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Our Lady (a novel in progress)

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Our Lady

By Molly Earner

Part One

Dana

Dana thought of her life in terms of the Before and the After. It was the way she framed events, recorded on her gender blog and discussed during her counseling sessions and transgender support meetings. Before she went on hormones, and after. Before she came out, and after. Before her twin sister had a psychotic breakdown, and after. Before her father walked out on his family, and after.

Except she didn't know that she could lose her father twice.

The phone call came at six in the evening on a Tuesday, just as Dana was exiting her office building, spat out by the revolving doors into the cool streets of Philadelphia in the early spring. The air tasted like car exhaust and the Delaware River at low tide. When she opened her mouth to greet her mother she could feel the grit coat her teeth.

It was a day like an old bruise, colors bleeding yellow through the rain-heavy clouds. The faint remaining sunlight chased Dana down the street as she held the phone against her ear, struggling to make out her mother's words. Downtown Philadelphia at

rush hour was not a good place for a conversation. Waves of people passed her by, eyes straying her way as if she was some casual curiosity.

“He’s—we found him.”

“Sorry, what mom? Who?” She sidestepped a jogger, causing a businessman passing the other way to stumble, and returned his middle finger with an apologetic wave.

“Your father—“

The heel of her left shoe caught in a grate. She stumbled as she worked her foot free, still pressing the phone against her ear as she did so. “Sorry, I didn’t—dad?” She pulled the heel off in one frustrated motion. “What do you mean, you found dad?”

Dana felt the heaviness of the word “dad.” It was odd coming from her lips. Unbalanced, one shoe in hand, she hobbled over and leaned against one of the monolithic office complexes that shaped downtown Philly. Something wasn’t connecting between her mother’s words and her brain, so she pressed the phone tighter against her ear, as if that could strengthen the connection between them.

“I got a phone call this morning from a hospital in Pittsburgh. He listed me as an emergency contact, the fucking bastard.” There was a pause, as if she was waiting for Dana to say something. She didn’t. “Pittsburgh! Who the fuck wants to die in Pittsburgh?”

“He’s dead?” Dana took off her other shoe. She stood, barefoot but for her stockings, and let the cold damp of the cement sidewalk chill her feet. The feeling spread upward through her legs, till her whole body felt icy. Dana wondered if this would make her sick. She felt sick. Maybe she was already sick. Her head hurt like it had been

encased in something heavy. She waited a moment, her breath speeding up and matching the heaving breaths of her mother on the other end of the line. “Dad’s dead?”

Passersby stared out of the corner of their eyes, devoid of any concern beyond morbid curiosity. They were too busy ignoring the homeless man down the street to extend their empathy to a trans woman in crisis. It had been two years since she’d started her transition. Lately, her appearance rarely drew any attention on the street. But she felt the additional stares as if they were spoken accusations. She felt like everyone could see her broad shoulders and made up face, as if her body took up the whole street. She was exposed, unmistakable. And worst of all she was crying. She hadn’t felt this weak in a long time.

“I don’t—I don’t know what to do,” her mother said. “His—partner—said Gabe would want us at his funeral. Said he would want his funeral here—at my church. Our church! Shipping him from Pittsburgh to Cape May. Who the fuck does he think is? How is that going to happen, by airplane or a—a van? I don’t know what to do right now, I’m—“

“Have you told Gail?” Dana asked.

They shared another silence. Dana thought she could exist forever in that silence.

“Not yet. I don’t know how, you know?” Her mom said, “But I will.”

“Yeah,” Dana said. She stared at her feet. She placed her heels on the ground, as if she was about to step into them once more. But instead she just stood there, staring at the space they occupied on the sidewalk, her feet now soaking wet on the damp sidewalk. “How did he die?”

It was a freak accident, her mother said. He'd been out at a bar with friends when he'd hit his head on a chair like the fucking charismatic idiot that he was, dancing on a table covered in spilled drinks and food. Forty-seven years old and still the life of the fucking party. Dana could almost smile when she heard this, but there was something that made the expression feel more like a grimace, her face twisting in new shapes, the muscles necessary for smiling forgotten. Her mother described how her father had knocked his head falling off that "god damn table" and then passed out for a few minutes, only to be helped home by friends. Fell asleep in his bed and never woke up, she said. His boyfriend, "some man named Santiago Flores," had discovered him the next day, after returning home from a business trip. The doctors said his brain had hemorrhaged. At least his death was relatively painless. Relative to what, Dana wasn't sure.

"Dad had a boyfriend?" Dana asked. "I didn't—you never said—" He'd left her mom for a man? For this "Santiago?" She felt like she was trying to line up two conflicting images, but the lines didn't match.

Her mother didn't answer. Her silence seemed a clear indication of her thoughts.

Dana filed this information under things that would need to be processed later, when she didn't feel like she was contracting a fever in the middle of midtown. "It doesn't matter," Dana said. It did. "So the funeral service it—it takes place this weekend?"

"Saturday," her mother said.

That was three days away. Dana considered all that needed to be dealt with between now and then. She thought of Gail again, and winced. "I can take work off Thursday and Friday. We need to contact Gail. She needs to be there."

“Of course.”

“Hopefully she can get a flight from Seattle tomorrow. It’s short notice, but I don’t think she should be alone right now. She’d want to be with family.” Dana said this with more certainty than she felt. She had not seen Gail in nearly two years. There were still words that needed to be said between them, words that seemed swallowed by these new circumstances, this new catastrophe. “We’ll come down together. You going to be okay till then?”

Her mother made a noise like a laugh. “I’ll make it, don’t you worry about me. We’re strong women, us Fishers.”

Gail

There was something about the smell of wood in a church. It smelled sharp, like polish, and old, a burn in the nostril that revived nostalgia for something barely remembered. Every mass service she'd attended here had been packed with large families, of Irish or Italian descent for the most part, their sweaty flesh sticking to the hard wood seats that painfully squeaked with every small movement. She could almost imagine the smell of bodies lingering along the unforgiving lines of the pews' straight backs.

Gail sat in the last row. It was late, and the church was dimly lit by the old electric lights that lined the aisles. The tabernacle was open, the monstrance displayed upon the altar. The sanctuary lamp that hung from the ceiling tinted the golden surface red. It was like a sun, rays extending from the small rounded chamber that housed the Eucharist, the wafer so white it seemed to glow through the glass. She remembered what the priest would say about the moment of transubstantiation, when the small tasteless piece of bread became the Body of Christ: "How can such a small thing hold the essence of our

Lord? How can such a magnificent event happen every time we say the mass, every day, every moment. How much of the Lord can there be, that he should exist so fully for us in this never-ending sacrifice?”

Homilies like this seemed a series of questions with no answers. This was how the world operated, on these incredible miracles, every miracle an unanswered question.

The monstrance shimmered even in the dim light, its chambers exposing the Host to worship. It was nearly four AM when she arrived, but no one had signed up on the welcome sheet to participate in Perpetual Adoration for that hour. She liked the idea of maintaining a vigil over the Host, liked the knowledge that even God didn't want to be alone at this hour. It felt like a long time since she had been able to fall asleep.

Gail slipped a hand into her jacket pocket, fingering the hard pearl beads of her favorite rosary. “Hail Mary, full of grace,” she murmured to herself. She repeated the prayer till there was nothing else but the words, each word as hard and precise as the bead that she pressed into her palm. She closed her eyes, her heart quickening. It was so nice to speak out loud in this church, to hear her voice strengthen and fill the space. She imagined the words rising to crowd at the ceiling, catching in the wooden framework, echoing back in the emptiness that suddenly felt less empty.

Her father had loved to pray the rosary with her. His voice, so deep and controlled, had underpinned her own high-pitched, stumbling recitation. He had collected Virgin Mary statues, filled their small house with them. She and Peter used to race each other around the house, counting the statues as they went. By the time she was five, she could count as high as thirty-six on the first floor alone.

She had asked him once why he loved Mary so much. He had placed Gail on his knee, his arms wrapped around her waist so that she was secure against his chest. She craned her neck to look up and see his eyes trained far away from her. The darkness of his pupils were like small fish, sliding across the shimmering lens of his eyes as he stared.

“She was given something,” he said, “a blessing that she never asked for. It was a blessing that could have been a burden but she said ‘Yes.’” He tightened his grip, so that Gail felt trapped in his embrace. “You may not understand now but sometimes it can be very hard to say yes. I need her—sometimes, I need her to remind me of how important it is to say yes to the life God has given us. None of us ask for it, after all. It is a gift.”

Gail had brushed her small hands along her father’s arms, trying to reassure him, though of what she had never been quite sure.

In the alcoves on either side of the sanctuary stood statues of the Holy Family. On the left, Joseph the Carpenter motioned toward the church with a craftsman’s calloused hands. To the right, the Blessed Mother gazed upon Gail with heavily lidded eyes, her lips parted slightly, as if preparing to speak. A line of sweat ran down Gail’s back. Her hand clenched.

It came over her as a delicate presence. She recognized the feeling—it was the feeling she remembered from when she had worked as a life model in college. The sensation of being sketched, or painted, was a physical awareness—eyes looking and marking out distance, features, space carved into being by a brush. She felt the words of the Hail Mary as she spoke them, the sound consumed by the church around her, her thoughts heard by the statues that watched her. Like the feeling of a doctor skimming fingers over her skin, firmly pressing, looking for the source of pain. Gail held the source

deep inside her, a hard knot of agony that she could only mark by what surrounded it. She couldn't touch it.

When her father had left her, Gail had smashed his Virgin statues, one by one, counting them out loud as she did so. Her mother, her eyes still swollen from tears, had found Gail amidst the trail of broken glass and ceramic, her small hands bleeding.

She hated this violence inside of her. She hated how it stirred her, the parts of herself that disgusted her to contemplate even now. Gail Fisher knew how she appeared to the world, had carefully cultivated her image to distract from the fucking persistence of her own thoughts. She'd always had trouble with eye contact—couldn't look someone in the eye without feeling like she'd given something away, some clue to her perverted nature. But here, in this holy place, she was absolutely focused, her eyes open and gazing upon the tabernacle with utter clarity. She knew she was seen.

She needed more privacy, and the confessional booth was tucked into the south transept. That was a better place for this, Gail thought. She would need to move, to pull herself away from the force that pinned her to her seat. Unsteady, legs half asleep and tingling with the sudden rush of blood, Gail stood. She genuflected before walking down the center aisle, bending a knee and crossing herself in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. The tips of her fingers dragged across her forehead, chest, and shoulders in one slow, heavy motion.

The confessional booth was set partly into the wall of the church. It was made of a dark walnut that matched the wood paneling of the church's interior. She inhaled dust as soon as she stepped inside. The door was relatively sound proof, lined with heavy fabric. She pressed first her hand and then her ear against it, until she could feel the lack of noise

like a pulse. It relaxed her enough to slump against the kneeler, legs splayed in front of her.

She knew herself well enough to let her fingers do their work without thought. She traced the outline of her cunt through her jeans, pressing into the crevice between her legs and warming herself there. Her hand rubbed, back and forth, over the seam of her pants. A jolt of pleasure shot through her. She forgot her pain and focused on that feeling, chasing it with harder strokes of her fingers. When that wasn't enough she unzipped her jeans and reached into her underwear, over her pubic mound, the musky scent of her arousal filling the small booth. Her head fell back against the wall behind her, knocking into the tightly woven plastic screen that separated her stall from the priest's, the screen meant to shield the penitent's identity.

Gail parted her labia with two fingers and joined one hand with another to work the flat side of her own palm over and across the small nub of her clit, a motion not unlike the sign of the cross. She was gone, far away inside her own sensation. Her whole body convulsed, moving with the sensations that shot through her. She heard the clatter of her head against the screen as a distant noise, every feeling in her body directed toward her climax. Ecstasy built a rising song, crescendoing with a single gasped, "Fuck."

Her eyes opened on the light flooding into her cell from the church, the door held open by a trembling hand. She noted the priest collar as she dragged her lidded eyes up toward the man's face. She felt the blood in her face drain, suddenly aware of how her whole body was splayed, heaving and sweating in the stuffy booth.

She was the one caught, but Father Ryan seemed trapped in the doorway.

“Uncle Rye,” she said. “It’s been a while.”

Dana

She'd expected to pick Gail up from Philadelphia International at noon that day, not from their old parish church at 7 in the morning. She had thought her sister was doing well. Living across the country in Seattle, running her own photography business, updating her art blog every week—all of these things had been indications to Dana that Gail was finally healthy. But masturbating in a church was not healthy.

She supposed they all had their ways of coping.

