loaded my stick with another one.

“Our mom’s dead,” Lyle announced.

I dropped my whole stick and marshmallow into the fire.

“Oh my, I’m so—”

“No, she’s not,” I said. “She just taking a break.”

“What...she?” The woman stuttered at us. I wanted to stab Lyle in the eye with the marshmallow kabob. I wanted to tell him not to be cruel to people who were giving us free marshmallows.

“It’ll be easier,” Lyle said, he handed me his marshmallow and stick, “If you just tell people she’d dead. Less complicated for them.” He jerked his head towards the woman and rolled his eyes. I was certain she could hear us, Lyle never whispered, but she was, out of politeness or embarrassment, sitting very still in her plastic folding chair, pretending not to listen.

“She left because she hates me,” Lyle stood, shook his head, shrugged. “Right, Lane?” He began to walk away, back towards our room. He got like this sometimes. Obstinate and angry and willing to say absurd things just to watch the reaction ripple out. Especially when the routine of our life was interrupted. Mom said it was him trying to regain control. Dad said it was him being cruel. I thought maybe he thought it was funny. My face burned in apologetic embarrassment as I looked over at the woman.

“He’s upset,” I muttered awkwardly. I stuck an uncooked marshmallow from the bag in my mouth and ran off down the path after Lyle, brandishing my skewer out in front of me, as though it were a lantern guiding me through the dark.

I caught up to Lyle just as he reached the door to our room. Panting. “She does not hate you,” I said.

He shrugged at me.

I could hear Dad watching the news inside our room. “Do you hate her?” I asked.

“*Indefinitely,*” he muttered.

I really don’t think it was hate that made her leave, though. For her, I think it was a threshold of fatigue. Too many consecutive days of resentment and confusion, an overwhelming feeling she would never be able to do enough for us. A bitterness too, I’m sure, that we were what her life had turned into.

When they were younger mom imagined she’d become an immigration lawyer, while Dad aspired to become a comedian or a screen writer. By the time they had Lyle, Mom was the receptionist at a veterinary office, and she had to take non-drowsy Benadryl every day because although she was allergic to cats, she was more allergic to applying for new jobs. Dad was a technical writer for a pharmaceutical company, and it was this job which both paid the bills and began our slow descent into the exploration of alternative lifestyles. Dad would sit in his home-office, writing symptom and side effect pamphlets for generic versions of name brand drugs, and he’d become more and more angry and disenchanted with the whole system—the way we poisoned ourselves with one thing just to cure ourselves of another. He could be heard walking around the house muttering, *Don’t like the weather? Take a pill!*—under his breath as he took out the trash, or reorganized the drawers in the kitchen, so all the forks faced the correct direction. He got into exercise, and what he called natural treatments for natural problems: topical oils made from plant distillations for his stress hives, guided meditation for his migraines, twice weekly yoga at the rec center in town to keep him spry. Mom tolerated his zeal for lifestyle

wellness and kept herself busy crocheting beer koozies for her friends and listening to true crime podcasts, especially ones about cults or women who went missing during college parties.

And so, it was a three-pronged problem, when Lyle started showing signs of behavioral and developmental dysfunction that could not be ignored. The first prong was they liked to fix their problems themselves. They waited as long as they could to get professionals involved, and even once the school forced their hand, they held the doctors at an arm's length, taking in their suggestions but eagerly doing their own research before they took any of the behavioral plans to heart. Lyle was a squeaky door hinge, and they had always been handy, they still believed they could fix it themselves.

The second prong was that Dad did not really believe in pills. He did not believe there was a solution in the world that might be provided to us in small orange bottles. Symptom management came from dietary changes—we decided processed sugar was inflammatory to Lyle's mood and so we only ate whole wheat or alternative grain pasta, cupcakes on special occasions. Symptom management, Dad believed could also come from exercise—we did family bike rides to the park every Sunday. Or from lifestyle augmentations—we weren't allowed cellphones until we started high school, and he limited our screen intake to two hours a day on the family desktop. Or from brain activities—Dad and Lyle played chess four times a week at a local chess club. Lyle hated chess. But, as Dad was always saying, as he fried eggs in the kitchen on Sunday mornings while I waxed poetic about how nice it was when I stayed at Maya's because her parents let us have donuts for breakfast, our problems were not available for fast-track solutions, and sometimes we had to do things, and eat things, we did not like. *Our problems will not be a profit*, he'd tell us, splatting turkey bacon down next to pre-sliced wheat toast and fruit salad.

The third prong was that our parents had an image of the kind of life they wanted to lead; the kind of life they wanted us to lead. We were supposed to play clarinet in the school band. We were supposed to be student council presidents, go to prestigious colleges, actually get around to becoming lawyers who believed in things. We were not supposed to drench our whole right arm in washable glue during craft hour at the summer reading kickoff event at the local library, because we liked the way picking it off felt, and we definitely weren't supposed to cry so loudly in the bathroom three separate staff members came in to check on us when Mom made us wash the glue off with hot water and foaming soap—this, of course, was all Lyle. We were supposed to do all the things our parents had never gotten around to doing.

The problems persisted. Festered. Grew. Grew into screaming at each other in the grocery store because I wanted sugar cookies and Dad had a migraine his smelling salts couldn't fix, and Lyle couldn't stand the way the lights felt on his skin. Festered and turned into fights about who was supposed to do the dishes. About her job, which she hated more with every passing day. About which one of them would chaperone our next field trip to the New York City aquarium. Neither of them wanted to go anymore. Dad grew more agitated, volatile, reactionary. He was about punishments. Mom grew stubborn, distant, and immovable. She was disappointed. She was about boundaries and guilt. Suddenly, they meshed poorly. They began to speak to each other in calculated speeches, as though they were still in the debate club where they met in college. The problems festered and grew into fights about whether they even had time that year to run in the charity 5k. And then, when no solutions had been exhausted but all the problems had been aired out, she was gone.

To: Alyssa Botwin
443 Lansing Street,

Color-me-Park New Jersey, 08817

From: Lane Botwin
23 Mountain Road,
Breckenridge CO, 80424

Hi there!

Just writing to let you know that we are in Colorado now. I don't know if Dad told you before we left. Lyle says that it would be illegal if he didn't. But I still don't know. So I wanted to let you know. You'll only get this if you're home now. Are you home now?

We're doing okay out here, the mountains are beautiful and we've gone on a lot of long walks. Lyle has added a lot of new red rocks to his collection that he finds on the walks and we're making friends with the people at the hotel. They let us roast marshmallows with them at night on the fire pit and we can see the stars. I'm thinking about learning all the constellations while we're here visiting because it's so much easier to see the sky here. Maybe next time we go to town I can get a book on constellations.

There's nowhere to swim here though, and I miss the public pool in town. Are you going a lot? Are people still really mad about the policy on shower shoes? We've spent the last week exploring Brecken Ridge. That's the name of the town we're in. It's a neat town. Last night we got Foe Noodles at a Vietnamese restaurant and went to see a movie about talking sheep escaping from their farm. I didn't like the movie much because it felt like it was for kids. And Dad fell asleep. He snored in the movie theater which was so embarrassing. Remember how he does that? Falls asleep in the worst places. He says that we're going to this place called the Center for Whole Soul Soothing tomorrow. To do some paperwork. I hope he doesn't fall asleep there.

Write Soon! L

We arrived back at the Breckenridge Center for Wholistic Soul and Self Wellness for our intake evaluations in the bright sun of midafternoon, sweating and nervous, a week after our arrival in Colorado. main building at The Center, which was called *The Nucleus*, looked something like a cross between a convention center and a church. The ceilings were tall and vaulted, and the first room we entered when we arrived for testing that day was a large lobby full of windows with white linen curtains. There were portraits hung around the room, mostly of men in tan linen tunics smiling cold toothy smiles. I shrunk closer to Lyle as we walked by one portrait of an unusually pale man with bright red allergic looking freckles covering his face. The plaque underneath read: In Memory of Bhagavan Peter Mesentery. There were alcoves built into the wall every six feet of so, filled with burning sandalwood incense, and gaudy gold vases. Some of the alter alcoves held crosses, some small stone Buddha statues, some gold statues of Ganesh. Children screeched and ran about as their parents laughed and chased them, and old, hunched women gathered drinking funky herbal tea out of reusable travel mugs. Dad stopped walking for a moment and observed the scene, the shrouds of people, the mystic art, mesmerized.

We registered at a table at the back end of the room. A woman wearing many wooden beaded bracelets checked our names off a list, put white wrist bands on each of us, and then called over three separate escorts in white lab coats. She instructed us to follow our designated White Coat for individual testing.

“I don’t want to go,” Lyle said.

“Can’t we go together?” I asked.

“No,” Dad said.

“I don’t like doctors.” Lyle was speaking more to his shoes than his designated lab-coat, a dark-haired boy with dark curly hair who couldn’t have been much older than seventeen.

“My name is Nico, does it help if you know my name before we go? I’m not a doctor. Just a helper and a guide here, okay?”

“I’ve been to a lot of doctors,” Lyle whispered at the floor. I could smell the dewy sweat and bright motel soap on his skin. Watching him shrink, I felt like I might cry, but none of the lab coats seemed to register me.

And he had, during those early years of diagnosis, when he was only eight, and despite our parents' skepticism, spent a lot of time getting worked-up in doctor’s offices. Offices which masqueraded as safe fun activity rooms, with books and board games and sensory play tables filled with sand or dried beans. They were spaces designed to make patients forget that on the other side of the mirrored one-way glass, they were being observed. We went once or twice a week for months, so the behaviorists could get a comprehensive understanding of Lyle and his specific challenges. I found the whole thing gruelingly dull. I figured if I wanted to hear Lyle talk about the book he was reading, I figured I could just ask him myself. Mom and Dad watched him closely though, faces pressed so near the one-way glass they were almost touching it with their noses.

Sometimes Lyle would be excited after the doctors. He’d tell us about the games they’d played, or how fast he’d solved the different puzzles. But more often he’d be frustrated or sad, and the days following an appointment would be especially difficult. He’d want to do nothing but hide in his room for hours at a time, sitting on the floor, cradling Bird on his lap, reading in the mellow light of his bedside lamp. In some of the Doctor’s appointments they showed him videos of children his age playing and arguing on the playground and asked him to explain what

he saw. In some of the appointments they just played loud repetitive noise until he started to shake. It went on for so long once that he hid under the table, and still, it went on.

I looked up at the white coats who were waiting for us. Most of the doctors Lyle had seen in those years hadn't even worn lab coats. I bit my bottom lip.

"I don't want to go," I said.

"I don't either," Lyle added.

"No one is asking what you want. They're telling you what to do. And if you give this nice boy a hard time I will—" Dad began, glaring at Lyle and gesturing largely.

But Nico cut Dad off with a loud laugh. He shrugged out of his white lab coat and folded it over his arm. "We wear those to keep our clothes clean because in some of the intakes we use paint, okay? But we're not doctors, alright? For today, I'm just your pal Nico?" "What types of things are you interested in, Lyle?"

"Huh?"

"What kinds of things do you like? Do you like superheroes? Or magic tricks? Or sharks? or—"

"I like habitat conservation of local wildlife. And wetlands especially. And Sherlock Holmes. Did you know some species of lizards can go their whole life without drinking water at all which makes Colorado a good—"

"Here's the deal," Nico interrupted again, smiling. "Every time we finish a test or a task you can tell me something really interesting about local wetland conservation, okay?"

There was a long, taught, pause. I could practically hear Dad's anticipatory breath.

"Okay," Lyle said finally. "Okay. But I don't know that much about the wetlands here, mostly it's the ones back home."

“That’s alright. You can teach me about the wetlands back—”

“We’re from New Jersey,” Lyle interrupted.

“You can teach me about the wetlands in New Jersey, then.” Nico started to walk down the hall and this time Lyle followed. He squeezed my hand before he went, but he didn’t look back.

“We like to talk to them in kind voices,” The older white coat said to Dad as she began to lead him away. “In the pre-meltdown stages if we can keep our own reactivity in check, then sometimes we can avoid the breakdown completely.” Her voice drifted farther away as she and Dad turned a corner and disappeared down another hall.

I was alone then, with my own white coat, a girl who was in her mid-twenties with thick blonde dreadlocks and a tattoo of a feather wrapped around her neck. She introduced herself as Sandi. I wiped my eyes. I could not stop shivering. She led me first into a normal-looking classroom, where she handed me a case full of pencils and pens and a large leaflet questionnaire.

“You’ve got an hour,” she said, pulling out a pink iPod and sticking headphones in.

One a scale of one to ten, with one being not hard at all, and ten being extremely difficult, how hard do you find it to concentrate in class. (2). True or false, when I am bored, I am easily able to entertain myself by imagining things in my own head (true). On a scale of one to ten, how hard do you find it to predict people’s reactions to the things you say (4). True or false: I am upset when my routine changes (mostly true but a little false. I don’t need to eat oatmeal with raisins and brown sugar every morning. I don’t need to walk the same path to school and I don’t need all of my notebooks for all on my classes to be green. But I don’t know if you know but I used to live in NJ and I was supposed to go to the public pool in town with my best friend Maya and we were supposed to wear our first bikinis and we were supposed to go

shopping for them together at the outlet malls outside of town with her mother who is very cool and who always buys us cinnamon buns dipped in thick vanilla icing when we're out at the mall, and I love the way the icing feels all sticky and thick. I like to lick it off the bun. I was supposed to have a pet fish this summer. I don't love when routines like that get interrupted? But I don't need to eat the same thing everything morning, if that's what you mean). On a scale of one to ten, with one being not hard at all, and ten being extremely difficult, when on the phone, how difficult is it for you to know when it is your turn to speak (2, it's usually when the other person is finished with their sentence right? Now I'm worried I've been talking on the phone wrong for years. Is it supposed to be difficult? Have I been interrupting people?). It went on like that for twenty-five questions.

When I finished the test Sandi led me through a maze of cedar planked hallways and through a set of swinging doors to the in-house medical facilities. The floor was laid out like any other doctor's office, fluorescent lights and a dozen separate patient waiting rooms, scales set outside the door of each one. Sandi, although not herself a doctor, was evidently cleared to perform some basic evaluations. She took my temperature and weighed me and took my blood pressure. We made small talk. *Did I like the weather out here?* She was still getting used to how dry it was. She was from New York, and she missed the pizza. She really thought I was going to like it out West, she said. She said coming to The Center had *saved her life*.

"Have you always been rashy?" She asked, lifting my Somerset County School System Annual Spelling Bee Bonanza t-shirt to look at my stomach. I was sitting on a medical recliner in the center of the room. She pinched the skin on my side between my ribs and my hips.

"Rashy?"

“Show me your arms again,” She sighed. She took a note on her clipboard and tugged my t-shirt down. I held out my arms and she lightly raked dirty nails across a collection of small, inflamed, bug bites. I winced.