Dana parked her car outside Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic Church. She took a moment to pull her mirror down, and search her face for any blemishes or stray hairs. She knew that she would meet her uncle and her sister inside, but she didn't know what she would say to them. Dana stared at herself in the mirror and wondered what Gail would see. The years since they'd last seen each other had been long ones.

The air in her car was warmer than the air outside, a cocoon of warmth she didn't want to break. Her body felt heavy, as if she had injected metal into her muscles this morning instead of estrogen. Maybe she could stay right where she was. If she didn't

leave the car then all she would need to worry about was right there. Her cup holder needed to be cleaned, and there was a weird brown spot on the passenger seat that she should probably take care of.

She had stopped attending church years ago—senior year of college, to be exact. The extra hour of sleep on Sunday morning was a welcome change, though the half-remembered obligation of church would sometimes resurface at inopportune times, like when she was eating out her girlfriend on a lazy sex-filled morning.

For her, Catholicism had been a window through which she had filtered the world for so long that now, being on the other side of the stained glass, she knew exactly what her life looked like to those inside. Before coming out, Dana had existed in a state of perpetual self-loathing. Even now she remembered the feeling like an old glove. Miriam had called it her “Catholic damage.” It hurt her at the worst times.

Back when Dana had the look of a harmless, unassuming Catholic boy—short hair, button downs, khakis and all—she had passed through the church as unnoticed as if she were part of the upholstery. Being an altar boy helped with the charade. But Dana couldn’t help the feeling that she was waiting for it all to fall apart. It was like being trapped in a room with a hornet’s nest. She was fine while she didn’t move, but eventually she would agitate it enough for the sting.

Our Lady had clearly been built in the 1940s, pre Vatican II reforms. It was uninhibited by ideas of appealing to the modern parishioner, with welcoming and naturally lit architectural spaces. Instead it was built to intimidate and to humble, and it did the job. The floor plan was in the classic cross shape, intersected by the transept and reinforced by a wooden ceiling that Dana had always thought looked like the underbelly

of an old sailing ship, held up by stone pillars that made her feel like she was somewhere ancient and biblical.

She always thought of Sampson, her favorite Old Testament hero, who had lost his strength when his supposed lover sheared his long hair. Dana liked to imagine him breaking free from his captivity by smashing the pillars of the building where he was caged and crushing the Philistine nobility that had once mocked him. She thought of this every time she stared at the pillars of Our Lady of Sorrows. She imagined them cracking and bringing the entire church down on her family mid-Sunday service, so that the hull of the giant ship above her swallowed her whole.

As small Catholic martyrs-in-training, Dana and Gail used to trade predictions of doom. They both agreed at the age of five that they wanted to die for Jesus, somehow, so it seemed only right that their deaths should be extravagant. It was a game they had played since childhood, phrased like a choice between two eventualities.

She could remember one particular instance in this very parking lot, as Dana and her family had piled into their old mini van Sunday after mass.

“Church collapsing on us or church burning down?” Dana asked as she buckled her seatbelt.

“Burning,” Gail answered. She swung in and out of the door while her mother waited to close it behind her. “Eyes plucked out or tongue cut off?”

“Eyes plucked out.”

Gail, finally seated inside the van, kicked at Dana’s feet. “You should cut off your tongue, you don’t talk anyway!”

Their mother leaned in to buckle Gail's seatbelt. "Sounds a bit violent, guys! Let's try and be nice to each other, okay?"

But their dad, his hazel eyes crinkling in the corners with laugh lines, joined in the game from the driver's seat. Leaning back, as if his wife couldn't hear him, he offered his own suggestion. "I would have my hands cut off." He held up one such hand and wriggled his fingers. "Then I could have robotic hands to replace them. It's foolproof!"

Their mother smacked his shoulder, but Dana caught the smile she hid behind her other hand.

"That's not the point! Robot hands are cheating!" Gail said, capturing her father's large hand in her own, smaller ones. "No, they'd cut off your hands and you'd bleed so much you died, that's how it works!"

He laughed. Dana loved the way her father laughed. His eyes always squinted, as if blinded by a bright light, and the noise that escaped from his mouth came from some deep part of his body. It was a genuine laugh, none of that falseness that she noticed from other adults. She missed it more than ever now. But sitting in her car wasn't bringing that laugh back. Nothing was. So she opened the door and let the chilled air in.

Good Friday, 2008

Dana woke up to screaming. Or rather, she dreamed of the screaming first. It was a muffled sound, distant enough that she was sure she was dreaming it even when her eyes were wide awake. She didn't know it was real for sure until she was standing in the hallway and she saw her mother, her long wispy red hair draped around her face like a pre-Raphaelite painting, dragging ragged breaths into her lungs as if she had just surfaced from drowning. Their eyes met. Dana would remember, years later, the animal fear in her mother's face. Neither of them said a word but the screaming continued, a guttural sound filled with words they couldn't understand. Dana rushed after her mother down the stairs.

They found Gail crouched halfway down the basement steps. She was holding her head and crying out. What had been incoherent floors away was now comprehensible:

“Leave me alone! Why can't I just be left alone? Why can't I be?”

Gail didn't acknowledge their presence. Instead, as they ran down the steps toward her, she curled up as tightly as possible and continued crying out into the space

between her legs. She wrapped so tightly into herself that her head was wedged between her knees, a disturbingly childlike image at eighteen years old. “I want my peace!”

Dana stopped a step above her sister. Mother crouched next to Gail, her body shivering with energy. She gripped her daughter’s shoulders in a knuckle-white grip and bent low to look into her face. “Shhh shh, my sweet girl oh my God my sweet girl please shhh I love you so much please—”

Dana could see the notches of her sister’s spine pushing through her thin pajama shirt, a garish banana print from Target. It was soaked in sweat. Feeling helpless, she reached out a hand to touch her shoulder.

At her touch Gail became quiet. She slowly uncoiled. Her short strawberry blonde hair stuck to her face, tufts standing up in the back where she had pulled at it with her hands. Her eyes were narrowed, accusing.

“What’s the matter, hon?” Their mother asked.

Gail’s attention slid away from all three of them, into the depths of the unlit basement. “I’m afraid I don’t know who I am anymore.” She clutched her knees to her chest and started to slide down the remaining stairs, scooting one step down before being stopped by her mother’s arms. It was enough distance for Dana’s hand to slip from her back. “Peter doesn’t know either. We just don’t know.”

Dana had been called Peter then.

Dana stared at the bananas on her sister’s shirt, wondering why they had faces. “I know who you are,” she said. “You’re my sister. You’re Gail Fisher.”

“It’s okay, honeybear, it’s all okay,” mother said, brushing her long hair behind her ears so she could pull Gail’s face against her shoulder. Gail leaned her head into her arms.

Fat tears welled up in her closed eyes and snot slid down her lips and into her mother’s shirt. “We don’t know,” Gail said again. “We don’t know anything.”

It was a long night. Gail spent most of it pacing and ranting about the angels and the demons until she tired herself out. Dana sat with her while her mother made phone calls, and then slept on the floor of Gail’s bedroom with just a pillow and a spare blanket. It was to ensure Gail fell asleep, she told her mother. She didn’t say it was because she was afraid of what Gail could do to herself. They both were afraid. She knew her mother was grateful by the way they hugged each other, their arms parenthetical phrases containing all the words they couldn’t say out loud.

That Easter weekend was a hard one. Gail and her mother had to skip mass on Sunday to attend an emergency psychiatric appointment, so Dana went alone. Uncle Ryan, who said the mass, accompanied her to the parish brunch afterward, introducing her to his parishioners as “his favorite nephew.” It was a joke, since he didn’t have any other nephews. The members of his parish didn’t know that, however, so it was a wasted joke. Dana, for her part, barely touched the deviled eggs or ham piled high on her paper plate. It wasn’t the worst Easter she’d ever experienced.

Gail was diagnosed with type I bipolar disorder. Dana read as many articles on the topic as she could access through Google, hoping for some key to unlock the new door that had sprung up between herself and her sister. Mental illness seemed so stark

and straightforward on the Internet, listed in bullet points between advertisements for weight loss pills and newsletter subscriptions. She tried to reconcile the symptoms listed on WebMD with her own sister, but it was like looking at Gail through a tube. She didn't fit.

One night a week after Easter, Dana walked in on Gail crying in her room. Through her tears, Gail explained that she couldn't focus on the words in her Bible. Dana had never known her to read the Bible casually before, but nothing was casual anymore. Gail told her that she'd tried to read it out loud to herself, but couldn't do so without shouting. She told her that her voice sounded so ugly in her own ears, she just couldn't stand it.

So Dana took the book out of her sister's hands and read aloud to her. It was the passage where Jacob fought the angel in the desert. He would have won, if the angel had not broken his hipbone at the last moment. Gail said God played dirty sometimes, and Dana agreed.

They sat side by side on Gail's bed for a long time after that, their knees touching just enough to remind themselves that the other was there.

Gail

She was on her third decade of the Rosary when the doors of the church opened behind her. The sudden interruption of light caused her to drop the beads onto the pew in front of her. She picked them up and tried to find her place again before everything was lost. The Third Sorrowful Mystery, the Crowning with Thorns... Hail Mary, full of grace... She pulled the beads through her hands, weaving her clasped fingers together as she did so. She was all tangled up.

“Gail?” The voice behind her sounded familiar, yet strange.

The first thing she noted when she turned was Peter’s dress—a simple blue maxi, with a skirt that brushed his ankles. It was the kind of dress a saint could wear. With Peter dressed up so feminine, her jeans and flannel and sweatshirt suddenly felt too casual in the holy space. From his breasts she briefly met his eyes, outlined by mascara.

“Hi,” she said. She tried to remember the name Peter had told her he used now but it slipped from her memory, moving out of her reach like the rosary beads from her hands.

“You going to give me a hug? It’s been forever,” he said.

There was something forced in his voice, which was higher than she remembered. She didn’t know if she liked it. She didn’t think she liked it.

“I’m praying the rosary,” Gail said simply, holding the beads up in her clasped hands. Peter stared, his eyebrows pulling together. “Just let me finish this decade. I was in the middle of it when you interrupted me.”

“Okay,” Peter said. He genuflected quickly before sitting in the pew behind her. Before she could return to her Hail Marys, he leaned forward to ask, “Where’s Uncle Ryan?”

His breath was hot on her ear. She could smell his perfume. Lavender.

She shrugged. Uncle Ryan had been in and out for a while now. She assumed he was nearby. It felt like he was always watching.

Prayers were what she needed, prayers were what focused her. She needed to atone for what she had done. She needed to atone for who she was. How dare she let herself feel like that? She closed her eyes and began reciting the Hail Mary again. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee...

Peter coughed. She didn’t like Peter sitting behind her. “Please don’t sit there,” she said.

“What?”

“I don’t like you watching me like that.”

After a moment he said, “Ok.”

He straightened his skirt as he stood, stepped from the pew, and moved to the one opposite her aisle. They mirrored each other, side by side, like they had always been. But now things were different.

She didn't like this new Peter. The one from her memory was much kinder, and dressed the way he always used to dress. This Peter had a new name she couldn't recall, and breasts that swelled obscenely beneath his blouse.

Gail prayed out loud, letting the words of the prayer drown out the sound of her thoughts. She closed her eyes. Maybe if she filled the church with the words, they would crowd everything else out. She could open her eyes, and this Peter would be gone.

Hail Mary full of grace... Hail Mary... Hail—

The hand on her shoulder silenced her mid breath. "Please," a soft voice said, "Stop shouting."

It was Uncle Ryan. She didn't look at him. She couldn't meet his eyes. She always had trouble with meeting eyes. These eyes especially. He had eyes like Jesus, she thought. They had seen her.

"I'm sorry, please forgive me," Gail said, and she heard now how her voice was too loud even in her own ears. She had always been too loud, too much. She spoke again, whispering, "I'm so sorry."

"It's fine." His hand left her shoulder. He gestured towards her brother, who was standing in the aisle again. "Your sibling has come to pick you up."

Peter looked around the church. "So where's your luggage?"

"Luggage?" Why would she need luggage? She barely remembered being anywhere but this church.

“That’s okay,” he said, “You can borrow my clothes.”

She looked down at his feet. He wasn’t wearing heels at least—just a sensible pair of Toms that stepped nervously away from her gaze.

“Hopefully we can scrounge up an outfit for the funeral.”

“Funeral,” she said, still whispering.

She remembered now the phone call she had received the other day. The one that told her he was gone forever. She remembered the flight she’d booked that very evening, a rush of excitement pulsing through her veins at the thought that maybe her plane would have a mechanical failure midair and crash in the center of a cornfield in Iowa. Maybe her father would be waiting in the wreckage, a passenger just like her. Maybe they were all passengers waiting for the crash.

Peter said something she didn’t hear, and then Uncle Ryan responded, “She’s been here since four a.m. at least. Hasn’t slept yet. I offered her a bed and she insisted she remain in the church to pray.”

She didn’t want to go with Peter. She said so, louder than a whisper and with what she hoped was authority.

Uncle Ryan straightened his clerical collar. “We can’t always get what we want, Gail.”

Gail couldn’t look at him or her brother. She was beset on all sides. And she couldn’t remember her place in the rosary at all now, not even the mystery. She was sure she was on the Sorrowful Mysteries, but she couldn’t remember which one.

She glanced to the Virgin statue that flanked the altar. Mary stared back, eyes full of understanding.

“No,” she said, “I guess we can’t.”

Dana

Dana Fisher's birth certificate listed her time of birth as March 14, 1989 at 3:22 PM, exactly thirty-three minutes after her twin sister, Abigail Marie Fisher—Gail for short—entered the world screaming. The document also listed Dana's name as Peter Gabriel Fisher, and her sex as male.

Gail and Dana were identical in almost every way as babies. They were the reason color-coded baby clothes were invented. Everything Dana wore was in shades of blue, and the same went for Gail in pink. They lived in a duo chrome world.

But by the age of three they were already playing tricks on their mother. One night they switched pajamas and beds before she entered the twins' room for nightly prayers. Each dutifully knelt at the foot of the other's bed to recite the Our Father and three Hail Marys in perfect unison, racing each other by the last Hail Mary to cross themselves first. Dana giggled too much to really get away with the farce—Gail had always been the better pretender. But their mother didn't seem to notice. At least, she

acted as though she didn't. She certainly didn't comment on the hats they both wore to bed that night to cover up the length of their hair.

"Goodnight, my lovely girl," their mother whispered as she kissed Dana's forehead.

"Goodnight, my darling boy." And a kiss for Gail.

She left the room, leaving the door open just a crack behind her. A moment later, the twins were in breathless hysterics, muffling their giggles with their pillows.

The sensation of that knowing kiss appeared in Dana's memory with the consistency of a recurring dream. Their mother only seemed to have patience for such antics at night. By the light of day, she was a whirlwind passing in and out of their sights. From infancy through kindergarten, a veritable village raised the twins: they passed through the care of two aunts and two grandmothers, a different house for nearly every day of the week.

On Mondays it was Aunt Barb and her two cats. Tuesdays and Wednesdays were Granny O'Malley and daytime television. Thursdays were Aunt Mallory and her toy-filled basement, a treasure trove that was theirs so long as her three daughters were still at school. And Friday was the exclusive domain of Grandma Fisher, whose house smelled like cigarettes and burnt coffee.

Mr. and Mrs. Fisher weren't neglectful in those early years but as Dana came to understand later on, she and her sister happened to be born at an inconvenient point in both of their parents' lives. Part of growing up was realizing that the universe did not begin at birth. If the world did begin at a certain point, it did so while no one was looking for it to happen.

Easter Sunday, 1995

The pastel-packed Easter service was a sweaty affair, crowded as the parishioners were into narrow wooden pews that nearly cracked under the unusual fervor with which fair-weather Catholics filled their seats. Because it was their Uncle Ryan's first Easter Mass as a fully ordained priest, Dana was squeezed between Gail and her mother in the front pew of the church. Unlike Gail, who spent the entire mass in her coloring book, Dana endured the proceedings with quiet piety.

She had to hide her embarrassment when Gail loudly asked for a new set of crayons in the middle of their uncle's homily. The entire congregation could see them, she was sure of it. She didn't understand why Gail couldn't have learned enough shame to be quieter.

When they stood up for communion, Dana aimed a vicious kick to the back of her sister's shin. Gail shrieked. Their father carried Gail in both arms and withdrew down the main aisle of the church to keep her from stopping the entire mass with her tantrum.

Mother pushed her toward the communion line. "What happened?"

Dana crossed her arms in front of herself and shrugged, feigning ignorance. In front of the altar, Uncle Ryan leaned down to rub his fingers in a cross shape over her forehead since, at six years of age, she was too young to receive communion. She jealously turned and watched her mother receive the small wafer directly on her tongue.

Afterward, the Fishers crossed the parking lot and waited in the living room of Uncle Ryan's rectory house. He was to accompany them to Easter brunch. Dana hid from her family in what she assumed was her uncle's office, unable to stand Gail's accusing, red-rimmed eyes.

The office was a compact space, crowded with bookshelves bending under the weight of Uncle Ryan's library. The desk at the center of the room housed a massive computer monitor that reminded her of a spaceman's helmet. Its screen reflected light from the window in its rounded black surface.

That was where she saw the statue. It was unlike any Virgin statue she had ever seen before. She was used to the blue-cloaked Mary bestriding the world, crushing the devil beneath her bare feet. But this small marble statuette had the striking addition of seven thin gold daggers all protruding, fan-like, from her heart. She was fascinated by its violence. The statue sat on a bookshelf behind her uncle's desk, wedged between a copy of Augustine's Confessions and Homer's Odyssey.

She picked it up with both hands to examine closer. The weight of it surprised her—it wasn't hollow on the inside, like the plastic Mary figures her mother had let her hold before. This was made of real stone.

"Peter!" Dana turned and saw her mother framed in the doorway. "We don't touch what isn't ours."

She held the statue towards her mother. Mary's eyes looked up toward the ceiling, slack-jawed in apparent agony. "She doesn't look happy, mom."

Her mother crossed the room, her heels clicking against the hardwood floors. She carefully accepted the statue, apparently ignoring her earlier admonition not to touch anything.

She said nothing as she adjusted the statue on the shelf.

With a light hand touching Dana's shoulder as if she should lose her way otherwise, they walked back through the long hallway to the main entrance of the rectory.

Despite the rectory's homey interior, Dana had the distinct sense that they didn't belong there. The dining room seemed to have never been dined in. The tablecloth was too clean and the chairs too dusty. In the adjacent kitchen, the elderly Father Collins sipped decaf coffee while he cut into his sticky bun with a knife and fork. No one should eat a sticky bun with cutlery—yet there the pastor was, smacking away at the kitchen counter, while the Phillies game played on mute on the small mounted television in the corner. Gail sat next to the older man, her feet dangling from the tall chair. She was still intent on her coloring book, despite the fact that her crayons were all broken and rubbed away to nubs.

"Where's Uncle Ryan, mom?" Dana asked.

"He'll be down soon, babe."

"Where's daddy?" Gail asked without looking up from her work.

"He'll be down soon," their mother said. She leaned over Gail's shoulder to admire her coloring skills. Gail slammed her book shut.

She sighed and ran a hand through her daughter's hair. There was something heavy in her fingers, as if someone had taken her hands and replaced them with stones. Lifting them seemed to hurt.

They watched the muted baseball game, the only sound in the room Father Collins' slurping and Gail's feet kicking restlessly against the counter. Dana hated to break the strange membrane of silence that encased everything in the house, like the plastic covering over the couch in the living room that warned anyone off who wanted to relax there. She stared at Father Collins and his sticky bun. Half a raisin clung to the corner of his mouth like an insect attempting its escape.

Their father's loud steps down the staircase preceded his even louder entrance into the dulled kitchen. "Ready to roll, guys?"

She had looked up in time to observe the hard lines of her father's mouth before he creased it into a disarming smile. There were too many teeth in his smile.

Gail jumped up from her seat, abandoning her coloring book on the counter to cling to her father's pant leg. She buried her face in his side. "Daddy, I wanna go right now!"

"Your uncle needs to finish bleaching his collar first," her father said, stroking Gail's blonde hair absentmindedly.

Dana wondered if he was still mad about the incident at communion. She wished, desperately, that she could take the moment back. But he said nothing to her.

"We're leaving!" he called over his shoulder. "You hear that, Father Rye Bread?"

Father Collins snorted into his coffee. The raisin finally fell off his face and plopped into his mug.

Footsteps pounded from the private quarters above. Uncle Ryan pushed past her father into the small kitchen, looking harried as he crossed the floor to peck her mother on the cheek. He rounded on Dana, his cassock flourishing like a ball gown around his ankles. She took a step back.

“Hey kids, having a good Easter?” Uncle Ryan looked around at both of them. His smile fit badly on his face. Neither responded. Uncle Ryan gestured toward Gail, who pressed even further into her dad’s side. “You look so fancy in your Easter dress!”

He was referencing the pink and yellow monstrosity that Gail had been forced into earlier that day. Power Ranger Band-Aids threatened to fall off her knees, knobby and bruised, protruding from beneath her over-starched skirt.

Gail lifted an accusing finger toward her mother. “She made me wear it!”

Her mother, for her part, only shrugged.

So he turned to Dana, bending on one knee to be level with her. She wilted under his appraising stare. He offered his hand to shake, as men do. Her small fingers were engulfed in his palm. “And how are you, young man?”

“I’m not big enough to be a man,” she said in a small voice. She felt the distinction was important.

“Someday you will be,” her uncle said.

Dana opened her mouth to respond but was interrupted by her mother. “Peter, tell your uncle how well he did in the mass this morning.”

She hated being told to say something so specific. But she followed the script regardless. “You did a really good job on the mass.”

Gail wrapped her knees criss-crossed apple sauced to straddle her dad's left ankle. Pink underwear peeked from between her legs. "You did a good job, Uncle Rye!"

Father Collins let out a groan of despair from his lonely counter. The Phillies had lost. His coke bottle glasses reflected the light from the silent screen, where tiny men in red uniforms jogged defeated from the field.

"Not our day, just not our day," he said.

"Not our year," Dana's father agreed, still leaning in the door's threshold, his body half out of the room. She stared at him and felt overcome by the sudden urge to cry.

"Well," her mother said, slapping the kitchen counter emphatically. "Shall we head out?"

Her father smiled as he reached down to scoop Gail up into his arms, despite the fact that, at six, she was definitely too big for that now. Gail's hands clutched around her father's neck as he carried her out the rectory door. No one tried to hold Dana anymore, not ever since she'd become a "young man." She followed, feeling old.

After a characteristically stiff brunch with Uncle Ryan, they drove to Uncle Tommy's house across the city, where Dana and Gail ran about the expansive backyard with their cousins. They searched for the plastic eggs that had been hidden by Aunt Mallory in the brush. Dana found the most, but ended up giving them all to Gail anyway. The adults watched from the patio, glasses of wine in hand.

It wasn't until later that evening that her father disappeared. Dana remembered how he had dropped them back home first, Gail clutching her basket full of pastel colored eggs and Dana with her suit jacket dirtied from the hunt. Their mother went upstairs to lie

down, complaining of a headache. He said he needed to pick some things up from the store. Gail had whispered to her that he would return with ice cream, as he so often had before when he left for unexplained evening excursions.

But the ice cream never came. Instead, their mother received a call from a telephone booth in New York City at two a.m. She cried until five. Dana sat up with her, unable to sleep through the wracking sobs. Gail, who had fallen asleep on the couch waiting for what she was sure would be her dad and a tub of mint chocolate chip ice cream pulling into their driveway, was not told till the next day.

Mother tried to give them reasons for his absence. Their father was feeling sick, she'd said. He needed to take a break for a while. He would be in touch, but for now he was staying far away.

The three of them sat together on the family couch, Dana and her sister on either side of their mother. Her arms encircled them as if she wanted to make sure they stayed right where they were. "Could we get sick too?" Dana asked.

"He's not sick," Gail said, pushing her mother's hand away from her. "You got rid of him. You made him leave."

Her mother didn't respond. Instead she pressed a hand against her lips as if she were suppressing vomit. Her eyes were red rimmed from crying.

Dana wasn't sure where Gail got her convictions from, but she knew how they hurt her mother. The house was frigid with the hurt of it.

She got in the habit of entering her parents' bedroom first thing each morning to make sure her mother was still there. She would have stayed in bed all day otherwise.

Gail, meanwhile, was sure that this was all a conspiracy. She explained this to Dana, showing her the map that she'd drawn for herself. It was a treasure map, like the kind that pirates used in the movies. Instead of a treasure, she had drawn a map showing the way to their father. "He's left clues, I know it. He wants us to find him, and save him!"

Dana didn't think any of the clues that Gail found made much sense. Among the clues gathered were pieces of paper she'd found in his office drawer—telephone numbers and computer passwords—and a photograph she'd discovered at the bottom of his sock drawer. It showed their father as a young man, arm slung across another man's shoulder. He looked odd, his hair longer and face less lined. He and the other man were smiling with their eyes. A note was scrawled across the bottom of the photo in pen: "Summer '88."