After the medical testing we left the exam rooms and we went back to the other part of the building, down a different side hallway, up two flights of stairs, and landed in an empty yoga studio. Sandi spent the next hour instructing me to move around the studio. She made me run, and then skip, and then hop, and then bounce on an exercise ball, and then lay with my back curved around the exercise ball, and then hop like a leapfrog, and then try, and fail, to hop like a leapfrog over the exercise ball, and then lay very still on the floor with my back flat and my arms stretched over my head. I felt exposed and embarrassed. When she put on banjo music and told me to try dancing, I started to cry. She told me expressive movement was supposed to be fun, and I was pretty repressed for an eleven-year-old, but we could be done if I wanted. In a sudden and irrepressible swell, what I wanted was for someone who smelled like blue dish soap to wrap their arms around me. I wanted my mom. I worried that this is what Lyle had felt like every time we took him to the doctors during that year of workups. I looked around for the one-way glass, but there was no one watching for me.

Mountainside Motel and 57 Piccapin Road, Breckenridge CO, 2009:

Much to my relief, we did not have to return to The Center for a few weeks after those initial tests. Dad was taking part in something he called a “Family Wellness Familiarization Intensive Seminar” for those weeks, and so he went there every day, while Lyle and I were left alone at the motel. We watched TV. We ate the crunchy peanut butter Dad brought back from The Center each night, directly from the jar. It was the most familiar of the foods approved by the new wellness seminar. The personalized diet plans would come later, but in those early days we ate exclusively the odd foods Dad brought back each night at the end of his workshops: some assortment of raw milk in glass jars, beef tallow spread on heavy loaves of einkorn bread, cups of broth, heated in the microwave, made from slow boiled chickens’ feet, tubs purple sauerkraut. What I wanted, more than anything, was a bag of salty potato chips, or bright orange macaroni and cheese from a box, or microwavable pizza bites bursting with tangy tomato sauce and cheese.

Lyle spent a lot of time reading a book of logic puzzles Nico had given him at the end of their intake session. Sometimes he tried to include me, reading them out loud and trying to get me to join him in drawing charts to help figure them out. But I found the meaning of them impenetrable and grew frustrated quickly. *If three members of a family leave for Colorado one summer, and two of them like it out there but the third one can’t stop thinking about the particular joy of walking out of a dark cold movie theater in into the oppressive heat of suburban sidewalk summers and then going to the strip mall nearby to get blended mocha coffees and to read in the giant bookstore, how many return home in September?*

“Why do you think this stuff is purple?” I asked Lyle one night. We were sitting outside, watching the sun set in the mountains. Dad was still out at his workshop. I held up a forkful of

the sauerkraut we were supposed to be eating for dinner. We were also supposed to be eating slices of pale salami for dinner, which smelled almost musky and sweaty, and which were growing greasy and warm on a paper plate next to us.

“Because it was grown that way,” Lyle replied. He wasn’t eating the sauerkraut or the salami. “Do you want to do a puzzle?”

“Aren’t you tired of those puzzles?”

He shook his head.

“Aren’t you hungry?” I could hear a collection of motel guests sitting in the plastic deck chairs around back, laughing. I was grateful they weren’t roasting hot dogs. The smell when they roasted real food always made my stomach jealous. Since the night with the woman who’d asked about Mom, I hadn’t felt brave enough to venture back to the fire pit.

Lyle shrugged. “Okay so, there’s a group of five people: Abe, Bob, Candy, Dave, and Eva.”

“Can I be Abe?”

“Can you? What? No. That’s not how it works. Each person has a different job. One’s a horticulturalist,”

“What’s that?”

“A person who grows plants.”

“How’s that different from a farmer?”

“Lane,” he sighed and closed the book and stood up.

“No, no I’ll...I want to play,” I jumped up, anxious, but he nodded and sat back down.

“One’s a horticum?...hortitician?... plant person?...A person who grows plants.” I prompted.

“Horticulturalist. One’s a *horticulturalist*. One’s a teacher, one’s a preacher, ones an architect, and one’s a painter.”

“What do you think Mom’s job is right now?”

“Horticulturalist,” Lyle replied, not looking up from his book, but smiling.

“Whatever. Do you think Dad is working right now?”

“Yeah, he works when we’re asleep. I see him at the desk when I wake up to pee.”

“Do you think he likes it here?” I asked through a mouthful of sauerkraut. My new strategy was to try to swallow each forkful whole without chewing it, to get as little exposure to the flavor as possible. I picked up a salami and waved it near Lyle’s face.

He batted my hand away shaking his head. “Forget about Dad. The last one is a *painter*,” he returned to reading his puzzle out loud, done with the conversation. I stirred the sauerkraut around in the jar, trying to make a well in the middle. The smell of vinegar made my eyes water. “Three of the people prefer hot coffee and two prefer iced coffee.”

“I miss iced coffee, don’t you?”

“*Lane*,” his voice cracked in frustration, and I smiled with feigned innocence, but then put the lid back on the jar of sauerkraut and turned to focus on him. His face was thin, his freckles lit by the sprawl of mid-afternoon sun. I looked down at his book and noticed his hands; he’d picked away all the skin of his cuticles, and some of his nails were chipping, and there was dirt caked under his nails.

“Do you hate the hotel hand soap” I asked. At home, we’d used unscented hand and dish soap. Here, the motel provided plastic dispensers of bright pink, gooey, grapefruit-scented hand and body soap. We used it to wash all our dishes that weren’t disposable in the bathroom sink, too.

He looked up from his book of logic puzzles. “I...uhm.” He rubbed his eyes with the wrist of his right hand and then a little electric shock ran through his body. He shook his hands a few times. “I’m trying not to think about it too much. Alright? *So*, the painter and the horticulturalist have names that start with vowels, and of the people whose names start with vowels, one of them likes iced coffee and the other likes hot. Are you even playing attention?”

“Mom would’ve packed the right laundry detergent for a trip.”

He closed the book and stood but didn’t immediately retreat into the bedroom. He started scratching at the skin of his arms. He shook the wrist of his right hand again. He leaned down and picked up the plate of salami slices. “I’m gonna toss these, okay? They taste like salted feet.”

“Do you think she’s looking for us?”

“You know Dad has a cell phone, right? I don’t think we’re particularly hard to find.”

To: Alyssa Botwin
443 Lansing Street,
Color-Me-Park New Jersey, 08817

From: Lane Botwin
23 Mountain Road,
Breckenridge CO, 80424

Hi Mom,

We’re still here in Breck. It’s not so bad here. The views at the hotel we’re staying at are fantastic. I think you’d like the mountains. Lyle and I get to hang out a lot. He’s doing well considering how much his routine has been thrown off lately. You know? But I’m sure Dad is telling you all the same things in his letters. Or when he calls? Does he call? He’s doing a wellness retreat nearby—Dad I mean—and I think it’s good for him.

But the food is weird here. Remember how I used to complain when we'd buy spaghetti that was bright red and made out of lentils? I miss that spaghetti.

Write soon? L

It wasn't clear to me then the first or second or even third time Dad brought the milk home that there was anything especially odd was happening. The rest of what The Center had to offer, the spiritual guidance, the regimented diets, the group behavioral therapy, all of that was a benefit, but it wasn't the root reason Dad signed us up. We'd signed up because he was sold on miracle milk. He carried home frothy jars of thick creamline cow's milk, and he seemed almost worshipful as he placed them delicately in the motel mini fridge. We started with regular raw cow's milk first. We drank that every night for two weeks, out of the plastic cups provided by the motel, with Dad smiling in broad enthusiastic ways as Lyle and I gulped it down, mostly without protest. It tasted like milk. A little sweeter and grassier, maybe. But like milk. Dad told us it was supposed to be easier to digest, that it had good bacteria. He did not mention that raw milk was often illegal to sell or buy, and he certainly did not mention he was coming to believe that unpasteurized milk was a message from the angelics, a form of nutrition untainted by the greed of corporate food systems, a divine feminine maternal care that could heal us and make us whole again. Instead, he introduced us to the milk with sleeves of spelt chocolate chip cookies we could dip in it, and with long enthusiastic conversations about our stomachs as local ecosystems for microbiota.

During the weeks that Dad attended the initiation wellness workshop at The Center, Lyle and I languished at the motel, growing more cooped up and restless with each passing day. We

went for long walks outside. We read in the room. We watched daytime TV. I especially liked shows with real families airing out their real grievances in front of As-Seen-On-TV judges. I often wondered what Judge Pat or The Honorable Marcella would order Mom and Dad to do, if we appeared on set. We ate dense sour brown bread covered in thick yellow butter, and spoonfuls of chunky cherry chutney, a different kind of cold cabbage-based side dish with dinner every night. The Center seemed to be helping Dad in those early weeks. He seemed less volatile. Less frenetic. He woke with his alarm and splashed his face with bitter smelling tinctures he'd picked up from one of the retreat attendees, looked in the mirror, said his daily affirmations. But by the time we'd spent a month living in the motel, I was officially sick of sauerkraut, and Lyle was officially sick of rereading the same books he'd brought with him for the trip.

“Can you not just skip the morning?” Lyle whined. It was a Wednesday morning and Dad was getting ready for his day at The Center. Lyle was seated in the desk chair. Unwilling to take no for an answer, he was repeatedly asking our father to take us to the library or a bookstore that morning instead of going into his conference.

“Lyle, it's a program, we have to work it every day. You can't just miss a morning or they'll—”

“But what if you were sick? What if that jar of purple cabbage you ate out of just now even though you forgot to refrigerate it overnight gave you food poisoning? What would you do then?”

“I'm not sick.”

“But if you were you'd—”

“Lyle, this isn't a game. I can't just—”

“—Leave us here *alone* in a motel room for another day with nothing to do and nothing to eat? I agree.”

I gave up on going back to sleep. Dad was standing over Lyle, he was dressed in oddly tight denim shorts and hiking boots and one of his long white button-down shirts, the one with the red sauce stain on one sleeve. It looked a little too large for him now, hanging loosely around his torso. It was how my shirts were beginning to fit me, too. Lyle started spinning around in the desk chair, going so fast that watching made my stomach hurt.

“I am out here, spending hours learning about.... I drove all the way across the country for.... Do you have any?” Dad sputtered. “You do realize, correct? We’re here because of *you*?”

Lyle slammed his feet into the floor. The spinning chair to stopped. I watched Lyle’s chest, shrouded a bit by his own slightly ill-fitting clothes, rise and fall rapidly.

“What are you going to do about it?” he asked.

I threw myself back down onto our mattress loudly. This was one of his phrases from years ago. One of those terrible repeated phrases. We’d gone through five months of *what are you going to do about it*. Our parents would tell him to eat his vegetables, get dressed for school, get in the car, sit down to do a coloring book page, pick a different book to read, and he’d look at them and say *what are you going to do about it?* And then sometimes he’d say it in moments that made little to no sense. They’d ask him if he’d prefer chicken nuggets or hamburgers for dinner: *what are you going to do about it*. We’d be late for a dentist appointment Lyle couldn’t find a pair of socks that felt right on his feet and he’d look up from clawing through his drawers, holding one cotton black ankle sock and one grey knit sock that went up his calf, and he’d ask, almost pleading *what are you going to do about it?*

“What did you just say?” Our father’s voice was thick and cool.

“Sorry,” Lyle whispered under his breath.

It had been years since that particular turn of phrase plagued our house. Years since Dad had read on an internet parenting forum that a good deterrent from repetitive phrases and behaviors was repetitive punishment and rewards, so every time Lyle said the phrase, he had to go sit on the red plastic chair they’d put in one corner of his room, facing the wall, for five minutes. Every time. Even when we were already late for something. Even if we were out in public. We’d drive home so he could sit, for five minutes, in the chair.

“You know what to do,” Dad barked.

Lyle started shaking one of his hands in a rapid motion, but otherwise did not move.

“*Find a spot,*” Dad whispered.

Lyle still did not move from the desk chair but transitioned from shaking to scratching at the skin of his forearms rapidly. “I’m thirteen I’m not—”

“Lyle Adam Botwin, you have until the count of three to—”

“No.”

“If you do not—”

“No.”

“If you do not...” Dad’s voice was growing louder with each interrupted threat.

Lyle scratched so hard at the wrist of his left arm that I was worried it was going to start bleeding.

“If you do not find a way to regulate your speech, I will put you on a speech restriction for a whole twenty-four—” Dad continued.

One of Lyle’s books, a softcover mystery novel with a beaver on the cover, which he’d been reading on repeat for the last five days, was sitting on the desk. Lyle stopped scratching,

picked up the book, and whacked his left forearm with it, hard. Dad grabbed the book out of his hands. I shrunk back in the bed. Dad threw the book across the room, where it hit the back wall with a sharp slapping noise. Lyle drew his knees up to his face and buried his head in them. I could hear him whisper something muffled that was either *what are you going to do about it*, or *I just wanted to go to the library*. I couldn't be sure which.

"Dad, I...I," I tried to speak finally. I got out of bed and retrieved the book and placed it back on Lyle's bedside table. "I don't think..." But he wasn't paying attention to me. Dad had retreated to the bathroom, leaving the door open. He looked at himself in the mirror and repeated his morning affirmations *I am enough, this is enough, we are enough*, in a whisper, smiling at himself with a broad toothy grin.

"Lyle? Lane?" He turned back out into the room when he'd finished affirming. "How about a glass of milk?"

Lyle spent the proceeding hour, after Dad finally did leave for his retreat, hiding in the bathroom. I suspected he was in shower, with the sink and the fan on but the shower itself turned off, because when he got truly upset, he liked to be alone and in tight spaces with white noise. His face was pale when he finally emerged, and his hair was damp, like maybe he'd stuck his head under the sink.

"Do you want to do logic puzzles?" I asked when he returned.

He shook his head.

"Do you want to not talk?"

"No, it's okay. We can talk."

He was hovering awkwardly. He didn't seem to want to sit on our bed, or return to the desk chair, and he couldn't figure out where else to go. Finally, he walked around to the foot of

the bed and lay down on the floor. I closed the curtains to the windows, turned off the glaring overhead light, and lay down next to him.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I don’t mean to get so...”

“I know,” I said. He was always receptive and regretful right after one of these blowouts in a way he seldom was otherwise. His nose running, his eyes red, his arms scratched, he was stuck in the aftershocks of shame and loathing, and if I caught the momentum of that, I could tell him about anything that hurt or scared me, and he would feel it with me.

I rolled onto my side to watch him more clearly. He was lying with his back flat, staring up at the ceiling.

“Are you sure you don’t want to do a logic puzzle?” I asked again.

“Not really,” he grimaced.

“Do you want to go for a walk?”

“No.”

I had a strange flash where I considered asking him if he wanted to do interpretative movement like Sandi from my intake session had made me do, just to try to get him out of his head. *Do you want to hop around this motel room like you’re a frog with a stomachache.*

“Do you want some raisin tea?” I asked. There was a jar in the mini-fridge full of raisins soaked in yarrow tea. We were supposed to warm the tea in the microwave, drink it, and then fish the raisins out with a fork and eat them one by one.

“Gross.”

“What are your opinions on the much-contested scientific debate that some species of dessert lizard can go their whole lives without drinking water?”

He stood and shook his body out like he was a rag doll. “You don’t have to do that,” he sighed. Then added: “I think it’s a load of crap, and that they’re not adequately considering access to ground water sources.” He shook his head again and smiled. He walked over and opened the curtains to our room. Light poured in and I covered my eyes quickly, groaning and rolling on the floor to try to make him laugh, as if the fresh sunlight was causing me true life-threatening harm.

“You know what I want?” He asked me.

I squinted at him, interested in the fresh notch of excitement in his voice. “What?” I asked.

“Breakfast.”

I wilted. I couldn’t do anything about that. “We have some hard-boiled eggs I think and—”

“No. Gross. I don’t want Wellness retreat cafeteria food. I want real food.”

“Where are we going to get that?” I asked.

Lyle had gone over to his side of the bed and pulled out his duffle bag. He rummaged around in the front pocket, located one neon orange sock, and unceremoniously dumped the contents of the sock, somewhere between seven and seventeen one-dollar bills and a handful of quarters, out onto the floor.

“I packed everything from my old piggy bank. In case of emergencies,” he said in response to my look of confusion.

“Oh of course,” I agreed sarcastically. “The panic sock.” Only Lyle, I thought, would pack a sock full emergency cash. “You didn’t have anywhere better to hide your funds? Because

no offense but I don't really want to use a whole bunch of money that smells like your toe sweat."

He threw the sock at me, or he tried to, but he wasn't able to get much airtime and it flopped awkwardly down two feet in front of him. It was like him, really it was, to ignore me every time I brought up my interest in hitchhiking to the grocery store, or my deep concern about the length of our stay, or my underlying nausea every time I had to look at the congealing soft-set yogurt Dad was now serving us for breakfast, only to reveal he'd been preparing for the unknown since we left our house a month and a half earlier. Understated and overprepared, that's how he always will be.

"I want to save most of it in case we ever need it," he said. He reached out in front of him and retrieved the sock, began shoving cash back inside it. "But there's a vending machine in the reception trailer. Let's go get some animal crackers."

"Chocolate frosted or vanilla?" I asked.

"Whatever you want," Lyle shoved a five-dollar bill into the pocket of his cargo shorts.

"Dad won't be happy," I said.

"What's he going to do about it?" Lyle winked at me.

The owner of the motel, whose name, we'd learned, was Jefferson, was in the middle of swearing loudly at his computer screen when we entered the reception trailer.

"The goddam fuck moustache," he was snarling at the screen, banging one of his palms against the top trying jiggle it back to life. He wore a silver and turquoise bolo tie and a black button-down shirt paired with mud splattered jeans and work boots. He had a small hoop in one ear and a thick black beard that was starting to speckle with white hairs. He whacked the top of the computer again with a large, dry, hand. The vending machine spat to life and started its

creaky journey to deliver strawberry frosted animal crackers to us. Jefferson whacked the computer one more time and looked up finally.

“Hey, you. Liam.”

“Lyle.”

“Sorry son. *Lionel*.”

“*Lyle*,” Lyle corrected again. I kicked him, not particularly surreptitiously but he ignored me and tore the bag of crackers open and began to fish around for an elephant shaped one for himself. He handed me a giraffe.

“Lyle,” Jefferson laughed. It was a forced booming type of laugh. “Lyle Lyle Alligator. You think you might be better equipped to fix this rattling death machine?”

Lyle shoved three elephant crackers into his mouth and walked over to the computer. It was an easy fix, nothing a forced restart couldn't clear up, but Jefferson was thrilled none the less, and offered to take us out for ice cream. Lyle asked if, instead of ice cream, Jefferson would take us to the library, and somewhat bemused, Jefferson agreed. I would have rather had the ice cream, but I sensed Lyle *needed* the books, so I didn't fuss too much about this negotiation, though I did hiss in Lyle's ear, as we loaded into the truck, that he owed me at least two more packets of emergency-sock animal crackers for this. Jefferson drove a two-seat pick-up truck, a so Lyle and I had to squeeze into the passenger seat together.

Jefferson said he *already had more books than he knew how to read*, so once we arrived at the local library, Lyle and I went in alone, wielding the remains of our bag of animal crackers and Jefferson's library card, leaving Jefferson behind, parked in his truck, smoking a cigar, and singing along, somehow, to one of Beethoven's symphonies. The library was mostly empty as we entered, save for a young, freckled librarian sitting at the main desk. I got a guest pass to use

the computers, and Lyle immediately settled into the shelves of adult fiction. It was dark, cool, windowless, space, with posters of caterpillars reading books hanging on the walls. It was dull, really, but I was grateful for the change of scenery.

We left the library after an hour. Lyle was laden with twelve new mystery novels and an encyclopedia about desert animals, and I was filled with exuberance from my active instant message conversation with Maya, about how her neighbor Jacob had gone swimming in the public pool yesterday and seen a woman there who, while taking a nap in one of the folding chairs, started drooling and had one of her breasts fall out of her black string bikini *nipple and all*, and about how Maya was going to get a string bikini soon, she'd asked her mom and everything and they were going shopping in a few weeks and she really hoped I was back by then, which I really did too even though I wasn't as convinced by the idea of string bikinis as Maya was. I managed not to ask Maya if she'd seen my mother around town. All I wanted was one normal conversation, like I was still home, still just messaging her from my desktop at our house in New Jersey. I said nothing about the new wellness center, the milk, or the motel.

When we pulled back into the motel parking lot, Dad had returned. He was leaning against the car, holding his canvas bag, wearing a straw hat and long white linen shirt I'd never seen before.

"Usually," he yelled as Jefferson pulled the truck into the spot next to our car. "When some big, bearded, man in a pickup truck whisks my kids away to god only knows where without so much as asking me first, I call the police." His voice was even keeled, but clear over the rumble of the engine. I thought he might be truly angry, but Jefferson put the car in park and laughed.

“Usually,” he replied, “When some man from Northern New Jersey calls me up saying he got the name of my motel from my cousin Dee and do I have any long-term rentals available for him and his kids they just really need a place far away from it all to *figure some stuff out*, I call the police.”

Dad walked over to Jefferson’s rolled down driver side window. He smiled, a strained and kind of ecstatic smile I’d never seen before. He took off his sunhat and held it over his chest. There was a line of sweat on his forehead.

“Lucky break for both of us then,” Dad replied.

To: Alyssa Botwin
443 Lansing Street, Color-me-Park New Jersey, 08817

From: Lane Botwin
23 Mountain Road, Breckenridge CO, 80424

Hi Mom!

We went to the public Library in town today. Maya and I IM’d a lot but she didn’t mention seeing you around town so I’m thinking you’re not around town which means you’re not getting these letters at all.

We’ve spent a lot of time at the hotel lately, like I’ve mentioned. Dad’s been at that retreat so we haven’t gotten to get out much, me and Lyle, but today we did. It was the first time I’d used a computer in a moth! A month! Can you imagine? Remember that show I used to watch, the one about the mice living in mid-evil times? I keep thinking about a mouse from that show, named Alfonse. He’s the court hermit. He lives in a part of the wall near the mote where no one else likes to go and he spends most of his days sitting on a patch of moss near the

entrance to his mouse house and whenever other rodents visit him, he's just so excited to scurry in and bring them tea? That's what I've felt like lately. The court hermit.

Write soon. Or visit. I'll make you tea!

Yours, Alfonse

After the day Jefferson took us to the library, he and Dad started spending most evenings together sitting by the fire pit in the back of the motel, drinking various herbal remedy teas mixed with whiskey. Once, Jefferson even produced fresh logs to use with the wood burning hot tub, and they took a dip together on a Tuesday night. I went out to reception, pretending to get ice from the dispenser, to try to eavesdrop on them. Tendrils of steam rose out of the hot tub, dissolving into the open sky, obscuring my view of their bodies as they soaked. I heard the sounds of splashing, of Jefferson explaining the myths behind the constellations, of Dad's laughter, which had become more and more infrequent in the passing months since Mom left.

We went to Jefferson's house for dinner a week later, to celebrate the end of Dad's intensive at The Center. The house looked like it was being staged for photos rather than occupied full time. It was full of cement coffee tables and bookshelves with very few books, but very many terracotta planters with little cacti in them, and wooden picture frames that held nothing but pictures of golden retrievers or particularly stunning sunsets over the Rocky Mountains.

Jefferson opened cans of beer as Dad loaded the contents of his daily haul from The Center into the fridge. He'd instructed us, on our way over, that we were going to take a small break from our new food protocols, though he had of course brought some condiments and

accoutrements from The Center just in case, because it had been very kind of Jefferson to invite us for dinner.

“What’s in the jar?” I asked Dad as I watched him unload a quart of thick milky looking liquid. It didn’t look exactly like the milk we’d been drinking. There was no separation in it, for one thing, no thick line of cream floating on top. And it looked more opaque and slightly darker in color, for another. I wrinkled my nose.

“It’s a surprise.”

I trailed after Dad and Jefferson when they went out to the back deck to grill burgers. I draped myself over a lounge chair, dramatically bored.

“Why don’t you help me with this corn?” Dad suggested. I picked up an ear and started meticulously removing the silk strings from it, one by one.

“Did you grow up in this house?” Dad asked Jefferson, who was leaning against the porch rail, whistling under his breath, and watching very closely as Dad peeled.

“My family’s been out here forever,” Jefferson replied. “They live in New Mexico now, down near Albuquerque. Grew up here in town, though. With the mountains. Lucky bastard that I am. Not this house. This I bought much later.” One of Jefferson’s front teeth was a shade darker than the other. “You never get used to the view. Lived in this house ten years now, and you never get used to the mountains,” Jefferson said. He patted my shoulder as he walked by me to start the grill.

The burgers Jefferson served were charred, and we smothered them in the foods Dad had brought from The Center, a mayo which he proudly announced used Cod liver instead of vegetable oil, and watery coleslaw made with yogurt and fennel seeds. Dad narrated about all the foods he’d brought, explaining to Jefferson, who listened with rapt attention, about how fennel

aids in digestion, and vegetable oil could maybe cause cancer. Lyle read at the table, even after Dad asked him repeatedly to stop. I landed a glob of fish-o-naise roughly the size and shape of road-kill-frog on the leg of my plaid shorts when I took my first bite. The corn, which Jefferson had scorched on the grill was a thrillingly unappetizing combination of both burnt and raw. I swallowed with effort and listened to Jefferson ask our father a slew of questions about his philosophies on astrology, and Catholicism, and divorce.

After dinner, Lyle and I stayed on the patio as the sun began to set, while Dad and Jefferson cleaned up inside and sang along to mellow 60s rock classics on the radio. I watched the sky turn a hue of glowing yellow orange. Once, Maya and I got into a fight because she said if we both saw the same shirt, and I called it a red shirt, and she called it a green shirt, it would be both a red and a green shirt. I told her this was incorrect and got so upset about the idea something could be more than one thing at once that I started to cry.

“Do you think we’re ever going home?” I asked.

Lyle sighed. He closed his book, marking a spot with his finger.

“To New Jersey?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t think soon. Maybe someday. But it’s not worse here.”

“Easy for you to say you didn’t have any friends at home.”

“I had a lot of friends,” he clicked his tongue as he opened the book again. “I just didn’t like very many of them. I assume the same will be true here too.”

“Mom could be home.”

He ignored this and went back to reading.

“What color would you say the sky is right now?”

He turned a page with extra force.

“Did you know that if a color has two names than its two colors?”

“I mean technically that is true. But it’s silly. It’s like bringing up that mantis shrimp see approximately one thousand more colors than we do or something. So, the red we’re seeing isn’t really conclusively red. Like, you’re right. But who really cares? It’s like—” he paused finally lifting his face up away from the book, he looked up to the sky, but his eyes were pressed closed. “Like, if I decided that I was eating ice cream right now, and you also decided that I was eating ice cream right now, then, without anything changing except that we’ve both changed what we believe, I’d be eating ice cream.”

“No, you wouldn’t be.”

“I would be if you believed I was. Reality is just mutually agreed upon delusion,” Lyle said.

I rested my cheek on the glass patio table.

“The sky’s orange tonight, by the way,” Lyle said.

Dad and Jefferson came back out, Dad carrying a tray laden with a sleeve of the spelt chocolate chip cookies he was always offering us *as a special treat*, even though they were terribly thick and dry and savory, and he must’ve known they weren’t any good. He was also carrying four glasses, and a quart jar filled with the strange new milky liquid I’d noticed him putting in fridge earlier.

“I don’t want it,” I announced, sniffing the milk. It smelled chalky and bitter. My stomach ached with a sour feeling from burnt corn and from looking at Dad’s rigid smile, as he held his own glass of milk. I wanted a grilled cheese made with pre sliced Swiss cheese and mayonnaise baked into the outside.

Jefferson picked up his glass and drank most of it in one large gulp-and-belch move. “Amazing,” he said, making a suspicious amount of affirming yum noises as he went in for another sip.

Lyle consented to try it. “It’s fine,” he announced. He dipped a cookie from the tray in his glass of milk and ate it. “It tastes like cookies.”

My stomach rumbled aggressively, and the sandy textured cookies on the tray started to look like a strong option. I took one and dipped it in my own glass of milk. It made a paste in my mouth as I chewed, but Lyle had been correct, by and large, it tasted like cookies and milk.

“Do you want to know a secret?” Dad asked us as we both finished off our glasses. “That wasn’t cow’s milk at all.”

“Ew,” I moaned in disgust. “Gross Dad,” My brain immediately jumped to worst case scenarios. It had been the juice of hundreds of pulped up silkworms. It had been weasle milk. Some kind of blended mushroom water. Human milk! My stomach lurched.

“What was it?” Lyle asked. He was inspecting his glass closely.

“Camel’s milk,” my father said, his voice airy and excited. “Exotic local camel’s milk.”

The Breckenridge Colorado Center for Wholistic Soul and Self Wellness, Breckenridge CO, 2009:

Four days later, on a particularly sweltering July Sunday, Dad finally took us back to The Center. We wore Breckenridge Colorado Center for Wholistic Soul and Self Wellness t-shirts. They were adult size medium, so Lyles hung around his thighs, and mine completely covered my black shorts and fell loosely around my knees. The T-shirts had the whole name of The Center printed in gothic font, with the same logo of camels walking in a line in front of red rock structures that was printed on Dad's canvass tote bag. On the back of the t-shirt was a saying: "Healing means listening to the body, the community, the self, the soil, and sky."