She thought it was nothing, but Gail became convinced the other man in the picture was important. "He's taken him. I'm sure of it."

A week later Gail was caught sneaking out of the house past midnight with a backpack containing a sleeve of cookies, half-eaten Easter candy, the assorted clues, and about seven dollars in loose change. One of the neighbors caught her sleeping on their back porch under the lawn furniture and brought her back home that same night. Her face was bloated with tears.

After that, Dana began checking her sister's bedroom every morning as well. Just to make sure that she was still there.

Gail

She was seventeen when she was impaled on a fence.

Impaled was the word she used whenever telling the story. It elicited the best reactions, though there were few ways a sentence like “falling on a spike that went straight through the upper thigh” couldn’t land with shock and horror in most audiences.

Worse even than the resulting trip to the hospital was the fact that she had to admit first to her teacher, then the paramedics, then the nurses and doctor, and finally her own mother, that it was no one’s fault but her own. And even she didn’t recall why she had climbed through the window of Sister Maria’s homeroom class at lunch to stand precariously on the roof of Our Lady of Sorrows High, her plaid skirt waving and lifting in the wind while the students on the southwest edge of campus pointed up at her in fascination. It was a second story window, on the border of campus where an iron fence bisected the corner of the faculty parking lot. The fence jutted several inches from the edge of the roof where she had stood, distracted by the sensation of light entering her eyelids from above.

The air tasted different two stories above the asphalt—dirtier, marinated in sun-warmed sludge that had not been cleaned from the ledge for decades. When she slipped, it was without any fear or surprise. The screaming came from outside of her, from the senior girls who gathered by the corner of campus to exchange cigarettes and gossip, away from the Sisters' prying eyes.

She didn't recall the sensation of the spike going through her flesh so much as she remembered the way the spike had looked, jutting from her skin. Its iron tip seemed to sprout like a grotesque flower bud from her inner thigh. She remained staring at the spike for the long minutes that followed, as if waiting for it to bloom, while one of the older girls ran to get help.

She was aware, as she balanced precariously on the roof and tried not to jostle her punctured thigh, that her legs were spread wide for the rest of the campus to see. Her punctured leg protruded out over the parking lot, the space between the fence and the roof small enough to allow her to sit in the dirty drainpipe. She was distracted from any sense of shame by the immediate pain of the moment, and the fear of the possibility that she had punctured a major artery and was slowly dying. Her hands clutched at the solidity of the rooftop, her skirt soaking in the muck that hugged the edge of the building. The pounding of her pulse was louder than any of the subsequent shouting or the distant onslaught of sirens.

The spike had entered her body so easily, tearing through her flesh as if she were nothing. In psych class she had learned about the railroad worker who'd been impaled through part of his brain by an iron rod. He'd survived, but his loved ones reported that

he was forever after “no longer himself.” She was frightened by the idea that some part of her body, a part that made her who she was, could be altered so definitely.

Luckily, the spike missed fatally wounding her, though later she wondered if it would have been better to become a local tragedy rather than a school-wide laughingstock. At least her funeral would have been well attended, compulsory as the nuns made any such occasion. Everyone remembered attending the funeral mass of Jack O’Hara, the sophomore who ate a bottle of sleeping pills by the Delaware River a year earlier.

“Were you trying to impress someone? A boy, perhaps? Or the other girls?” Sister Giovanna asked her the following week. The school had to conduct a formal investigation, the headmistress explained. It was protocol.

“No,” Gail said. They were in the headmistress’ office, a large imposing desk separating them. She looked over Sister Giovanna’s shoulder at the paintings of Mary and Joseph that flanked her. They were the kinds painted in such a way that the eyes followed you wherever you stood in the room.

“Were you trying to escape?”

“Would have been a dumb way to escape, there’s nowhere to go from there,” she adjusted her crutches where they leaned against her chair.

The Sister’s pen hovered over her notepad. “All I want to know is why you were out there.”

Gail shifted in her seat, the bandages around her upper thigh making her skin crawl with each tug of the fabric against the chair. She leaned back, tilting the chair until

it leaned only on its rear legs, ready to topple at any moment. “Seemed like the thing to do at the time.”

When she thought of violence, Gail thought of the iron spike growing from her upper thigh, the tip of a flower bud breaking through freshly watered earth. She thought of the blood as it dripped down her leg to the asphalt six feet below. Her skirt had been ruined like it was during her first period flow back in fifth grade, when Tommy Conlon pointed out the wet stain in the middle of math class. The snotty tears of shame that clogged her face that day tasted like violence.

Gail tasted this same violence years later when she turned to her brother and asked him what it was like not having a penis anymore. They were in Peter’s car, driving to his apartment from Our Lady.

“Excuse me?”

She was sure he must have misheard her. “I mean,” she said, “you don’t still have it, do you?”

He laughed, a high-pitched release of breath that held no amusement. He accelerated as he switched lanes on the highway, taking the exit back into midtown. “You don’t talk this entire car ride and you ask me that.”

She looked away, out the window at the passing billboards off I-76. An advertisement for a beach getaway in the Bahamas featured three smiling women in various states of undress. Their mouths were painfully wide, revealing teeth bleached blinding white. “Never mind.”

“Not never mind.” Peter turned the car into one of the main streets, narrowly avoiding a taxi as it merged too close in front of them, leaning on the horn. “Why would you ask that?”

She braced herself against the side of her door as they approached a yellow light with increasing speed. “Peter—”

“That’s not my name,” he said.

They narrowly made it through the light.

Gail reached for her rosary, bunching the beads up in her fist and clenching. She hated this, hated the fact that her brother wouldn’t answer a simple question. Who did he think he was? “Let me out,” she said.

He didn’t look at her. “We’re almost home, Gail.”

It was too hot in the car. Waves of warmth rolled over her, drying out her throat. She unlocked her door, lifting up the latch with trembling fingers. “I want to get out of this car,” she said. “I can’t breathe.”

“Gail,” he said, “don’t.”

She opened the door. It swung out on its hinges, the rush of air into the vehicle like a balm on her hot skin. She reached for her seat belt, the asphalt speeding beneath her.

Peter grabbed her arm and squeezed painfully. “Close it!”

“Let me go!”

His manicured fingers dug into her skin. She wanted to cut his hands off, wanted to see the flesh tear from the bone.

“I don’t want to be here,” she said.

The car began slowing down. Peter pulled them off to the side of the road. All the fight left her by the time they were stopped. She slumped forward in her seat, placing her head against the dashboard.

Peter's grip loosened, though he didn't let go of her arm. "I want you to tell me what you're thinking."

It was all running together, had been for years now. Their father leaving them on Easter, her mother's tears, Ryan's watchful gaze, her brother now thought he was her sister—the iron spike seemed to pierce her over and over as she closed her eyes, her cheek pressed against the dash.

"Gail?"

She didn't answer. She didn't know what to say.

Miriam

People used many words to describe Miriam Berkovitz, from “intense” to “self-reliant” to “excessive.” Patient wasn’t one of them. She took pride in this, claiming the title “high maintenance” with a satisfied smirk. She said: “high maintenance is only negative if you’re a sexist piece of shit.” She said this in the way she dressed, from the harsh short cut of her hair and hard lines of her makeup to her well-fitted leather jacket. She was the kind of person who could wear shitty custom-designed Internet t-shirts that said things like “I Can’t Even Think Straight” or “I Prefer Eating Out” and make them look good. And though she intimidated many people, Miriam preferred it that way. She liked to weed out the undesirables.

Among the few lucky bastards in this world that Miriam had attached her affection to was Dana Fisher, bookworm computer specialist with a penchant for bad tattoos and an even worse taste in movies. She’d met Dana at a singles speed-dating event hosted by the local LGBT Philadelphia chapter. They didn’t even finish answering the first question, “What is your favorite movie?” before Miriam and Dana were both arguing

the merits of rom-com versus horror as genres. When the bell rang to let them know it was time to switch tables, she packed her bag, grabbed Dana's hand, and led her out into the parking lot. They were done there. Instead they would continue their discussion of the meta-narrative of *The One I Love* at a nearby bar. The night ended at Dana's apartment, watching *Plan 9 From Outer Space* and sharing a tub of Ben and Jerry's ice cream.

Their first real date was a trip to the aquarium. They held hands in front of the octopus tank, where a crowd had formed to see the jar-opening demonstration. They watched from the back of the small crowd as the ancient ocean-dwelling beast attempted to unscrew the lid, squeezing its body around the top of the jar and slowly rotating, tentacles shifting to change its grip on the smooth glass surface as it moved. Miriam was fascinated by how its body pulsed with each shift, the tentacles tensing and untensing in delicate, spiraling movements.

That was when Dana told Miriam that she'd never had a steady girlfriend before. She said she was used to being someone else's experiment, used to waking up to an empty bed and apologetic texts. She said she was afraid of falling for someone who was going to leave the next day. She said all this in the way she gripped Miriam's hand, as if uncertain that this was something she was really allowed to do. Miriam could feel the shifts in pressure in the pads of Dana's fingers as they tangled with her own, as if Dana was already looking for a way to let go.

In public, surrounded by aquarium visitors, Miriam pulled Dana's face toward hers for a slow and sweet kiss. The crowd was too intent on the octopus to pay them any attention. They missed the lid popping off the jar, the octopus' tentacles suddenly

releasing, draping loosely around the now open container. Several people cheered. They were still kissing as the crowd dispersed.

There were two types of people in this world, as far as Miriam could tell: the people who seek, and those that need to be sought. Dana was one of the latter.

The first night they slept together, Miriam sprinkled the bed with rose petals and played Marvin Gaye in the background because she knew it would make Dana laugh. And she did. They woke up the next morning tangled together. She collected the memory of the way that Dana's hand had caressed the dip in her waist, tracing the lines of her body as if she didn't want to lose the feel of it. But Miriam had no intention of that being the last time, and it wasn't.

She'd learned the stories behind each of Dana's tattoos. The minimalist waves that hugged her left rib cage were because of a dare back in college. The shark that swallowed her left shoulder did so because Dana said everyone is afraid of sharks, and they didn't deserve it. The incredibly detailed Virgin Mary image that Dana wore between her shoulder blades was more jarring. She had trouble explaining it herself. Miriam chalked it up to Dana's quaint religious nostalgia, though for her part, she had never found the urge to tattoo a Star of David on her flesh. To each their own.

Miriam got that the funeral was family business. She knew, when Dana explained that her visiting sister was "very Catholic," that it was code for homophobic and transphobic and all the things Miriam couldn't stand. So it was understandable that Dana had asked her to keep her distance that week, as much as she hated it. But there were only so many texts that she could stand in which her girlfriend lamented her sister's insensitivity before she took action.

She stood outside Dana's apartment at ten PM the night before Dana and her sister were meant to leave for Cape May and the funeral, a box of donuts in one hand and a bottle of chardonnay in the other. Dana opened the door as if she were deactivating a bomb. She was dressed in sweatpants and a loose fitting old soccer jersey, her typical bedtime attire.

Dana looked over her shoulder, clearly trying to keep her voice down when she asked Miriam what she was doing here.

"Love you too," Miriam said. She felt like she was back in high school, sneaking into her girlfriend's house under cover of night. That was when she had been the resident lesbian of Salem, Ohio, and loud enough about it that every girl's parents in the town had their eyes out for her.

Miriam allowed herself time to enjoy the look of exasperation on Dana's face before stepping past her into the apartment, landing a peck on her cheek for good measure. She held up the box of donuts, "I thought I would drop by with some snacks for your drive tomorrow morning." She brandished the wine. "And maybe some stress relief for tonight?"

Dana ushered her into the kitchen, past the living room and bedroom. She grabbed the wine bottle from Miriam's hands. "You know Gail doesn't know about you."

"She doesn't know much if she's been dead-naming you all day, girl," she replied, not bothering to whisper. She watched Dana's mouth open and close. "Okay, sorry. I get the family stuff."

“Well she finally fell asleep an hour ago,” Dana said. She pulled a corkscrew from one of the kitchen drawers and motioned vaguely toward her cabinets. “Grab a couple glasses, please.”

“Or we could forego the dishwashing and drink straight from the bottle?”

“You know me too well.”

They laughed. Miriam put the box of donuts on the counter. “Joe’s Donuts, your favorite.”

“Like I said,” Dana pulled Miriam closer. “You know me.”

They kissed. Miriam pressed Dana into the counter with her hips. She was just wondering if now was the right time to push her tongue past Dana’s parted lips when there was a crash like a door slamming too far open on its hinges.

It was a voice like the Old Testament God contained inside a stuttering twenty-something woman: “Dad is *dead*, Peter.”