Healing means listening. An insidious little earworm they'd use with us, later, whenever one of us was struggling. On better days we'd be able to turn it around and make it into a joke again. Lyle would zone out during a conversation, and I would laugh and snap my fingers and say *hey, pay attention, healing means listening*. But there would be days too, when we'd be caught with chocolate candies wrapped in silver foil in our pockets, when we'd fail to turn in group activity sheets or when we'd blow off sessions with our guides, or we'd fall asleep during All Center Meeting; on those days we'd be syphoned off to a sperate room for a *delivery*. We'd be alone, one of us and one of the Messengers, in a room with four beige painted walls, one desk, one lamp, five wooden stools, and no windows. We referred to these rooms as "the beige room," or "the naughty corner," but they were officially named "The Kidneys." These one-on-one discipline meetings—we were supposed to call them deliverances—would always end the same way, with the Messenger looking past us with a cool gaze, offering us a not so optional glass of camel's milk, and saying: "Healing means listening."

Of course, what they meant, or at least what they said they meant, was that healing was all about listening to our bodies and our food. On the surface the ethos of the Breckenridge

Colorado Center for Wholistic Soul and Self Wellness was a belief that nutritious food was essential to mental and physical health. That if we listened to the needs of our bodies we'd be guided to nutrient dense diets. They were, by and large, ahead of the curve with a lot of their fad diet ideas. They beat the anti-vegetable oil craze by almost twenty years, and they were preaching the benefits of thick bone broth and unpasteurized milk long before the days of homestead-adjacent social media influencers with professionally whitened teeth who believed the government was stripping their municipal tap water of vital bio-nutrients as a way to dull the resistance.

The second layer belief system of The Center was that nourishing food was not just a step in the health journey, but a pathway to ultimate health. We were taught we could actually heal ourselves completely of any ailment with nothing but belief and food. This whole concept was referred to as “food medicine.” Each of our journeys with food medicine were personalized, so that we were all eating slightly different, very controlled, diets, to target our individual health needs—both physical and mental. There were a few people at The Center, for example, who ate nothing but raw ground beef for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. And there was one aspiring mom who was put on a diet of citrus fruits in the morning supplemented by an evening snack of mixed nuts and vitamins, plus three glasses of a blend of goat and camel's milk a day. The raw beef diet was curing Crohn's disease, the citrus diet was a personalized plan to treat infertility. If we listened to what the food could do for us, to the messages in our bodies and in our food, we could find a path to healing. And this was why we were there—not for health exactly, but to heal. And, more specifically—to *heal Lyle*.

But then there was the third layer of the belief system. The strangest layer, which I would always struggle to explain, even years later, when I was well fed and hungover and safely tucked

away in loud Mexican restaurants in Philadelphia eating chips and salsa with new work friends who I was trying to impress with my tragic backstory™.

“*You believed what?*” one of them might ask, as pulsing music blasted through the speakers, and she poured herself another margarita from the pitcher on the table. And I’d lick suggestively at the salt rim on my own mostly empty glass. We believed food had the ability to deliver messages to us directly from the angelics and those messages would heal our bodies and minds, our inner and outer wounds, and allow us to become attuned, or in harmony with, our own bodies, with the world, and with the heavens.

“That angels were talking to us through the food, yeah. *Right?* No, I know.” I’d laugh and then lightly place another chip covered in heftily salted guacamole in my mouth and chew very slowly.

As we pulled up to The Center that day I was filled with a surprising and sudden longing for the safety of our bland motel room. I wanted to watch fictional family court room TV. I wanted to hear Judge Pat say, *you are out of here!* as she gave her pronouncement.

It was much busier than it had been during our first visit. Most of the kids were in normal regular clothes, jean shorts and t-shirts or sundresses, but most of the adults wore the same beige linen shirt Dad had recently acquired. I watched a family of six, one parent and five similar looking children with blazing red hair and a whole lot of freckles on their exposed arms, play on a wooden swing set at the playground, named “The Appendix Play Center.” The largest of the five children, an extremely thin boy who looked to be in his late teens, wearing a corduroy vest with no shirt underneath and denim capris, was pushing the smallest child, a doughy toddler, on one of the wooden swings as she laughed manically. Families were unloading things from their cars, kneeling in the flower beds out front, weeding, or gathering to talk on the front steps of the

main building. *The Nucleus*, I remembered, as we parked in front of it. Had it gotten bigger? That seemed impossible, but the wood beamed building loomed.

Inside was also more active than it had been on our initial visit. It was a Sunday morning at about 9 a.m. I watched in amazement as one woman, draped extravagantly in long skirts and scarves, wearing a preposterous amount of plastic butterfly clips in her nest of frizzy gray hair, burst in the doors behind us, yelled, *hello*, at the room in general, and then walked to an abstract painting hanging on the back wall. I suspected, because of the curving tan shape in the middle of the painting, that it was supposed to be some kind of representational camel. When she reached the painting, she promptly kneeled on the ground, held her hands up in the air, and started waving them like they too were fluttering butterflies. She repeated the word “thank you,” in escalating volume: thank you, THAnk you, THANK you, THANK YOU, as she shook her hands beneath the painting.

I wondered what was going on with all the camels. On the bags, the shirts, and hanging on the walls in abstract art. Mom once took us to a carnival back home, and there’d been a camel riding attraction. Tall dirty camels, missing patches of fur on their necks, and wearing bandanas tied around their eyes. A man in a yellow suit had called out to us as we passed by them, trying to convince Mom to splurge for a camel ride. I’d been terrified the camels were going to bob down as we passed and eat my ice cream.

I was so distracted by the woman and her worship of abstract art, by the general camel motif, by memories of ice cream, that I hadn’t noticed another woman approach us. She was hugging Dad by the time my attention returned.

“I’m so glad they’re here,” I heard her whisper into his ear as she squeezed him. Her eyes were pressed shut; her flat face spread with a contended smile.

When they pulled apart Dad turned back to us and gestured to the woman, “Guys, this is my new friend Patrice. She’s been one of the leaders at my retreat. She’s heard a lot about you. Or should I introduce you as Mama Marsden? That’s what everyone here calls her.”

“Or Mama Mars,” the woman, Patrice, offered. She had tan skin and a wide smile, dark hair tied back in two long braids. “You know my son, I hear.” She continued, looking at Lyle. “Nico.”

“He gave me the best book of logic puzzles. A few of them were even actually difficult to figure out.”

“He’ll be helping us with orientation today,” Patrice Marsden supplied. “And I’m sure he’ll be so thrilled to see you here. *Alright*, Dad, you ready? I’m going to take them to the Stomach and we’re going to get them acclimated with the rest of the group doing orientation today. You can head on to...well, *wherever*. You’re official now!”

I didn’t know what she was talking about but I didn’t trust her tone. I felt a little nauseous. I started craning my neck around to try to get another glance of the woman worshipping the painting. The red-headed family from outside had made their way in and they’d set up a picnic blanket in the entrance of the room. They were all seated on it, eating celery sticks which they were dipping in a thick brown paste.

“I’ve heard so much about you,” Patrice said, smiling at us. She pinched Lyle on the cheek. He recoiled. “We’ll work on these reactions,” she whispered to Dad. I took a step closer to Lyle.

Nico, in white canvas shorts, a white t-shirt, and white sneakers, jogged over to us waving. He kissed his mother on the cheek. Lyle and I allowed him to lead us away from Dad without much fanfare.

The Stomach, it turned out, was really just a cafeteria. It was laid out with long wooden tables in rows, with rickety wooden benches, and there were buffet stations, which were empty when we arrived, in the back. There was a coffee and tea station that was always operational, which Nico pointed out as he led us to the table where the rest of the group there for orientation was already gathered.

“We’ve got your stragglers here!” Nico called as we approached. “Last ones. Thanks Wintergreen. You going to be okay?” He turned to Lyle and raised his eyebrows.

Lyle nodded stoically. Nobody spoke to me.

“Have a seat,” A man with long dark dreadlocks, an eyebrow piercing, and a septum piercing, gestured to some open seats at the end of the table. “My name is Wintergreen, and this is my wife Snow Penny,” he gestured then to the very short woman to his left, who took her turn to do a little bow and then smile at us, “And we’re going to be your Messengers today.”

Wintergreen and his wife went on to summarize the basic structure of The Center. They largely skipped over the belief system, they said we’d be better off figuring out what worked for our spiritual cores as we went through the program. Instead, they explained layout, history, and expectations. The Breckenridge Colorado Center for Wholistic Soul and Self Wellness, they began, was founded ten years earlier by Doctor Sandra Lewis, who none of us had met yet, but who they said was a clairvoyant thinker about health and healing and the world, and who we’d meet next Sunday when we attended our first All Center Reverence.

“That’s why it’s so busy today,” Snow Penny said. She had a surprisingly thick southern accent and pronounced the word “why” with two syllables, like *wha-ay*. Wintergreen agreed, squeezing her shoulders and offering up an *Umhmhm*, before going back to his lecture.

Doctor Sandra Lewis was a licensed and registered internal medicine doctor who had an epiphany about alternative paths of wellness after being part of an experimental program during her time in medical school where she and other students were asked to take psilocybin mushrooms and to smoke kava-kava root while hooked up to EKG machines. The story was that the drugs caused her to have dreams where the ground vibrated as milk rained down onto her skin and healed her of the stress rashes that had plagued her since she was fifteen years old. After this, she took on independent research projects in Chinese Herbal Medicine and Homeopathy, and after graduating and finishing her residency, she went on to get degrees in both nutritional science and herbalism. She brought all of that knowledge, and more, to The Center, Wintergreen said. Through her unique training and unparalleled ability to listen, she was able to bring us all into the liberating world of food as medicine and messenger. The Center had been fully operational for ten years already, and had seen hundreds of successful miracles and instances of full-body and whole soul healing.

“Right now there are about two hundred core members, plus about seven hundred more twilighters and another five hundred reverent alumni,” Snow Penny chirped.

“The Breckenridge Colorado Center for Wholistic Soul and Self Wellness is organized in layers.” Wintergreen said. Snow Penny started passing out palm sized red rocks with visible layers of separated sediment.

“Doctor Lewis is layer one,” Snow Penny said pointing at her rock.

And working directly beneath her there were four families, including Nico and Mama Marsden and Wintergreen and Snow Penny, who were called The Messengers. They were chosen to translate the messages they received from Doctor Lewis and from the sky and earth and their food to the rest of the participants at The Center.

“We’re a red rocks community at heart,” Snow Penny said. “And you see in those rocks it ain’t about hierarchy. No. It’s just about building layers.” She told us to look at the layers in the rocks and try to conceptualize how everything is about the different layers of sedimentary knowledge.

There were other kids at the table, who mostly looked down as they listened, fidgeting, and picking at scabs on their arms. But there were plenty of adults there, too. Recent converts to The Center, most of whom looked ill, either shaking and thin, or shaking and fat, or suffering from patchy hair loss, or with deep bags under their cloudy eyes. They all watched the married couple in front of us, mid-thirties, muscular and bright, with rapt attention.

Wintergreen continued, explaining that the Messengers trained people called Guides. The Guides led personalized one-on-one counseling sessions as well as group meetings. Snow Penny cut in to say we’d learn more about our groups later. Wintergreen continued, saying that the Guides were more like boots on the ground point-people for full Center members—which, he smiled at us, we all were now. We’d see our Guides around The Center almost every time we were there. We’d share meals with them, ask them for advice. They’d be our friends and our first points of contact when things got difficult.

“That’s another layer,” Snow Penny said.

And the Guides oversaw another group, called Attenders, who were mostly just participants in training for the higher positions. Attenders shadowed counseling sessions, occasionally led parts of group meetings, and did chores and clerical work around The Center as a way to show their commitment to the process. Snow Penny cut in to say that being an Attender had been one of her favorite parts of working her way up the program because it allowed her to really externalize her devotion. Wintergreen kissed her.

“Any questions?”

Wintergreen and Snow Penny ended the orientation meeting by telling us our new schedules: We’d all be expected to participate in one-on-one counseling sessions, those would be up to our individual Guide to organize, as well as at least three community meals a week, one group session, which would always be held on a Wednesday, and All Center Reverence, which was the Sunday meeting that everyone paying dues at the time was expected, *though not required*, to attend. They said we’d learn more about what “group sessions” meant later, when we got our welcome packets in the mail. The packets would tell us not only what group we were in, but what time our group and one-on-one sessions would be, and what room they’d be in.

After orientation, we were loaded into a revamped school bus, which Dad said would take us to one of the *agricultural tendrils* of The Center—the farm where they raised and milked the camels. Dad came with us for this part, though he had us sit together near the back of the bus, and he sat with the adults up front. I looked out the window as the scenery changed, from rocky mountain edges to sprawls of dry dessert and patches of low rumbled-down houses set on the banks of a small river. One of the girls sitting behind us tried to talk to Lyle. She poked him and asked him what he was reading. He didn’t look up from his book.

“Your brother is rude,” she said in a conspiratorial whisper, poking me. I thought her need to poke people was a little rude, too. I shut my eyes, pretending to have been spontaneously taken over by a need to nap. I already had friends. They were in New Jersey, but I had them, and I didn’t need any new ones, especially not any with a penchant for poking. I waited a couple of minutes, until I felt sure she’d moved on to other victims, before opening my eyes again.

We passed signs for hunting cabins, campsites, and one billboard, set in the middle of nowhere, advertising an antique-typewriter store and typewriter repair shop fifteen miles away. I

watched the mountains turn into grasslands, felt my life turn into another life, took tiny bits of the a chicken liver jerky we'd been given as a snack after orientation, felt the early pangs of my stomach rumbling, and wondered for how long this new hunger would last.

Happy Valley Family Farm and Sanctuary, San Luis Valley CO, 2009:

When we arrived at the farm, we parked in a driveway in front of a sprawling two story yellow house with a wraparound porch covered in planters full of dirt, and wicker rocking chairs, and empty milk crates, and single sneakers. There was one girl, probably Lyle's age, standing on the porch. She was freckled and tan, in cutoff shorts and an oversized flannel that was not appropriate at all for the heat of the day, her dark hair pulled up in high, tight, pigtails. She watched quietly as we all got off the bus. The driver turned and waved at her and she shook her head at him and rolled her eyes, flinging her arms dramatically in a gesture of discontent.

"They're *here*, and they're blocking my view of the chickens!" She hollered. I turned to look and there were, in fact, about twenty-five chickens pecking at the ground on the other side of the bus. Lyle frowned and raised his eyebrows at me. Dad was standing away from us, with the other adults, and Lyle and I were surrounded by seven other kids. The girl from the bus appeared to be the de facto leader of the group—he'd done quite a bit of social campaigning on the drive over it appeared—and our earlier snub of her meant we were already being sidelined and ostracized. Lyle, oblivious, stood reading next to me.