Just inside the kitchen door stood someone who could only be Dana’s twin sister. The resemblance was uncanny. Looking at her was like seeing Dana through a fractured mirror. They had the same shade of blonde hair, the same fierce hazel eyes, and the same proud Roman arch to their noses. But there the likeness stopped.

Gail’s eyes were unsettling, staring somewhere beyond them. She stood in an oversized t-shirt and polka dot boxer shorts, her entire stance accusatory. A miraculous medal and a crucifix both hung, on separate chains, around her neck. They tangled together in a ridiculous fashion, wrapping too tightly around her throat. Her left hand gripped an uncapped permanent marker, and from the patterns on her knee it was clear that she had been busier drawing on herself than sleeping.

Dana started toward her. “Gail, this is my—friend—Miriam. Miriam—Gail.”

Miriam didn’t like the word “friend.” She wanted to sling her arm around Dana’s waist and destroy the word with another kiss. But Dana looked ready to cry, so she stayed back.

Gail didn’t look at Miriam when she said, “Any *friend* of Peter’s is a friend of mine.” She held up her Sharpie, turned it over and over in her hand. “I thought that was how it worked, anyway.”

“Gail, please,” Dana said. “Can we talk later?”

“Is she coming to the funeral?”

“No,” Dana said—too quickly, in Miriam’s opinion.

Gail nodded, staring down the length of her marker at Miriam as if she were staring down the barrel of a gun. “Good. Would be distracting.”

“Distracting?” she finally allowed herself to speak. “Distracting from what exactly?”

Dana looked caught. “Miri, don’t.”

But Miriam couldn’t be stopped. “Please, enlighten me? You think I would distract from your grief somehow?”

Gail said nothing. Her silence was infuriating.

“You aren’t the only person grieving. For one, your *sister Dana*,” and she relished saying her girlfriend’s name, savored the syllables as she spat them at the other woman, “She’s fucking lost him too. And guess what? If she needs her *lover* to comfort her, than she is just as entitled to that as you are to being a judgmental bitch.”

She hadn't realized how close she was to Gail, crossing the kitchen to get right in her face. Gail seemed shaken. The dark pupils of her eyes slid away from Miriam, staring past her again.

She muttered something under her breath that Miriam couldn't quite make out. It sounded like a prayer, or a mantra. Then, as quickly as she had entered, Gail was gone, her footsteps retreating down the hallway.

She felt the viciousness inside her subside. It was a big feeling, as if she had won a victory over an old enemy. But as quickly as it came, the feeling was gone.

"Get out."

Her blood drained. "What?"

"Please—just go," Dana said. She had never seen her so angry. Her hands were clenched at her sides, tears definitely brimming in her eyes now. "I told you this was not a good time. Why don't you ever fucking listen?"

"I—just thought—" She was confused. Dana needed her. She knew Dana needed her. That was why she had come; she'd been ready to save her girlfriend from the depths of family drama and transphobic bullshit. How could she not?

"I got this under control," Dana said. She didn't look like she had anything under control. Miriam was tempted to point this out but she was stopped by the insistence in Dana's voice. "Just go home. Please."

In that moment, Miriam saw the entirety of her time with Dana as one perfect string of events held together by a delicate thread. That thread seemed to have snapped. Everything was sliding off, separating like beads, falling around her feet. She asked, almost afraid to voice it: "Are we okay?"

“This isn’t about us,” Dana said simply.

But Miriam didn’t understand what it was about, so she left.

Dana

Growing up, Dana and Gail had always been close. Their mother used to say they were “thick as thieves,” because they confided everything in each other. She thought they did, at least.

Dana remembered when she and Gail had been in eighth grade together at Saint Christopher’s Elementary, Dana in blue khakis and Gail in a plaid uniform skirt. That was about when Dana stopped confiding everything in Gail.

Or, it was less that she stopped confiding—more that she wasn’t quite sure what to say. Their bodies were changing in different ways, lines drawn where previously there were none. It was frightening, like finding herself stranded on an island watching her sister and classmates sail confidently away on boats of their own making. She felt like she’d been given all the wrong materials. She couldn’t float quite right. The boys and girls her age were glorying in their new body hair and curves and urges. She simply didn’t have the tools to do the same.

At fourteen, Dana had a keen sense of the language barrier between herself and her fellow teenage boys. During lunchtime, when the boys made crude jokes about Sister Giovanna's "crusty old beaver," Dana's own flesh felt ready to crawl off her bones.

It hit her all at once one day at lunchtime, when Dana and the boys had corralled themselves behind an overhanging tree to gawk at printout images of vaginas that Tommy Conlon had found on the Internet.

"I wonder what the nuns' are like." One boy said, surreptitiously adjusting his pants.

"Definitely hairier," another replied authoritatively. "And probably bigger. I hear that the older they get, the more they sag. Like boobs, you know? So they are flapping around every time she walks, like fat lips."

"Must be why they wear such long skirts."

"Awww look at Pete, he's blushing!" The boys all turned on Dana, who had tried her best to appear as curious and nonchalant as the others. But they could pick up on her discomfort. Kids were observant in that way.

"I bet Peter has a thing for Sister Giovanna," one boy said.

She often thought of the way they had laughed, the sensation of her stomach dropping out of her at the shame of it. The truth was, she did have dreams about the nun. But not wet dreams, not like the ones the others sometimes mentioned in whispered conversations after class.

In fact, that night she dreamed that she was Sister Giovanna. In the dream, she stared at herself in a mirror, her wrinkled face framed by a long black habit. Waxy hands led by some morbid power beyond herself slowly started lifting the heavy skirt of her

habit, revealing first thick ankles encased in diabetic socks and then veiny knees. Higher and higher the skirt went, till at last she had laid bare the intersection of her tree trunk legs. A great, gaping gash bared its swollen lips, through which Dana could see nothing. It was an immense emptiness. The mirror turned into a window, through which all the boys from her class gawked at her as if staring at an animal in the zoo. She wanted to scream but couldn't find her voice.

At that point she woke up, choked by her own silence. She clutched at her genitals, afraid for a moment that she had harmed herself in the night.

"I am going to hell," she whispered to herself in the dark. It sounded like a prayer.

It was a truth that no one would voice to her face, this distinct sensation of difference. But she sometimes listened in on the phone conversations that her mother had with other adults, and from this she collected a sense of the ways others saw her.

One day, Dana followed her instinct and picked up the other end of the line.

"I think Peter needs a strong father figure in his life." This was her soccer coach, Mr. Fontana. "Someone who can show him what it means to be a man."

Dana suspected Coach of also attempting to hit on her mother. She had seen the way he stood too close to her when she passed out orange slices after the games.

"I don't think I asked you for that opinion, Mark," her mother replied, voice icy even over the phone. "I asked you to write a high school recommendation for my son."

"I was just saying, if you don't want your son to grow up a homosexual—"

Dana dropped the phone. The conversation clearly didn't go much further than that, since her mother was instantly charging up the stairs.

“How much of that did you hear?” her mother asked. She sat them both down at the living room couch.

Dana briefly considered lying before she said, “I heard him say I could be—gay.”

Her mother closed her eyes and threw an arm over Dana’s shoulders, squeezing her close. “Don’t worry about him. He’s a jerk.”

Dana stared at her feet. They were bigger than her mother’s. She wondered how much taller she would grow, if she would get as tall as she remembered her own father had been. “Do you think he’s right?”

“Right about what?”

“Right about not having a dad? Like, do you think that makes me,” she pulled her legs up against her chest, “different, somehow?”

Her mother sighed. “That’s not how people work, Peter. No one can make you one way or another. You just are.” She squeezed her shoulder again. “Okay?”

Dana nodded. She wanted to say something else, but the words were stuck somewhere in her throat. She couldn’t articulate what was really wrong.

She felt somehow that Gail must know—that there was no way Gail couldn’t know. Of the two, Gail had always been the more knowledgeable about her body. Puberty hit Dana like a truck, while it caressed Gail with well-proportioned breasts and hips that drew almost every boy’s notice. If Gail understood that Dana was different, she said nothing about it to Dana.

That was back when all of Gail’s friends were required by unspoken law to be Dana’s friends as well. Because of Gail, Dana was invited to all the parties that an

otherwise quiet, unassuming guy like Peter Fisher would never have been asked to otherwise. This was how Dana found herself talking to Charlotte Delevan at an otherwise girls-only pool party one weekend late spring semester.

Dana and Charlotte sat together, their bodies perched on the edge of the pool and their legs submerged up to the knees. They were sitting beneath the high dive at the deep end of the pool, far enough away from where the other kids in their class were playing water volleyball that she felt undetected.

She felt bad for Charlotte, dressed in an oversized t-shirt and shorts while the other girls splashed through the water in newly fitting bikinis, displaying the gentle swells of their newly formed breast in multicolored spandex. Charlotte watched the other girls with forlorn eyes, and Dana watched her watch them.

“Being a girl is the worst,” Charlotte said, swinging her feet back and forth through the water.

“Yeah.” Dana nodded and then felt awkward about it, realizing that she should perhaps say something more sympathetic. “So—that time of the month?”

Charlotte splashed water at Dana in mock surprise. “You aren’t supposed to ask that!”

Dana shrugged. She gestured at Charlotte’s clothing. “You clearly aren’t about to go swimming and you just complained about being a girl, I’m just making a logical assumption.”

Charlotte smiled at her, a coy look in her eyes. “Yeah, I am. But I guess you hear enough about that type of stuff from Gail.”

“Gail doesn’t mind over sharing, that’s for sure,” she said. She placed her hands behind her on the cement, near Charlotte’s. They both noticed but said nothing. Dana looked down at her solid blue swim trunks, still heavy with water, and rotated her feet in circles through the water till she brushed Charlotte’s leg. She breathed in and out through her mouth, feeling as though she were about to jump off the high dive.

“You know,” Charlotte said, tilting her head so that her straight auburn hair draped to one side of her neck, shielding her face. “My boyfriend’s been ignoring me all week, so you’d probably do me a favor if we kissed.”

It was Dana’s first kiss. She liked the softness of Charlotte’s lips, appreciated the taste of watermelon chap stick and the timid pressure of the other girl’s breath against her own. They pulled away after only a moment, Dana blushing and Charlotte giggling. Charlotte brushed Dana’s hand with her own.

“You’re sweet,” she said.

“You too.” Dana replied, instantly regretting it. But Charlotte laughed, and their hands remained touching.

They didn’t see the shadow until it was too late, and suddenly Gail was standing over both of them, her hands on her hips.

“Well, this is quite a pairing,” she said. They had to shield their eyes against the sun to look up at her. She was resplendent in a bright red bikini and heart shaped sunglasses, slicked wet blonde hair dripping past her shoulders. She joined them on the pool’s edge, forcing their hands apart when she sat in between. “I’m sure Zach is going to be thrilled to hear about this development.”

Charlotte shrugged at the mention of her boyfriend, the picture of nonchalance. She stood to leave, regardless.

“It was nothing,” she said.

Gail flashed a smile. “Oh, I won’t say anything.”

There was a hidden conversation in that smile, and Charlotte left with a huff of exasperation. Dana, for her part, was too surprised at the speed with which her first romantic experience had begun and ended to keep track of what had been unsaid.

“I would watch out for Charlotte. She can get very,” Gail made a motion with her hand as if she were crushing a bug in her palm, “Controlling.”

“Yeah,” Dana said, staring at her feet once more. “I guess I wouldn’t want that in my life. Thanks.”

But she mulled over the pleasantness of this first kiss for a long time afterward. After all, no one knew that she tried to arrange herself in her underwear till she was as smooth in front as she could be, or that she knew what it felt like to try on Gail’s skirts in a locked bathroom after dark, holding her breath so she could hear if anyone was waiting for her outside the door. No one knew. Dana passed as Peter for them. All she had to do was wear a polo shirt and jeans and she was just any boy next-door, endearingly shy and agreeable. And now that she had kissed Charlotte Delevan, definitely not gay.

The Incident occurred during a sleepover hosted at Gail and Dana’s house. The Fishers lived in a townhouse where there wasn’t much room anywhere but the basement for the girls to unroll their sleeping bags. Dana had joined them for the Disney marathon and a game of Mafia, but when the clock struck midnight she was forced back up the

basement stairs to emerge again in the real world, where it was indecent for her to sleep amidst the other girls.

She was forced back into the loneliness of her room, the occasional peeling laughter echoing up from the depths of the house to remind her of what she was missing. She tried to distract herself with one of her favorite books, but even that was unsuccessful.

She waited until the lights turned off in her mother's room before she crossed the hallway to Gail's empty one. Her sister's closet was full of the peasant tops and flared jeans that were the fashion of middle school. It was not precisely to Dana's taste, but at least they were close enough in size. The first blouse that she tried was a pink eyesore gifted to Gail by their grandmother, who had refused to shop in any of the popular stores such as Delia's or Limited, Too when there was a perfectly good sale at Sears. She examined herself in the mirror as she buttoned up, tracing the jut of her neck from the rounded collar and the flatness of her chest where the shirt allowed for fullness. It was a disappointing image.

It was two in morning when Dana stuffed one of Gail's old training bras with toilet paper, sweaty palms kneading the cloth cups into a semblance of natural swelling. She enjoyed this new silhouette, closer to her ideal. Feeling more adventurous, she attempted the apex of her sister's clothing collection: the purple dress purchased especially for Saint Christopher's spring formal a few weeks before.

Dana, who since fifth grade had enjoyed maintaining strict control over her diet, had always been bonier than Gail. Where the blouse had highlighted this fact, hanging as it did from her shoulders like a sack, the dress made it her greatest strength. It clung to

her slim waist and traced a full chest where the sweaty toilet paper clumps pressed against her nipples. She spun and the skirt of the dress, which fell just above her knee, opened up like a flower blossoming at high speed.

The next transgression was the makeup. She had watched her mother and sister apply eyeliner many times before, the one deftly and the other painstakingly. The result of her first attempt was a staccato series of dots and smears that reflected the shakiness of her fingers when she had tried to trace a straight line onto her eyelids. She rubbed this away with the mental note to try again later. She then applied mascara a little too enthusiastically, but the result was more forgiving. It was the lipstick, a bright shade of red that had gotten Gail in trouble the first time their mother saw her wear it outside the house, that she enjoyed applying most of all. She smacked her lips with a popping sound, like she had seen in the movies, and pressed a kiss into a piece of tissue.

Dana was still posing in front of the mirror when the bathroom door opened.

“Peter?” It was Gail and her friends. Their shocked faces crowded the doorway. Behind Gail, a wide-eyed Charlotte dropped her can of silly string. It clanged against the ground, too loud in the ensuing silence, rolling to a stop just beside Dana’s left foot. She almost fell into the bathtub, her legs suddenly tangled in the folds of the dress.

Gail pulled the other girls back from the doorway, her whispered voice full of emphatic humor: “You all ruined the joke Peter and I were planning!” She blocked the door with her body. “It was going to be so good.”

Dana couldn’t look Charlotte in the eye, though she could feel her gaze boring into her like a laser beam.

Gail launched into an elaborate description of the prank that she had allegedly convinced her brother Peter to pull. It involved Peter dressing like a girl to scare them all while Gail told a ghost story about the “undead girl in the lavender dress.” It was going to be terrifying, they should have waited, what a shame the timing had been wrong. What a shame.

“Yeah, it’s all a joke!” Dana finally said, finding her voice. She was sure they could see straight through her to the tissue paper underneath, but she smiled regardless. She had no other choice.

Charlotte crossed her arms and looked Dana up and down. “Some ghost story.”

The partygoers accepted the story at face value for the most part, but for years afterward Dana faced questions from those who had secondhand knowledge of the event. It was always brought up as an embarrassing anecdote, meant to put Dana on the spot. She stopped trying on Gail’s dresses and withdrew from that particular group of friends. Charlotte Delevan never spoke to her again, though Dana sometimes heard her speak about her when she passed in the halls.

Most surprising of all, Gail never mentioned the Incident. Even when Dana finally came out to her as trans, the first words out of her mouth weren’t, “I knew it.” She insisted that she hadn’t seen it coming, that Dana’s transness was completely unprecedented. But Dana knew. She’d always known. How could she not?

Gail

She went off her lithium over a week before she received the call. As her father had once said, before he hit his head on a table and died in his sleep: “God works in mysterious ways.”

She’d developed as much of a routine as she could, running her own photography business in Seattle. But there were off seasons, of course. In the summer, weddings and anniversaries and engagement photo-shoot commissions flowed in. By fall, however, the commissions slowed down. Winter was a barren season. At the beginning of the wet, rain-filled Seattle spring, Gail was ready to do anything. She felt stuck in a rut, as if the days had begun to flatten out into copies of each other. Updating her art blog became more and more of a chore than an outlet. She wondered what she was missing.

One Friday she woke up early for seven a.m. mass. She always started her day with mass.

It was the feast of the Annunciation of Mary. The Gospel reading stirred Gail's memory like her father himself was sitting next to her on the pew. "The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth..."

The priest's voice rose and fell on each word with the steady cadence of his Northwest accent. It was the passage in which the angel appeared to Mary to tell her that she had been chosen by God to bear his son. She suddenly saw her father's hands, the way he had held her as he told her this very story. Radical acceptance, that's what he had said. Accept the path that God laid out for you.

She had often wondered how she could follow her father on whatever mission he'd been given. She wondered what the angel had said to him when he left their family, all those years before. Sitting there in church, across the country from where she had been born, she wondered how she could more radically accept her life.

There was one thing holding her back, keeping her from being the person that God had created her to be. She remembered how life had been, before she'd been put on medication. She remembered what it had felt like—the world had been a web of ideas, all connecting. After the medication she had lost that. She was tired of losing things.

She had fallen asleep too early the night before to remember to take her medication. This happened sometimes. She normally just balanced out the next day. One missed dose, in the long run, was okay. The second night, however, she simply placed her pill case inside her bedside drawer. Out of sight, out of mind. She told herself that she was doing fine, this was just a few missed doses. She could go back on it at any sign of trouble.

And she was free.

It happened slowly, an old feeling of heightened energy that grew day by day, a sense that what had never made sense was suddenly all bound together in one great phrase of meaning. Like the image on her camera had suddenly pulled focus, and what had been fuzzy and indiscernible made complete and absolute sense. It was the idea that God was talking directly to her. He was. She knew this, felt it in the way the blood rushed through her veins like molten gold, from the base of her spine to the tips of her fingers as she stayed up later and later each night tapping out her prayer meditations in one long word doc. She had not written so easily like this in a long time.

This must have been what the saints talked about, when they talked about being on fire with the Holy Spirit.

She had been commissioned for a wedding shoot that Sunday afternoon. She always prided herself on her ability to immerse herself in the background of a scene and take candid shots of the bride and groom at the exact right moments. The procession, the vows, and later the first dance and the wedding cake—these were just part of the photography package. But she had become known for capturing the buried emotion, the look in the eye of the groom as he watched his soon-to-be wife approach him down the aisle, the way the bride's mother gripped her daughter's shoulders as they hugged after the ceremony, the laughter in the best man's smile when he raised his glass for a toast. She could always frame these days, put them in order.

But that day she lost track of what moments she was meant to capture. The framing of her photographs seemed slightly off center. She spent the entirety of the wedding vows aiming her camera at the minister's face, looking at the way he clasped the

bible, how he bisected the couple in two, dividing them even as they were being bound together by their words.

Something had shifted inside her.

Two days later, when she sent the first draft of the wedding portfolio to the couple via email, she received an almost immediate response indicating the newlyweds' displeasure. The photographs were off-focus, they said. Was this a joke? She had wasted their money.

One bad review on her website was practically a death knell for her business. She knew that but couldn't bring herself to care. She was happy. She felt that maybe, if this business fell apart, it was what was meant to happen. It gave her a new opportunity. Maybe she was meant to drop this job entirely. Maybe she was meant to travel somewhere far away, take up the life of a preacher. She could be a missionary in Africa, or perhaps she would go to New York and live on the streets, preach in the subway. That's where her father was, she was sure of it. He had followed God's calling. That's why he had left. Maybe he too had become full of the Holy Spirit.

When she got the call from her mother saying that her father had been found dead, she connected the dots. He'd hit his head the same night that she had seen the bad review on her website. She had slipped up, and now her father was gone for good. It was connected, it had to be. This kind of tragedy didn't happen without reason. Everything had a reason, and this one was all her fault.

That night, she stood for a long time in her bathroom with a razor held against her wrist. She didn't press down. She just stood there, with the sharp edge held lengthwise against the bright blue vein below her left palm. She died and was resurrected a thousand

times in that long moment, as she watched the blood run under her skin. She never pressed down.

That was an exit strategy. She knew better than to take it. She was meant for more.

Almost twenty-four hours later and she was staring at her unblemished wrists as she sat in her brother's room. She had closed the door on him and whoever that girl was that he had been kissing in the kitchen. Why her brother wanted to be a girl and be *with* a girl made no sense to her. It all seemed counterintuitive.

How could Peter have let himself become so selfish? He never used to be.

There was a knock at her door. She considered escaping out the window. She was three floors above ground level, but there was a fire escape. She could make it out. She could leave and never look back. Like dad.

If she did, she wouldn't need to drive to Cape May with Peter. She wouldn't be expected to enter that church and act like he was really dead and gone. She could believe that she would see him somewhere still. None of this was real. Nothing here felt real. Her brother wasn't even real. He was fake, a fucking joke.

She unlatched the window and had one foot dangling out when Peter finally forced the door open, a lock pick in his hand and eyes full of worry.

"What are you doing?" he said.

She pulled her foot back inside, hitting her knee on the sill as she did so. She winced. "I thought that I should go."

"Go where?"

“Wherever I’m supposed to be. It’s not here.” She sat on the bed, knee still aching.

“You’re exactly where you’re supposed to be.”

There was something about his absolute certainty about this situation, about her life, that seemed haughty and pretentious. Who was he to think he could change the state of things? “Why am I driving to the funeral with you? I don’t even know who you are.”

Peter stared at her. “Yes, you do.”

“You don’t want to be Peter. Why should you be my sister then?”

He sat next to her on the bed. She shifted her body away so that he was at her back. She couldn’t look at him, at the length of his hair, the way his face had softened in the years since she’d last seen him. Hormone injections, he’d explained. She felt sick.

“What are you saying?” Peter asked. She hated his voice.

“I’m saying I don’t want to go to the funeral. Not with you,” she said. “I can’t.”

Peter didn’t respond immediately. The words hung in the air, a knife cutting through the strings between them. Her jaw was clenched. She felt like her teeth were going to fall out of her mouth, like this was a moment from a horrible dream.

“Do you want me to call Uncle Ryan? He drives down tomorrow as well.”

Gail remembered Ryan’s eyes, the way they had seen her when she did not want to be seen. She shivered. “No, I can’t even look at him.”

“Gail,” he said her name like he was throwing out a lifeline. “You don’t have to go to the funeral. But I think you would regret not going. I think you need this.”

“Need what?”

“To say goodbye.”

Gail laughed. It sounded more like a sob. She traced the patterns on her leg with her finger. Everything was so noisy, like static in her ears. She felt closed in on all sides. “I just want my peace,” she said.

“I wish I could give that to you,” Peter replied.

They sat in silence for a while, their breaths slowly syncopating, till they were like one set of lungs, sharing the same air.

Gail broke the silence first. “So where’s your girlfriend?”

“She left,” Peter said.

She could tell he wasn’t happy with this. But she felt a minor stab of triumph nevertheless. “What does she think about you being a girl?”

“She’s a lesbian. She’s into girls.”

“Oh.” This didn’t make sense to Gail, but she had learned not to ask about sex.

Peter fell back against the bed. After a moment, Gail joined him. They lay side by side, staring at the rotating ceiling fan above them.

Gail followed one of the revolving blades round and round with her eyes till she was the one spinning. She said, “Do you think there’s an alternate universe where we’re just one big happy family that lives in a house with a front porch and two dogs and the Mayberry theme plays every time someone opens the door?”

“We kind of were, for a bit,” Peter said. Gail turned to see her brother spinning beside her, a small smile on his lips. She began to slow down again, willing the world back into stillness.

“There must be a reason for this happening. This can’t just happen. I can’t believe that. Dad didn’t just leave for no reason.” She thought she might vomit from the vertigo. She swallowed. “He didn’t just die for no reason. There’s always a reason.”

Peter didn’t say anything. He stared upwards too, and she wondered what he saw. An unspoken question passed between the two of them, something uncertain and frightened. She remembered how they used to speak their own language as toddlers, how they used to switch places and dare their own mother to guess who was who. But time had passed, and this was a new dialect. She felt suddenly the distance they had traveled, their places in each other’s skies shifting with the planet’s spin.

She wanted her brother to reach for her, to touch her hand and let her know that he was still there. But he didn’t. She wondered when he would disappear completely, like everything else.