The screen door to the house slammed open and then closed and an older teenage girl joined the girl in the flannel. The new one, a taller blonde wearing denim shorts and goulashes, stood behind the dark-haired girl. She whispered something into her ear, and the dark-haired girl looked up at her and laughed. The blonde one winked. I stared, magnetized by the casual friendship, the warm familiarity of their interaction. I turned to Lyle, and, to my surprise, he was watching the girls, too, book held loosely at his side. I felt my breath pick up as the blonde one release her friend and then stretched both her arms, raising the hem of her white t-shirt up to her belly button.

“Alright let’s do this,” The blonde girl said. She hip check her friend and then walked off the porch and down to where we were all gathered in the driveway. “Hi everyone,” she smiled at us. My name is June Austin, I’m one of the farmers here at Austin Family Dairy—*I’m sorry*. What’s it called now?” She looked momentarily confused, her smile faltered, and she glanced at our bus driver.

“Happy Valley Farm,” he hissed at her.

“Right. Sorry. I’m one of the farmers here at *Happy Valley*, and I’m going to be taking you on a tour of our facilities today!”

She guided us through the gardens first, showing us patches of hatch chili peppers which weren’t ripe yet. While everyone explored the vegetable patches, I watched her harvest a batch of pickling cucumbers into the pockets of her shorts. She let us harvest carrots to take home. I sunk my hand into the dirt, relieved to finally have an activity. We’d grown pea sprouts in school one year, in tiny black plastic containers which we’d left on the windowsills, but otherwise, I’d never harvested my own food. I gripped the carrot tightly in my hand and considered asking her if they grew baby carrots here too, because I liked those better, but she was moving too quickly, explaining their composting practices with detail I couldn’t keep up with, and there was no way to wedge in the question.

June took us to a patch of strawberries next. The other kids jostled around me, grabbing handfuls, staining their hands as they picked. I found one corner at the edge of the patch that none of the other kids were occupying and sat down near it, inspecting the bush to find just one most perfect berry. I found one, the size of my thumb, red and shiny. I picked it and held it my open palm.

“Nice find,” June said, winking at me as she walked by. I popped it in my mouth and sucked on the sweet-sour flesh slowly for the rest of the tour.

We did a quick show and tell about the chickens, *mostly boring, mostly stupid, they make eggs and get eaten by coyotes*, June said, ushering us by them. Then we walked down the paths in the pastures. At a distance she pointed out grazing dairy cattle. A herd of goats. Grazing steer—which looked to me a lot like the grazing dairy cattle. We continued through more fields, passed a red barn that June identified as the milking parlor, another barn she called the cattle barn, and then another which she called the all-purpose camel barn, and then finally, we reached the camels themselves.

The camels, there were maybe a dozen of them visible that day, stood cautiously a few yards back from the edge of the fence in their pasture. They breathed heavily out of their snouts, and every few minutes one of them would stick out a tongue or wobble their neck dramatically. They were sillier than I’d expected. Cuter. I remembered being scared of the one’s we’d seen at that carnival, but these ones seemed cautious and unthreatening. They were too shy to let us approach them, so we watched from a distance.

There was a woman standing near the fence to the camel pastures. June introduced her as Evelyn. She looked like she rode motorcycles. She had greyscale tattoos of wolves on both of her exposed arms.

“She’s one of the uh? The teachers? At your center?” June said.

“Guides,” Evelyn corrected with a smile. “We’ll get you and your family to come visit us up there yet June! I know it’s a bit of a drive for them, but we’ll getcha. Show you what we’re really all about here,” she said it in a friendly way but there was a flatness in her voice. And June’s face stayed frozen in an impassive smile.

“*Here,*” June said. “I’m all about my animals.” She stepped up next to Evelyn and unloaded a bundle of carrots from her pocket. The camels approached her and took the carrots with gentle enthusiasm.

Evenly began talking, trying to ignore June’s continued antics with the camels—once they were done with the carrots, she picked up a rake and started scratching their necks with it, and they, in turn, started bobbing their necks in dramatic satisfaction. Evelyn spoke to us about the nutrient density of camels’ milk, and then with escalating hand movements and a little bit of chest thumping, about what she called, *the more spiritually attuned configurations of understanding* that could come from camel’s milk. I didn’t know what that meant. She told us, as the sun beat down and my neck began to tingle and sweat, about how camels were the *messianic mothering messengers of wellbeing*. She said camels were the chosen vessel, and for those truly prepared to listen, the food they produced carried all the answers.

“Camels,” Evelyn said, “are the cure to the ailments of modern life, and their milk is a gift and the medium of their meaning.” I watched some of the camels, done being scratched, jaunt back into the pasture, one chasing another into the fading distance. We stood in silence when Evelyn was done speaking. I think we were supposed to be experiencing some kind of reverence as we looked at the animals, but, evidently unmoved by Evelyn’s speech, June had begun blowing raspberries at the camels, and in turn the camels had begun trying to munch on the sleeves of her t-shirt, getting slobber all down her arms.

“June could you...?” Evelyn finally said. She raised her eyebrows at June who looked over, as if she was just noticing we were all still there. Which she might have been.

“I’ll leave ya to it,” she said, blowing one finally raspberry at the camels before beginning to jog back up the house, her rain boots slapping against the dirt with an odd rubbery echo.

We waited in silence, watching the camels, but once June was gone, they all started to move back into the pasture too. We watched them fade into silhouettes into the distance, and then Evelyn led us back to the bus.

Back at the bus, one of the boys started chasing the chickens around, making aggravated clucking noises as he ran, arms outstretched, trying to catch the bird.

“I don’t like when they visit,” the dark-haired girl said loudly. She was still sitting on the porch. June had re-joined her. The boy stopped chasing the chicken but glared, his face red from the exertion. Both girls stood and leaned on the railing of the porch, watching us more closely. June leaned back and pull her hair into a bun. The chicken the boy had been chasing hopped over to the porch step next to her and she leaned down to lift it up.

“That’s an ugly rooster anyways,” the boy announced. He kicked the dirt hard with his boot.

“That’s a hen. Hens are female. They lay eggs. Roosters are male. That’s not a rooster. Do you not know things?” Lyle said. His tone was uninterested. He was talking to the boy, but he’d opened one of his books immediately when we reached the bus, and he was still reading as he spoke. I cringed, worried the blithe correction might escalate into a more of a confrontation between Lyle and this boy. It had been a long day, one with very little routine, and I feared Lyle might be growing unmoored and exhausted, burnt out from being seen and observed and spoken to by so many new people. The dark-haired girl on the porch snorted at Lyle’s bland voiced correction. Lyle looked up at the girl and shrugged, a smile twitching in the corner of his mouth.

I think that was the first day he saw her. I know that day was the first time I saw June. Veronica smiled back at Lyle before turning her back on our whole group and striking up a whispered conversation with June. On our drive out, Lyle and I both turned to watch out the back windows as we pulled away. Laughing together and throwing their arms into it with exaggerated friendly enthusiasm, Veronica and June waved.

Mountainside Motel & 32 South Wellfleet Drive & Summit County Middle School & The Breckenridge Colorado Center for Wholistic Soul and Self Wellness, Breckenridge CO,

2009:

The day we moved into our apartment in Breckenridge, Lyle and I used a pocketknife to carve our names into the wooden bedframe at the motel. Dad and Jefferson were outside, doing epic battle with a bookshelf they were trying to secure to the top of Jefferson's truck. We'd purchased it the day before at the local secondhand store. Jefferson had his truck running, and he was playing a piece he'd informed me was called Vivaldi's Fall at full volume from the speakers. Other guests looked on the scene with confusion as they passed by. But Dad and Jefferson only laughed, Jefferson bellowing along to the music, and Dad occasionally pirouetting, as they continued to load boxes of dishes, and coolers bags full of our food, into the truck.

"Do you think they're having too much fun out there?" I asked Lyle. Jefferson was standing next to Dad, faux conducting the music with one hand and resting the other on Dad's shoulder. Lyle looked up and shrugged. I closed the curtains to the window, blocking out the view.

Lyle was carving a complicated Latin phrase he'd learned from one of the mystery books he was reading into the bed frame next to our names. *ALEA IACTA EST*. He stuck the knife into the wood and scratched in a period and then stood from his crouched position on the floor and wiped his hands on his pants. The words sat there next to our first tag: *lyle and lane botwin were here*.

"What's it mean?" I asked.

"The die is cast."

I frowned at him.

“There’s no going back now.”

The apartment we ended up in was a dusky basement suite located in a guest house that belonged to some of the more affluent members of The Center. They were what we called twilight members, people who came to large group celebrations and the occasional All Center Reverence meeting on Sunday, but who neglected their one-on-one and group sessions, and only did their diets when convenient. Our landlords always brought deviled eggs and bags of ice to the big potlucks they came to. They were tight people, with tight ponytails, and tight pants, and very well applied makeup. I could never figure out why they went to The Center to begin with. They were healthy weights, with healthy glowing skin, and they were always impeccably well-coiffed when I saw them leaving the big house and walking down their driveway to get the mail. People who don’t get the mail in their bathrobes can’t possibly need to be healed.

I was never sure if there was any real way to get expelled as a Participant from The Center. Could we get ejected for eating the wrong foods? For expressing doubt and confusion too loudly? For answering the questions wrong on our yearly aspiration checkpoint? For refusing to perform favors when asked? The answer, whether I was asking Veronica, or one of the other participants, or even my guide during our one-on-ones was always a hushed, *maybe*. Even though I think the more honest answer was probably, *as long as you’re paying, no*. But no one wanted to risk it, so when Doctor Lewis asked them, the Richardson’s graciously rented their guest suite, which they’d otherwise be renting week-to-week to traveling ski bums, to us instead, in exchange for Doctor Lewis’s goodwill and some comped pre-made Center-approved lunches.

The apartment itself was dark, and no matter how many lamps we bought at the secondhand store it was always dingy and full of shadows. I strung Christmas lights all over the

ceiling to try to make it more habitable, but the glow they threw only served to emphasize how poorly lit the place was to begin with. It was a little musty, too, and no matter how many incense sticks we burned, or how many times we smudged the house with bundles of lavender and palo santo wood, there was a feeling of slight unease to the place. Once, Cedar Winn, the woman I'd seen praying underneath a painting of a camel the—she'd been a participant at The Center since its inception—offered to come over to the apartment some time to do a womb cleanse of the space. We, as politely as we could manage, declined.

My one-on-one Guide for the first year we were participants at The Center was a single woman in her forties, with a penchant for purple eyeshadow and deep purple lipstick and saying the word “understandably” every other sentence, even when nothing that was happening was particularly understandable. Her name was Shelby. I think the hope, when we were paired together, was that she would take on a kind of maternal role in my life. Shelby brought activities to each of our one-on-one sessions: tubs of putty to play with, or glass marbles to roll in my hands, or small stitching projects to entertain me while we talked. And I wanted to like her, but I found her insertions into my life and my diet more intrusive than nurturing.

The way The Center diets worked was that we were each put on a generalized track that targeted our specific health and wellness needs. Then, our one-on-one Guides, who we met with once a week to discuss things like, *how our bones felt in our bodies*, and, *what kind of messages we'd been receiving from our guts and from the ground*, would personalize these plans. We bought all of our food from The Center itself, or from one of their approved and licensed vendors and distributors, many of whom were also participants. And if we paid extra, which we did that first year, someone would assemble our weekly meals in reusable glass containers, one for each

day of the week, which we could pick up in cooler bags from the walk-in fridge in the basement. The basement did not technically have a name, but we took to calling it “the bowels.”

My problem that year was that my guide Shelby did not think I was particularly good at listening to myself, or my body, or the teachings of The Center—I was at that time failing every pop quiz she gave me meant to test my understandings of our system of belief. I was also at the time failing every pop-quiz my sixth-grade pre-algebra teacher gave me to test my knowledge of how to solve for x . All around, I was not much of a success story that year.

Two months into our meetings, Shelby pulled out the list of foods I was approved to eat. She hummed lightly, pressing her purple painted lips together. We were in one of the Fingers, small office rooms on the second floor. Shelby was frustrated with me. She’d asked me to name one of the steps to harmonic ascension and I had said, *listening*, which I thought was a safe bet, but which evidently was all wrong. She’d been having me read a chapter a week of Doctor Lewis’s first memoir, but I was still on the early chapters. Chapter eight was about her third year of medical school and included far more detail about her time reading anatomy books at a dive bar in her hometown in Florida while her sister played darts, than it did about ascension. When I pointed this out, though, Shelby just frowned even more deeply at me and informed me we had to understand where Doctor Lewis came from in order to really understand how she’d ascended.

Shelby looked at my list of approved foods and crossed off six items: white rice, brown rice, cucumbers, all freshwater fish, eggs, and bananas. She informed me she wanted me to focus on eating sticky foods, like peanut butter, and honey, and citrus fruit, with the express hope they would help new information *stick*. She wanted to ban slippery food like fish and bananas, and also any food she thought might be providing too much starchy or thick caloric intake because she didn’t want the messages in my body to get cluttered with any bulk or junk mail. She told me

to eat one piece of sourdough toast with peanut butter and honey on it for breakfast and dinner, plus one half a grapefruit at each meal. According to Doctor Lewis, were supposed to take in the bulk of our daily calories during lunch, so my lunches, which I carried to school in The Center's pre-packed cooler bags, varied in content and size. I was supposed to eat bags of celery as snacks throughout the day. I resented Shelby's removal of eggs from my diet the most. I was a devoted egg salad sandwich fan.

Of course, the other great indignity of The Center diet was that it revolved around eating very large, very strange meals, in the school cafeteria every day. Starting at a new school was difficult enough. I did not blend well. I was new, shy, my hair was greasy from one of the topical supplements, and I was habitually wearing oversized hoodies and intermittently reading vampire comic books, or the biographies of different spiritual leaders, at a lunch table by myself. Plus, I was not a particularly good student. Nothing about me endeared me in the eyes of my peers. At least Lyle was smart. Lyle and I, along with Veronica, the girl with the pigtails we'd seen at the farm, who, it turned out was a Center participant herself, were some of the only students actually enrolled in the public school, so there was nothing in the way of Center Solidarity friendships either. Lyle and Veronica became were in the same grade, and became fast friends, but there was no one else for me to attach myself too. Dad worked from the apartment during the days and said he couldn't manage our schooling, so we were stuck as local oddities at the public middle school while the rest of the young people at The Center were either homeschooled or enrolled at private schools with curriculums that involved meditative forestry and reading the literature of the 1850s whaling schooners.