Part Two

Ryan

Cape May, 1988

The sea breeze rolling from the Atlantic Ocean was finally cooling the scorched pavement outside the Fisher family's beach house. Ryan tasted the salt in the air, letting it fill his lungs as he pumped his legs, pedaling his bike up and down the narrow residential streets of Cape May. The sun was in descent, falling behind the tree line and casting a pinkish glow across the young children riding their tricycles in lazy circles down the quiet street, three blocks from the waterfront and rent that much cheaper for the walk. He'd cycled the block twice already on his Schwinn, glancing out of the corner of his eyes at the girl stationed on his family's front porch swing. On his third pass he noted the way she had twisted sideways on the swing to avoid the sun's glare. He didn't think she could see him now, facing away as she did, so he slowed to a stop.

Dressed in a sleeveless tank that revealed sunburn-peeled shoulders and freckled skin down her arms, long ruddy legs curled fetal-like to her chest, the red-haired Bree O'Malley shone from the front porch of the small blue bungalow. He considered ditching

his bike at the park down the street and sneaking through the neighbors' yards to the basement entrance around back when his brother called his name from somewhere above.

"Ryan!" Gabe shouted. At the corner of Fourth and Sea Drive rose a poplar tree whose historic longevity prohibited the Cape May community charter from cutting it down. Ryan's brother sat nestled in the crook of its two heavy branches, his tan legs dangling three feet from his head.

Ryan stumbled as he dismounted from his bike seat. He ignored the numbness in his groin brought on by the intensity of his cycling, the flesh there now tingling as blood started to rush back. He realized how he must look, frozen in front of their house by the sight of Bree O'Malley. He couldn't look Gabe in the eye when he returned the greeting, "Hey."

Gabe swung nimbly from his branch; he dropped to the ground in a graceless crouch that became artful as he stood, his long lean body unfolding. He always made Ryan feel small.

Ryan stared at his brother's bare feet and was suddenly unable to banish the sudden vision of Gabe's toes ground down under the wheels of his bicycle—bones crushed, nails black and blue. But he did not act on his impulse.

"You know, you'll have to interact with her eventually," Gabe said. "The O'Malleys are here for the summer."

"Her?"

"You know who I mean. The only female in our house other than mom." He turned and shouted towards their house, "Hey Breanne!"

Ryan fought his instinct to run when Bree looked back at them. He was glad Gabe stood slightly in front of him, and hoped that from this distance she couldn't see his blush. He had always been wary of girls, conscience as he was of the expectations that dripped from every spoken conversation he'd shared with one. It was as if females spoke two languages simultaneously, the first being English and the second a language that involved eyes and smiles and fingers twisting in hair, something silent and demanding and filled with promise. It offended him in a way that he couldn't put into words.

That Bree was only a year his senior added to Ryan's distress. They had graduated from the same high school only a year apart. He should know her. They should have been acquaintances, at least, before his older brother first brought her home as his girlfriend. That she had been unaware of his existence until she started dating Gabe was a tragedy for Ryan, a calamity of Biblical proportions.

Ryan knew in some ways he only had himself to blame for being so invisible. He had been a track and cross-country kid in high school, not exactly a figure of note. Not when he'd torn his ACL in junior year, halting his dreams of making All-State and thus a name for himself. The knee sometimes stiffened when he ran, the phantom pain and missed dreams chasing him still.

Bree looked up from her book as they reached the porch. Her face looked like that of a dreamer awakening from a long sleep. He stared at where the fabric under her armpits had been darkened by sweat, his own body suddenly itchy.

"Enjoy your bike ride?" she asked him, smiling.

Ryan's blush returned immediately. His evasion hadn't gone unnoticed.

“Yeah,” Ryan said to his feet. He felt like he should say something else but no other words came to mind. They were lodged somewhere in his throat.

He sensed the silent thought that passed between Gabe and Bree when his brother laughed and leaned down to peck her dutifully on the cheek and ghost his lips over her skin to nibble at the tip of her ear. She tugged him back down beside her on the swing, lifting her legs to tuck them into his lap. The bench groaned at the extra weight, every movement marked by a loud squeak of protest.

Ryan stepped back, feeling his own intrusion acutely. He turned to drop his bike in the corner of the porch and nodded awkwardly at Gabe. He opened the screen door and entered the house, the sounds of the swing’s rusty hinges following him into the dim light of the living room where his mother sat watching Matlock from an oversaturated screen.

He joined his mother on the sagging brown couch, pulling one of the limp embroidered cushions under his armpit. The room smelled like methacrylate and cigarette smoke. His mother had just finished painting her nails.

“We really need to get a new television for this house, mom,” he said.

Without looking at him, she said, “We don’t come down the shore to watch television, Rye.”

He sank further into the couch. He could still hear the porch swing outside as it creaked its way forward and backward, forward and backward, the summer dusk crowding like moths around the light of the small house.

Later, when the night had finally settled on the beach town, he wandered out into the darkness with his oldest brother, Tommy. The two sat on the timeworn concrete of

the deserted Cape May boardwalk, their feet dangling over the five-foot drop to pebbled sand and faces squinting into the wind gusting off the sea. It was past midnight and the air was warm with untethered opportunities, the shrieks of teenagers in the distant darkness haunting him as he contemplated the night. Ryan and Tommy had never had much to say to each other. They pretended the silence was companionable.

When Tommy offered Ryan a cold, dripping can of Natty Light from his cooler, he shrunk back as if from a flame.

“I don’t drink,” he said.

“Not going to indulge in even a bit of vice, Father Rye Bread?”

Ryan wrinkled his nose in distaste. “Not planning on it, no.”

Tommy laughed and placed the can of cheap beer on the boards beside his youngest brother. At twenty-six he bore the signs of corporate employment in his stooping shoulders and false grins. A few years ago he would never have thrust a beer at his youngest brother, but now there was something desperate in the act. Ryan had rarely seen Tommy since he’d left for college, but over the summers he drifted in and out of the family beach house with the consistency of a ghost caught up in unfinished business.

They waited for Gabe, Bree, and her brother Aidan to materialize in the light of the quiet boardwalk’s lamps. Their plan was to hike to the lighthouse at the other end of the island, the one said to be haunted by a Lady in White.

Local myth claimed that she carried a lantern in one hand, a crying infant in the other. Seeing her meant different things depending on whom one asked, but Ryan had his own beliefs. He had once claimed to see the Lady, years ago when he was just a ten-year-

old following his teenage brothers like a shadow. Looking back he wasn't so sure if what he had seen had been a vision or one of Tommy's pranks. He didn't feel like asking.

Nevertheless, searching for her was a summertime ritual that the O'Malley siblings were soon to be initiated into, if they would only show up.

Tommy was on his second can of Natty Light when Ryan checked his watch. "Where are they coming from anyway?"

"Gabe wanted to take them into Wildwood to see Morey's Pier. Typical shore stuff, I guess." Tommy shrugged and put back another long swig, showing his disdain for such innocent activities. His young wife Mallory was back in Philly with her parents, taking summer classes to get through her nursing degree. He looked younger now than when he had been standing at the altar, saying his vows. His neck seemed naked, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed his drink.

Ryan tried to suppress the sadness that bubbled up from his gut as he watched his brother drink. He wanted to say something else that would make his brother turn his face and look at him, but he couldn't find the words.

"You couldn't afford any better shit than that?" Gabe's voice made him sit up straight. He craned his neck to see the three newcomers approach from the dunes. Bree clung to Gabe's arm, the dark-haired Aidan to the other side of his friend, flashlight in hand. He pointed its beam at the pack of Natty Lights and made a face, as if to emphasize Gabe's point.

Tommy placed a loving hand over his pack of beers. "This shit takes me back to the old days. It's a rite of passage, man."

The other three grudgingly accepted the cans as they were offered.

“Hey, what about Rye?” Aidan was nothing if not fair.

Tommy cracked open his third can of the night. He was at the stage in his drunkenness where his words were too loud. They grated on the air. “Baby brother doesn’t engage in vices like the rest of us mere mortals.”

Ryan didn’t respond. Contrary to their belief, it wasn’t from a sense of superiority that he refused the alcohol. It was fear. A fear his brothers clearly didn’t share.

“It’s about as strong as water,” Gabe said.

“Are you sure you don’t want one, Ryan?” Bree asked. She bent down to the cooler and pried a can loose from the ice, her slender arm bridging the space between them as she held it in front of his face. Even in the dim light, he could tell that she bit her nails.

“It’s up to you,” she said. “But might as well have some fun now, right?”

Without thinking, he grasped the can offered. Later he would tell himself he did it out of consideration for her feelings. But to be honest, in that moment, he would have taken anything she offered.

The can sat heavy in his hands. He looked around to Gabe as if for help.

“Look at Rye—its baby brother’s first drink!” Tommy was laughing, making camera motions with his thumb and forefingers and clicking noises with his tongue.

Gabe was distracted by something Aidan whispered in his ear. His eyes were vacant, staring at something far away and smiling secretly. No help there.

Ryan felt Bree’s gaze.

“It’s not my first drink.” To prove his point, Ryan snapped the tab back and took a confident swig. It was indeed shit. He fought back the disgust that curled his lips, trying

to school his face into a look of cool aloofness as the disappointing foam trickled down his throat. His hand covered the fingerprints made by Bree's fingers in the condensation and his grip tightened.

Tommy only laughed harder.

"Shut up, Tom-Tom," Gabe said. He winked at Ryan, "It's not Rye's fault you bought the saddest excuse for alcohol to ever make market. Next time I'm buying us all proper rum—we'll get this thing going pirate-style."

The air smelled like flowers now, her perfume carrying on the salty breeze. She looked at him, and he could only meet that kindness for a moment before glancing away, pretending he was looking at the ocean's horizon when in truth he could see nothing. Only an absolute darkness. He imagined the darkness beyond the shallows was the wall of a great wave, one that reached up and up into the sky until it blotted out the moon, a wall so close that they didn't know it was there, it was so absolute. He stared at it as it hovered on the point of crashing. It promised to swallow them whole.

Bree sat next to Ryan, causing his legs to tense. Her feet dangled off the boardwalk's edge in slow elliptical revolutions, closer and closer to touching his own. Sitting to her other side was Gabe, who stroked Bree's back with one hand. The steady scratching sound of his fingernails catching in her loose shirt felt loud to Ryan. Their intimacy offended him. Aidan hummed something that made Gabe laugh. Down the line, Tommy sat with his case of beer and disappointment.

Gabe Fisher and Aidan O'Malley had been best friends since high school. They had graduated together and now attended St. Joe's together, commuting just half an hour from their respective homes across Philadelphia. It was through Aidan that Gabe had met

the younger Bree. According to Gabe: "It had just clicked." And Ryan was loath to fathom his moonstruck brother's motives for spending all his time at the O'Malley household. That Gabe had suggested the O'Malley siblings accompany them on what had always been a Fisher family vacation had irked Ryan, but he would never state it aloud.

Sitting beside Bree now, he wasn't sure he minded anymore.

"So Gabe tells me you enter seminary this fall?" Bree asked, voice light.

He nearly choked on his beer. "Yeah," he said. "I will."

"Are you nervous?"

Ryan considered, staring out at the distant line of sand that ended just where the ocean began. He took a careful sip of his drink before speaking. "It's what I feel God has called me to do."

She poked him playfully in the arm, jostling his beer. "But are you nervous?"

Ryan's foot brushed against hers. He couldn't tell who was to blame. "Why would I be nervous?"

She shrugged. "It's a big commitment. A lifetime deal, right?"

He nodded. Possible responses crowded inside his mouth. Everything he could say to her sounded wrong, however. Pregnant with something unspoken and significant. He was afraid of how she filled the space beside him.

"I used to think I wanted to be a nun, you know," Bree said after a moment. Her toes scraped his ankle. She was gazing up at the moon, strands of hair curling past her face in the breeze.

"Really?" He tried to imagine her in a novice's habit, but she didn't look right in all white. The colors kept bleeding. "What changed?"

Bree didn't respond. She shifted her weight away from Ryan then, turning her shoulder into Gabe's.

"Nun," Gabe piped in, "of your business!" Bree slapped his knee. "Couldn't resist."

The question was dropped once Gabe tangled his fingers with Bree's. Tommy released a loud burp. The occupants of the boardwalk's edge groaned. They passed new beers down the row.

It was an hour before they were all drunk enough to set off towards the lighthouse. Ryan staggered through the sand, telling himself he didn't need to pee as the group laughed their way toward a steadily flashing point of light in the moving darkness, the waves that rolled into the bay mere streaks of foamy silver in the night.

"Will the Lady try to take over our bodies?" Bree asked. Her eyes were glued to the light as it revolved in intervals around the tip of the towering white structure. She gripped Gabe's hand. "Spirit our souls away to some other realm? You know, dark shit."

She said it like she hoped such a fate would occur.

Gabe laughed. "Nah, she's totally benevolent."