And so, every day at lunch I watched as the school cafeteria ladies thin fingers moved expertly as they scooped and poured piles of macaroni and cheese with broccoli into waiting

trays. My stomach rumbled. They were the snakes in the garden of Eden, smiling warmly at me as I walked, shoulders hunched, towards my table in the back where I sat alone; unloaded, with care and humiliation, my prepared lunches of filled with things like sliced-beef-heart and cream-cheese-flax-spread sandwiches, coconut carrot salad, and thermoses of liver dumpling soup, broths of every variety. I was ungrateful for my salvation from Big Ag and the machine of fast-food production. Ungrateful, as I burned my tongue on the hot unsalted chicken stock I was supposed to drink with lunch, that The Center was saving me from the burden of unconscious living that all my peers, eating pudding cups and cornbread, were stuck living under.

Everyone at school knew I was one of *those* people. There were whispers all down the hallways as I passed, about what really went on at the big log building on the outskirts of town. There were countless ideas that the other students had about what we might all be doing: we were religious zealots worshipping the third rising of Jesus; we were off girders who hunted and ate all our own rabbits; we were a traveling circus group using the space for long term rehearsals. It was at school that year I heard The Center called a cult for the first time, though I wasn't ready to believe it.

To: Alyssa Botwin
443 Lansing Street, Color-me-Park New Jersey, 08817

From: Lane Botwin
32 South Wellfleet Drive, Breckenridge CO, 80424

Hi Mom!

School started this week. At a new school. Summit county middle school, Breckenridge Colorado. I was really excited about starting middle school so I'm a little sad that it happened here because I don't think it's as good here. We didn't even get assigned any summer reading

and I miss my friends. I'm not really getting along with any of the kids here. A lot of them ski. And the ones who don't ski ride horses. And the ones who don't ski or ride horses read celebrity gossip magazines and do their makeup really well. We're doing this really new diet and it means that I have to bring all my own food to school and it's awkward. I don't want to complain though. Lyle and I go to the same school. I wore my lucky jeans—the ones we found at the thrift store that have a caterpillars embroidered onto the leg—and no one even complimented me.

Did I tell you we met camels? I didn't ride the camel at the farm, but I did see them, and we drink their milk sometimes now, which is cool! It tastes pretty good! You could probably try it if you came to visit. I was supposed to bring a fern into the first day of middle school do you remember that? Have you been watering it?

I know you're not getting these. I finally asked Maya, last time I was on IM, and she says she hasn't seen you. And since you're not getting them, it seems more okay to complain. I want you to know we're okay though. Everything is okay.

Maya's been spending more time with Louisa Hanson this year. I never liked Louisa Hanson because she wears honest to goodness bowties to school, like she's a conductor in an orchestra, or a penguin, and she thinks she's smart just because she goes to physics camp, or something. It's so weird. I wish I were home to hang out with Maya instead of here with the ski girls. There's even a JV and a Varsity Ski team here. Jemma Page is in the eighth grade and she's so good she's already on the varsity ski team. She has to take a bus to the high school every day to practice with them. They start practicing in September. For skiing.

I saw elk yesterday, on the drive into school. We pulled over to watch them for a few minutes, and it was quiet in the car. Dad's friend Jefferson was driving us and you don't know him but he even turned off his symphonies so we wouldn't scare them away and if you did know

him you'd know him turning off his symphonies is a big deal. The elk, at least, were kind of beautiful. And then sun was still blurry the way it is in the very early morning.

Talk to ya! L

It turned out that those first intake evaluations at The Center were used to sort us into color coded groups. No one would give us any information about what the criteria for each group was, how the tests were read and sorted, how, or who made the decisions. All we knew is that we were assigned different colored wristbands and different group meeting times. Lyle was green, and I was mustard yellow. I went with the other yellows, a group of kids whose ages ranged from about six to seventeen, every Wednesday night to a meeting in one of the yoga studio where we talked, mostly about our feelings and did interpretative crafts. Everyone in Yellow Group was on the same base-diet. Though most of them had not had their egg privileges revoked.

Lyle's group was different. He was part of what was referred to around The Center as the Elite Freaks. None of us were supposed to talk about our screening tests, what they'd asked us, what they made us do, how we'd answered. And we weren't supposed to talk about what went on in our group sessions, either. But we all broke this rule. Over dinners in The Stomach we'd try to make educated guesses about how we'd all been sorted. I suspected yellow was the catch-all group, but my group-friend Manishka thought yellow was for people who'd cried, *or almost cried*, during their intake. But green group, the "Elite Freaks," actually didn't talk about their tests or their group. The Elite Freaks operated as a secretive and separate force within The Center. Instead of meeting in any of the central meeting spaces, Green Group met in the medical center, which was off-limits to the rest of us unless we were having our yearly checkup with one of the inhouse doctors. Green Group's diets were more involved and deeply personalized,

constantly changing. And most notably, most mysteriously, Doctor Lewis ran their group sessions. They were the only ones who got any private time with her.

I tried not to be obsessed with what went on with Lyle's group. I tried not to do things like eavesdrop on them whenever I had a chance. I tried not to lurk in the hallway near the staff only doors that marked the start of the medical rooms, on the nights when my group finished early, waiting for him to come out, hoping to catch snippets of conversations as they exited through the swinging doors. I tried not to pester him with questions.

"You have to tell me," I demanded once. We were sitting outside The Center on a creaky wooden swing set, watching the sun set around the mountains while Dad finished up a one-on-one session with his Guide, Tabitha.

"You have to tell me about your group. What makes you an Elite Freak. Lyle you have to have to *have to* tell me." The swings creaked as I pumped my legs.

"I'm not at liberty to say," he sniffed at me.

"I'll be your best friend."

"Veronica's my best friend," he replied. This comment, while not surprising, stung in its matter-of-factness. Veronica was also in the Elite Freak group at The Center.

"I'll do your laundry for a week."

"Three months."

"Three months and you'll tell me something about your group?"

"Nah."

"You sound so stuck up," I kicked at the woodchips beneath my feet.

"It's not exciting, okay? Just drop it."

"We should make a no secrets pact."

“Absolutely not.”

“I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

“There’s nothing I want to know.”

“Last week at group we decorated terracotta flowerpots with all of our least favorite words people have ever used to describe us. That was a weird project. And then we did it again, but we used only really good words. We went in a circle and had to say nice things about each other and then we had to write down every word that people used to describe us on this pot and now we’re growing daisies in each of the pots and we’re going to compare which plant grows better the one in the negative pot or the one in the positive pot.”

“That’s stupid,” Lyle replied.

“I know,” I said. “Do you do things like that? In your group?”

“*Lane.*”

“Tell me one thing.”

“You’re annoying. That’s one thing.”

“Tell me one thing about your group.”

“We never plant daisies.”

“You’re doing this on purpose!” I screeched at him louder than I meant to. There was a group of teenagers from the blue group huddled by the steps to The Center, and they turned to glare at us. Lyle waved. I flopped my body off the swing and lay face up on the woodchips. He kicked some onto me and rolled his eyes. It was getting dark, and a chill descended almost immediately when the sun went away. I shivered. “I’m going to tell Veronica that you still sleep with a nightlight if you don’t tell me something!”

“You will tell Veronica no such thing or I will skin you very slowly with my pocketknife,

understood?”

Veronica was not allowed in Lyle’s room. Not because our father was interested in that type of active parenting, we had no other real rules, about curfews, bedroom doors, having girls over. But because Lyle thought some things, like the decor of his bedroom, which was painted a dull gray with no art hanging anywhere and was so generally bland it looked like a stage set for a play about a Dutch prison, were better left private.

I smiled blandly up at him from the ground. He poked at my side with his boot and rolled his eyes.

“Fine. I’ll tell *V-ron* no such thing,” I said. “I’ll just ask her about group then.”

“Ask away she won’t tell you anything,” Lyle replied. When I asked her three days later, she said she loved me but if she told me anything about Green Group, she’d have to kill me.

I don’t remember meeting Veronica again after that day on the farm, I just remember that one day there was Lyle, and the next, there was Lyle and Veronica. She was also in the eighth grade with him, with long dark hair and a wardrobe made up exclusively of old metal band t-shirts that she wore like dresses with tights and combat boots. She was Doctor Lewis’s niece. I asked Lyle who Veronica lived with once, after she mentioned her parents still lived in Boulder, but he just shrugged and said she lived somewhere at The Center, but that really, they didn’t talk about things like that. When I asked him what they did talk about, he told me they talked about things that were actually interesting. Like the ancient Mesopotamian base sixty number system.

Veronica was the posterchild, the darling, of the Breckenridge Center for Wholistic Soul and Self Wellness. She was all ringlet black curls and olive skin and freckles. She was thin, fourteen, lively, accommodating, and always prepared for any disaster with a bag of essentials like band aids and Advil and scotch tape and sunscreen and she never left the house without a

peanut butter sandwich wrapped in cling wrap and tucked safely away at the bottom of her black canvas tote bag. I understood Lyle was in early infatuated fourteen-year-old love with her. She walked home with us most days after school, and they laughed together about how impossibly silly they found the character analysis their English teachers were making them do of Shakespeare. They both considered themselves too smart for school and they were likely correct. They argued on walks home about useless things like whether Nihilism and Absurdism, as philosophical concepts, were fundamentally different or the same beliefs in different packaging, and they'd change their position based on who was more in the mood to be antagonistic. This was usually Lyle. They argued about whether poplar trees or mushrooms were better bioremediation for contaminated water. Veronica had many of the same odd needs Lyle did—she hated bright lights, would only use pine scented hand sanitizer, taped her index fingers on her knees in highly specific patterns whenever we were sitting quietly at the house. It was better for him though, spending time with her. The more someone shared and understood his quirks, the smaller they got, it seemed. Around Veronica, he was less freak, and more Elite Freak.

Sometimes, Lyle, Veronica, and I would join some of the Guides on their monthly errand run to Denver. They'd drop us off at a nearby shopping mall while they did their tasks. They had to do monthly meal deliveries to participants who lived outside of Breckenridge. They also had to pick up bulk groceries from a wholesale warehouse in the city, so that often on the drive back we were surrounded by boxes of dried red peppers and fresh green bell peppers and barrels of potatoes and flats of dozens and dozens of eggs, mostly chicken eggs but also duck eggs, and, a few flats of quail eggs too, which Veronica said we sourced specially for Cedar Winn, who put raw quail egg into a glass of warm camels milk and honey every morning for breakfast, and then fasted for the rest of the day.

“But why do we have to go?” I asked Veronica, once, a few days before our third trip out to the mall. We were sitting outside on the steps at school, waiting for Lyle to wrap up with detention. He was getting detention a lot in those days: for being distracted in class, for not completing homework assignments, for talking back to the teachers, for reading other books while the teachers were lecturing, for spending too long in the bathroom.

“Well, *you*, don’t have to,” Veronica replied, tapping the sole of her black combat boot on the pavement. “Only Lyle and I have to go. It’s part of our group prescription.”

I sat on the steps eating a bag of celery. I was supposed to have finished the celery the day before as a snack, but I was also supposed to be working on mindful eating and chewing each bite ten times made it hard to actually finish any of my food during the allotted times at school.

“Green Group has to go to a hyper stimulating location—*Think mall or bowling alley or arcade restaurant*. Lots of music, lots of lights— once a month as part of our program. To expose us to aggressive stimuli. Which helps us practice self-regulation and inner harmonics.”

I nodded. I did not know what inner harmonics were.

“So it’s not like you *have*, to come. If you’ve got a problem with—”

“No no, I want to come,” I blurted. The image of my alternative weekend, of being alone in the apartment, eating reheated cabbage and kielbasa casserole, spilling watercolors on the floor while I tried to paint a still life of a bundle of shriveled carrots I’d find in the fridge, felt overwhelming.

“You want to come where?” Lyle appeared on the steps. He was in a t-shirt and jeans, shivering. November arrived with a dry windy cold that neither of us was prepared for. The sun was direct and bright and every morning when I woke up, I felt deceived by it, expecting warmth

when really it was all cold light beating down.

“The mall this weekend,” Veronica said. “How was fucking detention?” She swore too much for it to be natural.

“I’ve been assigned another week because I refused to participate in the learning activity.”

“Excuse me?”

“Yeah.” He kicked his tan sneaker against Veronica’s boots. “Wanted us to do some reflective writing to help us process why we were there. And then she wanted us to *share* what we’d learned. Some aspirational bildungsroman bullshit. You know. I finished algebra, though, instead, if you want to copy?”

“As if I’d copy from you,” Veronica rolled her eyes. “You can’t even tell me what seven times eighty-eight is without using a fucking calculator.”

“Six hundred and sixteen.”

“Detention for a whole week,” Veronica whistled. “You’re going to be in so much trouble.” She said this in a sing-song voice, linking her arm into Lyle’s as they began to walk.

“Detention for the whole fucki—”

“Dad doesn’t care about things like detention,” I supplied, lagging behind them.

“It’s not your dad he’s going to be in trouble with,” Veronica turned back to look at me, a cat-eyed smile creeping up her face. “You might even have to start over at a social level one Lyle, if you don’t watch the outbursts.” She raised her eyebrows and laughed, coldly. “Detention for a *week*. Doctor L is *not* going to be happy about this.”

Saint Christopher's Church and Services Center, San Luis Valley, CO, 2026:

If anyone had asked me, back then, back when I was still living out here, still looking at the Rocky Mountains every day and still finding their endurance surprising, when I was still young, still deciding between a life of reverence or irreverence, if anyone were to ask then if I thought I would ever show up to a funeral with a bouquet of white convenience store tulips, a hangover, and a tamale growing cold in pocket of my blazer—I would have told them no. I would have told them no, I had manners, decorum, compassion, *come on now*. I would not have expected that, on top of all this, I would, actually, while everyone else was praying on the church kneelers, eat the cold tamale from my pocket, wipe grease and crumbs onto my best pants, and whisper *amen* with the rest of them before being dismissed to mingle outside in the cold, dry sun.

We, or more accurately what's left of us, those of us who have found some way to preserve ourselves through the past decade, either in dusty attic apartments or blue-lit bars or fluorescent hospital rooms, stand outside in a huddle, sipping with bitter faces at the drinks we've been handed, some cocktail of pressed ginger and apple cider vinegar and honey infused moonshine. It's cold, a bright mid-day October chill. It's been a long time since I've been back to Colorado at all, and I'm surprised by the familiarity I still feel here, the sore muscle memories in my legs and neck, the sense of sameness the landscape still holds, sprawling dirt and desert, patchy dry grasses, and the loom of distant mountains. I suspect none of us want to feel the ease of being back, it makes everything we did to escape feel sour and incomplete, but there's a comfort here, nonetheless. I reach out to hold Lyle's hand, it's warm and clammy and smoother than I expected. I think it's the first time I've reached out to hold him since I abandoned him here ten years ago.