"But she almost stole Rye away that one time, remember?" Tommy said. In what was clearly meant to be a brotherly gesture, he stuck his hand into Ryan's hair and shook it violently. His stomach protested at the motion. "It was a motherfucking vision, right?"

"You saw the Lady, Ryan?" she asked.

They were now on solid ground, having climbed the dune to the grassy earth that surrounded the base of the lighthouse. Ryan's stomach roiled with nothing but the shit foamy beer to fill it, and his bladder longed for release. "Ye-yeah."

He wanted to tell Gabe that something was wrong, that he felt like a sack of skin stretched tight over a balloon. He was sweating despite the cool night air, his knees weak on the even ground.

In the spinning darkness he could hear her question. Her voice was too close, too loud. "What did she look like?"

The last thing Ryan saw before he vomited the contents of his stomach at Tommy's feet was Bree, illuminated for just a moment by the electric beam from the lighthouse. Her eyes were shadowed and blank as a statue's.

Bree

She'd fucked Ryan Fisher the summer of '88 because he had been young and attractive and about to go to seminary. It wasn't a complex situation, in all honesty. By the time Bree O'Malley was in her twenties and dating Ryan's brother Gabe, she'd decided upon several core truths about her life.

One such truth was that sex before marriage would not ensure eternal damnation. This was a result of the unfortunate incident with Duane Mandusky when she was only a freshman in high school, fifteen and wide-eyed by any boy's attention. That Duane had taken from her the decision to be known as a slut was a fact that grated on Bree with each whisper that followed her through the halls of Our Lady of Sorrows High. She had since learned the pleasures of sleeping with truly grateful partners, boys who by night fumbled in their thanks as she made them feel like men. Very few stuck around by day, however. She had learned to numb herself to that particular sting.

The second was that her brother Aidan was in love with Gabe Fisher and always had been. And Gabe loved him back. Most important of all, she told herself, she didn't

care. She had learned too much about sadness to argue with happiness, and if they could be happy because of her, that was all that she needed. She would find someone, and in the meantime living the life of chaste Catholic courtship kept her parents off her back and unwanted admirers from their pursuit.

It was a symbiotic relationship based upon an unspoken agreement, one that would be resolved once Gabe finally spoke to her and moved with Aidan up I-95 to live out their gay lifestyle openly in New York City, or somewhere similar where everyone was queer and dying from AIDs as far as she could tell.

It was true that Gabe had been the best boyfriend she'd had yet, and they hadn't even slept together. His initial lack of presumption had been refreshing. They'd held hands and pressed their lips together on the beach. But she knew to look away when Gabe disappeared with her brother into the Atlantic surf.

It seemed like the perfect situation at the time. But she'd made one fatal mistake: she had actually fallen in love with Gabe Fisher.

She realized this the day Gabe told her he and Aidan were leaving for the weekend to visit Atlantic City. They were sitting in twin beach chairs by the water. She was busy rubbing sun tan lotion into the tops of her thighs when he told her their plans. "I would invite you, but you aren't twenty-one yet so I doubt it would be much fun for you," he said. He dug his feet into the sand in front of him.

She continued to spread the thick white cream across her legs, splaying her feet in front of her as she did so. "You should have fun. I know Aidan's always wanted to go."

At that moment her brother was in the water with his surfboard. She watched him, a quarter of a mile off the shore and easily straddling his pointed fiberglass board. The

waves weren't nearly big enough, she thought. She imagined what she would do if a whitecap swallowed him whole.

Gabe nodded happily and continued to bury himself, bit by bit, under the sand. He piled it around his legs with his hands. He was nearly at his knees. She wasn't ready when he said, "I think you may be the best person I know, Breanne."

"You should meet more people," she said. She realized she was embarrassed for him. She stopped applying sunscreen. "You aren't so bad yourself, you know."

He laughed but his eyes were sad. Blonde hair fell into his face as he continued to pile the sand on himself. "I think I try, sometimes," he said. He finally looked at her. "But I'm selfish."

They watched each other. She felt the urge to push him to the ground and wrap herself around his body. She wanted to hold him until he loved her, until he needed her as much as she needed him. "Gabe," she said.

"That's my name," he replied. He smiled at her, the sweetest expression she had ever seen on his face.

She said, "I love you."

"I know," he said. "I'm sorry I've done that to you."

He stood up then, sand streaming off his legs as he kicked himself free. He walked toward the water, where Aidan waved at him. Two small indents in the sand were the only sign that he had ever been there.

Enthroned in her crooked recliner, Bree shielded her eyes as she watched him leave. She tasted blood in her mouth and realized that she had bit her lip. So this was what love felt like. She ached.

A moment later she caught sight of Ryan Fisher running barefoot and bare chested down the beach. His feet carried him parallel to the water, his motion distracting her from the distant figures of Aidan and Gabe. He was close enough to where the surf threatened to lap at his feet but never quite close enough to actually get wet. He ran towards the bay, where the Cape May lighthouse jutted proudly into the horizon.

She watched Ryan's feet slap the sand, the sinews of his calves quivering with the exertion. Sweat glistened across his back. His face was beatific, haloed by the afternoon sun. Curly dark hair was pushed off his forehead, exposing a face as calm as Christ's on the cross. He seemed to run at the exact point between agony and acceptance. He ran as if he had something to run from.

Bree leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. She wiped the excess lotion off on her stomach, kneading it absentmindedly into her skin. She had been burned too many times before.

She slept with Ryan that weekend because Gabe wasn't there and she was lonely. She slept with him because they were both drunk and the house was empty. She slept with him because he looked at her like she was holy, and she wanted to be worshipped.

When all three of her store bought pregnancy tests turned up positive two weeks later, she told Gabe first. He reacted much as she thought he would. He laughed.

"What, is this the Miraculous Conception all over again?" It was sunset when she'd dropped the news. They were sitting in one of the Cape May Beach Patrol stands, a structure that stood like an Adirondack chair on stilts, pulled far enough away from the water that it would not be washed away with the tide. The beach was nearly deserted. The

only sign he gave that he was upset was in the way he touched his hair, brushing it back from his forehead in one agitated motion.

“Are you angry?” she asked. Her voice was smaller than she meant it to be, her words caught in the wind.

“Honestly?” He clasped her hand in both of his before looking at her with wry eyes. He winced before he said, “I’m not surprised.”

She nudged his knee with her own in admonishment. They could always communicate with just their eyes, and she knew that he didn’t want her to ask about Aidan, or the others. But her next question had to be said out loud. “Should I keep it?”

He stiffened beside her. His grip on her hand changed, tightened. “Are you thinking about getting an abortion?”

The word sounded like a swear word, said aloud like that.

She looked out at the horizon line of the ocean, the sun at her back still falling slowly behind the earth. Her hair brushed across her face with the wind, getting caught in her mouth. She couldn’t speak.

They considered the crashing surf, side by side on the gritty wooden stand. Bree closed her eyes for a moment, letting the sunspots dance behind her eyelids, bursts of color floating in the darkness. Somewhere in the distance children’s excited shouts mingled with the roar of the surf and the shrieks of seagulls fighting over scraps. It all felt so desperate, suddenly, as if they were the last people on earth.

“I believe,” he said, “that everything happens for a reason.”

“Do you really?” There were plenty of things in her life that seemed to occur with very little reason, if she was being honest. Fucking Gabe’s seminarian brother without a condom, for one.

He nodded. “I know that sounds naïve but honestly, I do believe that God offers us opportunities. This? This is a door that you can either walk through, or slam shut.”

“So you think I should keep it.” The words came out sounding bitter, and she realized that she was bitter. She was livid, in fact. She began to collect all the angry words inside her that had never been said, all the words that would tell him how much she hated this situation, this life that she had made from pieces of lies and impulsive decisions. How dare he assume she should want this?

Suddenly, he jumped off the stand in one move to land on the sand five feet below. When he looked up at her, it was with a smile on his face. “And I think you should marry me.”

She felt winded, as if he had punched her in the gut. “What?”

“Marry me?” Gabe asked. He looked so much younger than he really was when he reached up a hand to help her down from the stand. Then he leaned in as if what he was about to confide was the biggest secret of all. “I’ve always wanted to be a dad, you know.”

She kissed him. He kissed her back. She thought maybe if she could stay on that beach forever, in that moment, she would be happy.

“Do you want to know who the father is?” she asked after they finally pulled apart. She looked at their joined hands so she didn’t need to look him in the eye.

“I think you should tell the father. See how he feels about this. But honestly, I don’t really want to know,” Gabe said. He gripped her hands tighter, pulling her closer. “I want this kid to be mine.”

She hugged him. Over his shoulder she could see their conjoined shadows stretching out to one thin line beside them on the sand. It would be dark soon.

Years later, when he left her on that horrible Easter night, she thought about that moment. The way they had sat together on the edge of the Mid Atlantic, completely uncertain. A thousand possible futures had existed in that moment.

Her brother Aidan had been Gabe’s best man at their wedding. He left for a job with the Foreign Service in Germany a few months after. Aidan knew Gabe was too Catholic for him, too willing to suffer. There was only so much suffering that could be endured, Aidan had said. Bree knew the way Gabe was. She wondered if she should feel guilty, like she’d taken advantage of his goddamn martyr complex.

Ryan had never been the answer. He’d said awful things to Bree the week he’d found out she was engaged to Gabe that fateful summer—words that could not be forgiven by the mere passing of time. He was not a bad priest, but he would have been a miserable father. Of that Bree was sure. Maybe he would not have left, not like Gabe had. But there were many ways of leaving.

Honestly, she’d seen Gabe’s departure coming from the very beginning. That didn’t mean it hurt less.

Preparing the funeral ceremony for her ex-husband was an exercise in letting go of assumptions. For example, assuming that she still knew who Gabe had been when he died. It had been nearly twenty years, and the only contact they had in that time were a

few short phone calls and even fewer email correspondences. He'd meant to visit in that time. He'd said it as often as they'd spoken. He'd always meant to visit, but never could.

She understood, for the most part. Two contradicting lives couldn't be lived at once. One had to be sacrificed. She was glad he got to live one life fully, at least. His boyfriend seemed to have truly loved him, and without that possessive love that she had feared in herself.

Bree met Santiago Flores in front of the Spilker Funeral Home in Cape May the day before the service. She found him sitting in one of the wicker chairs that dotted the home's wraparound porch. He had his head in his hands. The chair practically groaned with his weight. A forty-something man with broad shoulders and lengthy frame, he was a sight to behold dressed in all black. She felt like an impostor in her patterned blue sundress.

"Mr. Flores?" she asked. She touched his shoulder. "I'm Breanne Fisher."

At her name he looked up, a dazed expression on his face. "Please," he said, "call me Santi."

She offered him a hug because she didn't know what else to do. He stood to return it, enfolding her in his embrace. True to his name, he smelled like flowers—lilac and hyacinth. When they pulled away, he had tears in his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said, brushing a hand across his face in embarrassment. The movement was delicate against his heavy features— a strong brow and well-defined jaw, complimented by a full salt and pepper beard. "I cry easily now."

“Of course,” she said. She fumbled through her purse for her pack of Kleenex.

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

He accepted the tissue with grace. “Thank you,” he said, and with real emotion that made Bree feel like a piece of ice, “I know this must be hard for you as well.”

She nodded once, worrying her lower lip between her teeth. Her own eyes were dry. “Have his—remains— where are they—“

“They were delivered this morning,” he said. They both looked out over the front lawn of the small funeral home. A low brick wall separated the property from the well-kept residential neighborhood surrounding. The neighboring houses boasted the distinctly Cape May aesthetic, all bright colors, seashells, and quaint lawn ornaments. Santi breathed through his nose, a humorless noise. “He *would* want his funeral in this town. Just this side of tacky.”

“You know Gabe. No place he loved better than the shore.” She smiled without meaning to. He caught her eye and returned the expression. He had a nice smile. She was glad that Gabe had had someone to smile at him like that.

“I think,” he said after a moment, bunching the tissue she’d given him up in his large fist. “That this situation is quite strange.”

She nodded in agreement.

Santi sighed and adjusted his tie nervously. “Gabe told me about your family.”

“Oh.”

“I was afraid of meeting you for the longest time,” he said. “How could we, you know?”

She didn't say anything. A family rode past on their bicycles, their bells jingling as they followed each other down the street.

"I would like to be your friend," he said. He reached a hand toward her. "Shall we?"

"Yes, I suppose so." She allowed him to wrap his arm around her shoulders, an oddly intimate gesture. She placed her hand at his waist. The height difference was comical, especially as she felt him lean more and more heavily against her smaller body. He seemed dragged down by an immense weight.

They staggered like that toward the funeral home door.

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