Seven years ago, three years after my departure, when Lyle finally found a reason to get himself out, he and his son Arthur moved in with me, into my studio apartment in Philly. We hadn't seen each other in three years. At first, it was awkward and obligatory to be near each other. All we knew how to share in our early reunion days was silence and space on the pink floral couch I found for free on the sidewalk. I spent as many evenings as possible away. Away from the shadow-eyed version of him that returned from Colorado, thin and exhausted and constantly burning homemade apple sauce on my electric stove. I spent my nights anywhere I could think of—staying with friends, driving my beater car out to the country and camping in the fields of the farms I used to work at, carpet-munching my way around the city, meeting men at indie interactive museum galleries who invited me to come back to their intentional-living-apartment-complexes to massage their pregnant wives' feet. I felt, in those months, that I should have something more to show Lyle. I should have a life or a girlfriend, or at least an apartment with more hot water, a non-alcohol-based grip on reality, a plan, a real apology, a pamphlet about how to enroll Arthur in the local pre-school.

It was Lyle who hugged me one night, tightened his still dangerously thin arms so hard around me that I felt all the air pushed out of my lungs. My hair was wet and dripping down my back. I'd just arrived home from some escapade at the local anarchist bookstore with my new best friend, Bo, and I'd forgotten my umbrella and was soaked from a torrential April downpour. I hugged him back and breathed as deeply as my constricted lungs could manage, lingering in the smell of him, all pine soap and garlic-stained fingers and wafts of wax from Arthur's crayons. Still, neither of us spoke. I made us smiley-face-shaped chicken nuggets and fries for dinner, the only thing I had in my freezer. Up to that point Lyle had still been cooking for us every night, regimented Center style meals which made my stomach turn when he served them to me. Arthur

was thrilled by the novelty of the frozen junk food, and he ate them with glee while the three of us watched cartoons. Still unable to eat other food, really, Lyle let his plate grow cold. We put Arthur to bed with promises of pretzels dipped in chocolate frosting and boxed macaroni and cheese. Lyle changed a lightbulb in the bathroom that had burnt out three months before, I cleaned burnt apple sauce off my saucepans without complaint. Quietly, we tried to make amends.

And had it worked? I look at his face as we stand at the funeral, huddled with the other ex-Breckenridge Center for Wholistic Soul and Self Wellness participants who'd shown up to pay respects. I squeeze his hand. There's a group here from the new *wellness retreat* Veronica had been living at before she died too, plus the rest of her family, the ones who had originally sent her away to The Center, and a few local friends and other strays, a few old teachers, and our father and Jefferson, hanging back awkwardly with Arthur. We don't often leave Arthur alone with Dad, not so much afraid of volatility anymore, but still skeptical of the enduring fanaticism he might try to impose. But when we pulled into the small dusty parking lot of the church this morning Lyle announced that there was no way he was subjecting his son to Veronica's family or anyone from The Center. He'd asked Dad to keep an eye on him, and in an uncharacteristic move, Dad agreed without question or defense. Arthur is seven now, with Veronica's dark hair and Lyle's sunspot freckled face.

There's a musician here, too. There's been some disgruntled rumbling throughout our group that he might have been Veronica's new boyfriend. He's standing near the entrance to the church wearing dirty jeans and a brown suede shirt with fringe at the bottom. He's got his electric banjo plugged into a generator and is wailing away at it too loudly, moving with speed and a shocking amount of technical imprecision through a repertoire of old bluegrass standards.

Someone in our cohort, the Ex-Breck brats, asks if anyone remembers him, and we all sip quietly at our vinegar drinks for a moment before shaking our heads no.

“I barely even remember you all,” Lyle says. It’s odd seeing him here without Veronica. He’s tall and pale now, from his new life working inside, his body still tilting a bit to the left because of the bad knee, which was blown out by a camel kick when he was nineteen. Here, with the backdrop of the familiar mountains and fields, he looks out of balance without V. And he must feel out of balance, off kilter from more than just his bum knee, at returning to the place without returning to the person he’d left here. Everyone else laughs at his dismissal of them, but his voice is a low persistent monotone which obscures for me if this was meant as a joke. Sometimes reality is a joke, I imagine him saying if I asked.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the funeral,” the banjo player says into an orange battery-powered microphone boombox he’s brought with him. He delivers his lines like he works as an Elvis impersonator at local retirement homes on the weekends. “I’d like to draw your attention to the procession.” He starts to play *Don’t Fear the Reaper* on the banjo, and Lyle leans his head into my shoulder, shaking. I don’t look to see if he’s laughing or crying. I dig my hand into my pocket, searching for more of the gas station tamale. To my disappointment, I discover that I finished the whole thing during the peace-be-with-you part of the Catholic service while everyone else was shaking hands and muttering the obligatory echo *and also with you*. I have three packs of hot sauce, two used cotton swabs, two pebbles, a rusty nail, and a communion cracker in my pants pocket. I pull out the cracker and a hot sauce packet, tear open the sauce with my teeth, and squeeze the watery red liquid onto the cracker. I lift the cracker, intending to eat it, but then just lick the hot sauce off the top and shove the wet cracker back into my pocket instead. I haven’t eaten in three days, not significantly. And this dearth of calories is at least

partially to blame for the pounding hangover. Drinking eight gin and tonics last night at The Smiling Hog, when I'm not yet used to the altitude, and then letting the pierced and imperturbable bartender baby-bird "top-shelf whiskey" into my mouth back at her apartment before I puked in her sneakers and then cried, is also partially to blame.

The Banjo Player starts plucking out a tinny rendition of *Dancing Queen*, and the funeral procession emerges from the back of the church. June comes out first. She told me they wanted her in a long white dress to look a little messianic and ethereal, but she's in a black minidress and chunky tan work boots, a floppy oversized sun hat that I'm sure is there to help with her own hangover. She's more of a shape in the distance, an outline of muscled legs and a still-thin body, walking out into the swaying yellow grass. She's holding a shepherd's crook in one hand, which I think is supposed to look pastoral, or biblical, or something. It just looks ridiculous. In the other hand, she's loosely holding the harness of the first camel. She told me last night that she'd chosen Winona, the retired matriarch of the dairy herd, to be the processional leader. But from this distance, though I used to be able to tell them all apart, I can't really distinguish Winona from any of the other long-tan snouts and slightly uncoordinated bodies that follow. There are seven camels marching in knobble-kneed steps behind June. They're each draped in black wool blankets, each wearing black leather halters. I remember June telling me once, when she was in her late teens and just flirting with idea of dropping out of community college, that one of her goals for the farm was to halter and saddle train all of the new calves so she could do local carnivals with them. She'd casually thrown her freckled, nineteen-year-old arms around me and breathed the words *camel rodeo* into my blushing ear. And she'd done it, from the looks of it, from the looks of them stalking now, regally, towards the middle of a pasture where the grave will go. I do have to admit, there's always been something mythic about the camels, and for one

second, as they march, as the chorus of *Dancing Queen* swells—*young and sweet, only seventeen*—for one second, I feel the grief silver and sharp. I could kneel, finally. I could cry for her, finally, because of the alcohol, because of the shrieking imprecise nostalgia of the music and the cold direct October sun, because of the weight of my brothers' hand in my own, because of the image of the camels, stalking, huge and majestic, because of the homesickness I'd not expected to feel. Because of Veronica, too. Because although she's been absent in my life for the better part of a decade, she is now absent and dead, and the new permeance of the situation cuts through the noise, the steadfast confusion of time.

And then the moment passes, the blur of my vision clears. I blow my nose somewhat loudly into my sleeve. The pallbearers come out next. There are four of them, sweating under the sun, under the weight of responsibility, and the coffin itself, which is wooden, large, and stained black. The pallbearers look physically unwell, a particular kind of hunched and unmuscular malnourishment. They look like they have probably been prescribed to eat a lot of beef liver pâté spread on celery sticks. They'll probably smell like cherry body spray and fresh mint and the particularly fruity musk of the shame sweat I'm sure men get when they're carrying the coffin of a woman they've thought about while they cum in the shower. I don't know any of these men personally. They're new friends from the FMI, the Food Medicine Institute. Dad told Lyle and me about the FMI on the drive out to the valley from the Denver airport earlier in the week. That's where everyone went when The Center finally folded, he said. Or at least, that's where everyone who'd really hung on went. Doctor Lewis rebuilt in New Mexico with a different name and a slightly different mission. Of course, she moved Veronica with her. Veronica had remained the darling of The Center even into adult hood, the blueprint of all healing that Doctor Lewis and her journey of wellness could produce.

Dad did not follow The Center when it moved, he stayed in Breckenridge. *After the raids, there wasn't much left, he told us, but you know them, if there's one person still looking for help, they'll find a way to rebuild.* Lyle had turned up the radio when Dad said this, and we'd all stopped speaking. The three of us have never been able to agree on exactly what happened; what exactly these places he'd brought us had been.

Lyle, Arthur and I don't visit Dad, but he and Jefferson come for holidays sometimes, and we watch movies Dad tells us are rotting Arthur's brain, and we leave Dad and Arthur alone as little as possible, and we all fight at least once per trip about our newfangled city eating habits—I dated a vegan for a little while and spent about eight months referring to myself as plant-based, even though I was still devouring string cheese every time I got drunk—and this almost caused Dad to fully malfunction. When he visited that Christmas, he bought twenty pounds of ground beef and stored them in my freezer *in case of emergencies.*

After the coffin, Veronica's family comes out. Or, at least, parts of her family—not her son, who is standing back with our father now, eating bacon-covered dates and watching, eyes wide and uncertain. He knows he's at his mother's funeral. Lyle decided the right thing to do was explain it to him, but it's been hard for Arthur to fully comprehend what this means. He's seven now and hasn't seen his mother in person since he was two, since Lyle had squeaked out of Colorado in one of The Center's pickup trucks with his son buckled into a questionably safe car seat he'd picked up from the basement thrift store located in this very church. They've spoken on the phone a couple of times, but even that stopped years ago.

So, it's just Veronica's mother, and her aunt, our very own Doctor Lewis, marching to the grave today. They're both wearing sky-blue satin dresses with strings of brown wooden Buddhist prayer beads around their necks. They're holding hands, neither are crying. They're

barefoot. I feel a swell of nausea at the sight of them, my muscles harden in contempt. In the past decade since I've last seen her, Dr. Lewis has hardly aged—thanks I'm sure to complicated and subtle medical procedures, though she certainly touts her timeless looks as a side effect of her wellness regime. She still has the same dark bob framing her pale, dewy skin. Though she's a tiny woman—she can't possibly weigh more than ninety-five pounds or be much taller than five feet—her posture is so straight, her step so sharp and confident, that she still looms as she walks. Lyle shrinks back and squeezes my hand too hard, and I can't look at him. *I know*, I want to whisper. *I'm so sorry*.

“I hate them,” he whispers. He's staring, straight-faced and cold, at the women and their tornado of blue fabric rustling up as they walk. Some of the other ex-Breck attendees we're grouped with hear him and titter uncomfortably. We all know it was different here for him, for him and the other *Elite Freaks*, than it ever was for the rest of us.

I think that if anyone pulls out a bland platitude about anger being a reasonable reaction to grief, I'm going to waterboard them with the vinegar drink until they apologize for being predictable and absolutely clueless and also, while we're at it, for being kind of mean to me when we were kids. They've been awkward around Lyle and me since we arrived. We were too close to Veronica and might be feeling more pain than they know how to interface with. And I'm sure they remember that for a long time, Lyle was one of the poster children for The Center, too. Everyone knows Lyle, the success story who burned it all down in a blaze of dust and screeching breaks from the stolen truck, kidnapping his son and leaving Veronica behind to cope alone. And they know me too, the oddball sidekick who dropped out of high school and never stuck with her Center prescriptions, who, when it came right down to it, chose the farm and the farm-girl over

her family, and then who chose to leave all of them behind. No one says anything in response to Lyle. They avoid looking at us.

Dancing Queen ends, and the banjo player does not start another song. The funeral is over. We're free to disperse—the conversation in our group morphs from respectful murmurs to gossip.

There are a few folks gathered around the appetizer table, picking delicately with compostable forks. I wonder who made all the food. How did anyone go about estimating how many people would be in attendance? I get some satisfaction imagining someone, Veronica's mother maybe, sending our funeral invitations on stiff cardstock, like they're wedding invitations. What if only some people got plus ones? The idea is ridiculous and inappropriate, and it makes me smile. *Please indicate here if you have any dietary restrictions so we can ignore them and serve exactly what we want anyway*, I imagine the invitation reading. *Trust us, it will make you feel better. It's possible that currently untranslated Vedic legend suggests that raw beef is one of the primary cures for grief.*

"Lyle?" one of the former Center members asks. I recognize them but don't remember their name. Ellie maybe? Or Esperanza? or Spokane?

Lyle looks up at Ellie-Spokane and nods.

"Were you two still in touch?" Maybe-Esperanza asks.

"Was she in touch with anyone who left?" Lyle asks.

I take another sip of apple vinegar moonshine. I want to leave this group, whose names and faces have blurred together in the passing years. I want to rejoin our father and Jefferson and Arthur, or leave the church, maybe go vomit someplace peaceful. I want to find June. I want to drink again, something real, not this ridiculous funeral tonic. When I tug Lyle's hand to get him

to escape with me, though, he doesn't budge, and I can't leave him alone with these information vultures. I can't leave him alone here again.

"No," Another boy who I recall being named Tristan answers, shaking his head. "None of us were in touch with her, but you were..."

"Was she still *in* it?"

"Did you really leave her?"

"Did she call you before she..." This one, with all the tact in the world, puts a finger gun up to his chin and shoots it.

"That's her son, there. Right? Her *son*." This person, who I don't recognize at all, points back at Arthur, who is standing with Jefferson, making shadow puppets on the ground.

"Do you know how she did it?"

"Are you looking for inspiration?" I glare at Tristan; I think it's Tristan anyway. I vaguely remember him being around during our later years at The Center. He's got an angry collection of pimple scars on his checks and can't be more than twenty-one now. "That's *his* son, okay?" I spit at them. "No more questions." I'm trying to help him, but Lyle has managed to zone out their inquiries entirely. He's set his eyes on the far-off point in the fields where Veronica's family is laying the coffin in the ground. I follow his gaze and watch as her mother collapses into a hunched mass of blue silk and sobs. His hand stiffens in mine.

If I had to guess, Veronica killed herself by eating the bulb of a plant called Death Camas. They are seriously poisonous, hence the name: more poisonous than rattlesnake venom or cyanide, she'd told me the first time I visited her private cabin at The Center. She had a Death Camas plant in a giant terra cotta planter on her porch, and I'd touched the delicate white flowers while I waited for her to answer the doorbell. Though we'd been close friends for years at that

point, she was still jumpy and private about where she lived, so it wasn't until I was fifteen, and she was seventeen, that I actually visited her house. I'd picked a flower off the plant and held it in my hand while waiting for her to come to the door. She came out, laughed, and told me not to get any big ideas. The plant looked identical to wild onions. She was in biker shorts and one of Lyle's t-shirts, shivering even though it was eighty degrees outside. She said she liked having the plant because it felt like a way to ward off unwanted visitors, a kind of protective talisman.

Death on my doorstep, she grinned at me.

Death is just another condition of the body. We often learned that lesson during our Center-sponsored educational summers in the southern valley of Colorado, at June's family camel farm—*Happy Valley Farm and Sanctuary*—which is just outside of the town we are in now. The Center sent us out here every summer so we could care for the camels and learn more about where the food and spiritual practices came from. And so we could be free farm labor. Death was a lesson we learned the first time we had to load cattle for slaughter, the first time we slaughtered on the farm and saw them hang skinned carcasses from the lifted mouths of tractors to bleed them, the first time we had to crush the bodies of half-trampled and already mostly dead chicks in old stained dish towels, the first time we were served meat later on for dinner, thick stews even in the middle of summer, soft and body-warm and filled with slabs of carrot and translucent onions and celery, warm aromatic herbs we pulled fresh from the garden. Death was a lesson we learned too the first time someone in town died, and we went to the funeral, a little field trip of summer farm laborers scrubbed clean and stuck in ill-fitting black slacks and button-downs and hauled over in the bed of June's truck to the church, *this church*, to shake Widow Stella's hand and tell her bony knuckles how sorry for her loss we were, what a good man her husband had been, how fair the price he gave us on all his hay was. And then when we got back

to the farm later, all a little life sick, we had to work. We milked, we cleaned stalls, and sometimes I'll admit I cried more over the crushed bodies of the chickens than I did over the funeral bodies, laid to rest in mothball clothes, faces covered in baby powder and setting spray.

June returns to our group when she's finished putting the camel's back in the truck. She's removed her hat and somewhat conspicuously left her Sheppard hook behind at the grave site. She takes one sweeping look at the gathered ex-Breck brats, wrinkles her nose, hears them still murmuring about *how*, and *who kept in touch with who*, and *who relapsed*, *who's crazy now*, *what is everyone eating these days?* She hooks her fingers through one of my belt loops and tugs. I follow without question. To my relief, Lyle's body softens this time when I tug on him, and he follows too, so that we exit like a small, linked chain—June's hands lopped in my belt, and me and Lyle, still with our hands intertwined. Lyle waves as we abruptly depart from the group.

“By everyone!” he chirps. He's putting on his most social and gregarious voice. “Let's not do this again soon.”

“Maybe never!” one of them calls out and they all erupt in laughter.

“I'd love that!” Lyle calls behind him. They all continue to laugh, and I wonder if they can tell he means it. June bumps her hip into mine and rolls her eyes.

“Elite fucking freaks, the lot of them,” she whispers.

Without discussing it, we veer left at the end of the church's long winding driveway and head down the road past dilapidated shack. We continue further down until we land at the river. It's not really a river. It's a stream—a leaky faucet dripping across the desert. Technically, it's an irrigation ditch, there to provide water to nearby beef pastures. We stand at the bank, looking at each other. I'm the first one to take off my shoes, but they follow suit. I roll up my pants so that I can wade in the water. Lyle strips his pants off, leaving him in a charcoal gray button-down, a

loosened yellow tie, and navy-blue boxers. It's too cold to swim, and the stream is too shallow, but we wade in anyway. June, whose new face I cannot seem to completely assimilate into my memories of the rodeo princess she'd once been, splashes a little water onto my legs with one of her feet. She winks.

"That was the worst funeral I've ever been to," Lyle says. "Only funeral I've been to recently, also. But seriously. An electric banjo at a Catholic service? Jesus did not die for those sins."

June sits in the water. "I've missed you," she says, laughing and splashing her face. She's totally soaking her dress, but she doesn't seem to mind.

"Yeah, of course you hated it, Lye, it was a sham. Her mother out there as if she—"

"Like everything here."

"*Here* isn't the problem," June corrects, her voice sharper. "Those people are the problem."

"Those people are here."

"Technically, aren't they in New Mexico now?" I ask. Lyle rolls his eyes at me. He wades further into the river, shivering sporadically with his whole body, maybe from the cold, but maybe just to release everything locked inside. I shiver, too, and June reaches out and puts an arm around me, ostensibly to keep me warm, but I suspect also to ask a question. Can I still do this? Or do I still have you? Or do you forgive me yet? Her arm is spotted with sun freckles. Her body is warmer and softer than I've allowed myself to remember. I lean my head on her shoulder and wish I could find a way to inconspicuously pick up a pebble from the bottom of the river and swallow it so I can experience the sensation of choking. I compromise by lightly resting my hand on my chest and pushing my thumb into my windpipe.

When I left Colorado at seventeen, I reunited with my mother in Pennsylvania. A move that lasted about nine months before we mutually decided I should leave—i.e., she announced one day, after I came into her house at ten in the morning, already drunk, and tried to cook dried beans in a frying pan on the stove without soaking them first, and subsequently set off her fire alarm and then sobbed when the local fire department showed up, unable to provide any explanation for my tears beyond that I was *sad I'd wasted the beans*, it was time for me to go.

After that, I lived in a suburb on the outskirts of Lancaster County. I was working at a vegetable farm then, growing organic cauliflowers, and living in a small apartment with a roommate who kept a beta fish in a luxury tank and always brought home jars full of caterpillars *for observation* and who smoked a lot of weed. Much to my surprise, it came to pass that I did not have a lot of money for rent and that my lack of a high school diploma and years of experience doing farm labor and retail work made me a good fit for jobs involving farm labor or retail work. It also came to pass that I hated vegetable farming. And I was terrible at it. I almost lost my first northeast vegetable farm job on my third week there because I arrived late, admittedly a little drunk, and refused to pull the dandelions out of a patch of beans.

“Beans are climbers, and dandelions are good for the soil, just leave them,” I argued with my supervisor, a twenty-four-year-old aspiring tractor mechanic with many pig-themed tattoos on her arms and inner thighs. She was always drinking pork bone broth out of a thermos in the dead heat of summer, and her sweat smelled salty when I worked next to her. We did end up sleeping together once, in the tractor, after hours, the day I quit. She did not, as I'd hoped, taste like bacon.

My drive to that farm job included passing over a river, a real one, with a bridge suspended high above the deep waters. There was an electric traffic sign with a suicide

prevention message that glowed in orange letters at the entrance to the bridge, right before the toll: *You are not alone*. Not even a number to call, just the words. And those words have always confused me. Is that why people kill themselves? I wondered as I drove by it. Loneliness? I still wonder often about this. If that is what does it for people? Loneliness? Was Veronica lonely? Certainly, but was that the reason she ended things? I'd guess not.

If I were to make a list now of the reasons I'd like to kill myself, loneliness would not crack the top ten. Climate Change and or impending climate apocalypse would maybe clock in at fourth. The way people's feet smell on airplanes might be tenth. Vegan-cheese-based social activism might be sixth.

Seven would be the surge of embarrassment I still get sometimes when I remember once, in the eighth grade, I had to recite a poem in front of my entire class. Mr. Roff, the most charming middle school English teacher Summit County Colorado had to offer, assigned us a poetry recitation. I was obsessed with getting Mr. Roff to like me that year. Almost every girl in our class had rabid crushes on him because he was young and muscular, and he spent weekends reading classic literature and hiking. My obsession was something slightly different, though. I think sometimes I wanted to be him when I grew up, young and untethered and desired by women. And I wanted him to see me. I wanted him to recognize something kindred and familiar when he looked at me. I wasn't comfortable around the other girls in my class, I felt misshapen around them, and like all of my interests—fantasy novels and home crafting projects, particularly those that involved making paper mâché out of recycled newspaper—were wrong. They knew a lot about hunting and skiing and doing makeup. They liked boys, and they wore perfume, I liked looking at illustrations of women in medieval armor online and smelled like the fennel hydrosol we used every morning to clear our stomachs for the day.

Mr. Roff assigned me to recite Whitman piece about a spider. And this whole assignment was something of a nightmare for me. Any public display of self was a nightmare then. I'd just started growing breasts in earnest, achy and unwieldy protuberances, which I hid under a uniform of Lyle's hand-me-down oversized sweatshirts. I was in a particularly ugly pea green hoodie situation on the day of my recitation. I stood in front of the class, shrouded in soup-colored polyester, nervously interlocking my fingers as I began.

“A noiseless, patient, spider, I marked where on a little promont—”

I felt my nose burst. I'd been getting a lot of nosebleeds that month because of one of the supplements The Center had me taking at the time, something that was supposed to help with retinal tension, blood cleanliness, and body filtration, but that also made my nose bleed, fairly often. This was usually fine because I usually got this particular itchy sniff ahead of the explosion, which gave me enough warning to fish a bandanna or at least a stray sock out of my pocket to stanch the flow. But that day, I had no such luck, no such itch. I pulled my hands over my face, horrified, but all this achieved was that my hands also became covered in blood. Mr. Roff looked at me in disgust and desperation. And then I started crying. Standing in front of the class, blood dripping down my face, staining my brothers' ugly hand-me-downs, everyone looking at me, crying like a girl. And what is one supposed to do in a situation like that? There was a protocol I knew, but I couldn't remember. Lean the head back? Pinch the bridge of the nose? Lean the head forward? Run loudly out of the classroom, find the janitor's closet, find a bottle of bleach, and drink some just to ensure that the horror of the moment is at least short-lived?

Finally, Geraldine Martin—Dinny, for short—one of the sun-freckled floral-skirt-wearing lip gloss girls got out of her chair and walked up to me. She looked, with some disregard at Mr.

Roff, like maybe her crush on him was dissipating right at that moment, like maybe if he came to the spring musical that year and sent her a personalized telegram, maybe she wouldn't even bother to get giddy about it. She walked up to the front of the class where I was standing. I was, to my desperate embarrassment, unconsciously muttering my memorized poem: "And you O my soul where you stand, surrounded, detached." Dinny hushed me.

"We're going to the nurse," she announced loudly to Mr. Roff. She pulled my hand away from my face and dragged me behind her out into the hall, not even waiting for a hall pass. And I thought then, as we walked briskly, that Dinny was brave. I felt like I might be about to vomit, and I wanted to tell her I needed to sit for a minute, but then I worried she'd sit in the hall with me and I'd have to smell her bubblegum shampoo, and we'd have to make conversation, and the taught mutual spell we were under would break.

Once, the summer before, June and I had been organizing the walk-in freezer at the farm store when she asked me if I wanted her to spit in my mouth. I said yes. I'd expected her to do it more like a mama bird, dripping and lingering, but instead, she did it hard and sharp, like spitting cud. When it landed, I closed my mouth. I looked up at her from where I was sitting by her feet, organizing bacon on the lower shelves while she loaded hooves and ears into bins above my head. We both stood silent for a second, and I waited to swallow for as long as I could. She watched me, sharp gray eyes and a slight frown, mud and thick mascara smeared on her face. Her spit was cold, and it tasted a little like wintergreen, and a little like honey, and a little like the tulsi rose petals she chewed.

"Good," she said quietly. I swallowed. Then we both turned back to our work.

Dinny left me at the nurses' office as quickly as possible. We didn't exchange so much as three words. Not then and not for the rest of our time together in that school.

“Lean back.” The nurse said. I had my eyes pressed closed to try to force the tears to stop, but I could hear her rummaging in one of her drawers. She found what she was looking for, and I listened to the drawer close, and then, without warning, she shoved what I realize now was a very dainty tampon applicator, made for very dainty middle school period catastrophes, up my nose and pressed to release the tampon. She made me keep it there, absorbing all the blood of my left nostril for twenty-five minutes while she ate a wilted Cesar salad and talked on the office phone with Maggie McGibbons, the front desk lady, mostly gossiping about the suspected lifestyle inclination of Desdemona, the proprietor of the local ice-cream shop who only ever employed beautiful young women because it was *good for business*.

When she pulled the tampon out of my nose, she asked me if I’d ever seen one before, and when I said no, she frowned at me.

“Put them in your bag for later,” she said, trying to hand me four more tampons. And when I looked alarmed, she just shook her head. “In case your nose gets to bleeding again.”

“No. No. I’m all set. We have some at home I think,” I lied. She shook her head at me and sighed, and I shrank under her gaze. I felt as though she could see directly through me. Like she could sense all the soft and secret sourness, the longing growing in my body. She popped a crouton into her mouth, sucking on it. Some nights that summer I’d fallen asleep thinking about the taste of June’s spit.

Mr. Roff made me recite my poem three days later, and I made it through the whole thing without a single hiccup or mispronounced word. Everyone clapped awkwardly when I finished. Three weeks later, in the school bathroom, I got my first period and threw up in the sink before shoving wads of toilet paper into my pants and going back to history class.

The warm radiating shame and humiliation, the enduring horror of existence and adolescence that I feel when I run into those memories. That is a reason I would kill myself. Probably number seven on the list.

Behaving more like a memory of myself than I expected to, I take June's hand as we keep walking down the pastures by the river. She smiles at me. We all know the sun will set soon, and when it does it'll get cold quickly, and we'll be left shivering and wet, but it feels impossible to return to the group just now. None of us know where we're going next, I realize. The idea of loading into June's pickup and returning to a sterilized Holiday Inn hotel room, eating potato chips and peanut butter from a jar and watching movies with Lyle and Arthur seems impossible. We're supposed to get on a plane back to Philadelphia in two days. We're supposed to have dinner with Dad tomorrow night at a restaurant in Vail that serves *the best vegan Cobb salad he's ever had*. None of this seems possible: to be back here, a tourist here, to leave again, to stay. June has to wake up in the morning to milk the camels and the cows.

We leave the river and walk for a while in the pastures. I look out over the mountains. They're bundled like purple giants in the setting sun. I breathe in and fill my lungs with the cold, dry air. I've never been out in the valley during autumn before. The yellow burst of the aspens marble the face of the mountains so that they glow in patches, even when no sun is shining directly on them. I reach back to my throat and squeeze again, regulating my breath. There's a word for it in Welsh I learned once: *hiareth*. The homesickness for a place you can't return to, a place you've imagined all along. June has dropped my hand, is crouched, looking down at an old bone she's found on the ground. I lean against Lyle, feel the skin of his arms, all gooseflesh, clammy and cold.

I think that flesh, the confining reality of it, the contradictory permanence and impermanence of it, the consistency of it when chewing, when it gets stuck in between my back molars, grainy and full of gristle and death, the way it smells, decaying, bleeding into the debris of banana peels and cheese rinds in the compost. Flesh, the way it grows with us and then gives up on us. Flesh is probably the number one reason I'd reason I'd kill myself if I were making a list. Flesh, and maybe the sound of the wind just now rubbing against the open space like the pulse of an estranged and imagined homesickness.