



PLAYS OF LIGHT

A NOVEL BY

ANAHATA FERNANDEZ



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About the Author

Anahata Fernandez is a debut novelist, an attorney, a former film producer and script writer. A British-born Canadian woman of Indian, Malaysian and Latvian descent, she was indoctrinated as a daughter of Newfoundland at the tender age of four when her immigrant parents chose the most Easterly point on the coast of North America to call home.

She graduated with a liberal arts degree from McGill University at twenty-one years young (1991) and obtained her law degree from The University of Calgary at the age of twenty-four (1994). After six years of practicing in Alberta with the Calgary Bar, she relocated to the southern interior of British Columbia. She lives and loves her life in Nelson, an idyllic small town, nestled in the Selkirk Mountains on the West Arm of Kootenay Lake. Everyone in her life, whether personal or professional, calls her Ahna.

To see what this author does, visit her law firm: www.pearkesfernandez.com If you want the deets on who she is, peruse her biogram in the first 300 posts on Instagram: [anhatafernandez](https://www.instagram.com/anhatafernandez). To hear (more of) what she's got to say, follow her on Twitter: [@AhnaFernandez](https://twitter.com/AhnaFernandez).

I dedicate this book to my husband, Timothy William Pearkes and my daughter, Nevé Amber Fernandez-Long.

Special thanks to all those gurus in plainclothes who have contributed to the ideas and concepts in this book unwittingly, wondrously.

For all those artists of yesteryear, today and tomorrow who have inspired me through their music, follow #curatorforthecure on Instagram or Twitter.

For many of those famous folks of past and present who inspired me through their written or spoken word, visit my Pinterest board entitled “Wise Words”.

One life in particular deserves mention, most honorably: Dr. Maya Angelou, who is credited with having spoken these words: there is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you. Thus my illumination.

Please enjoy my work. Should you wish, I invite you to lay down your brick @POLBookWall on Facebook.

This is an original work of fiction.

The following characters in this book are fictional and any resemblance of them to persons living or dead is purely coincidental: Remy, George, Kali, Cyrus, Peter, Gabriel, Bea, Mary, Giles, Jacob, Eva, Eva's husband, Anya, Talia, Tata, Birgitta, Endre, Evan, Jonah, Grace, Caroline and Cassidy.

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Prologue

If she lies very still, he can't see her.

If she's sleeping, she won't feel a thing.

The shadow of a man stands in her doorway: a shape within the frame. Never revealed. Always concealed. Silhouetted by ambient light.

Uninvited. Unwanted and unknown to her. Standing at the threshold of outer realm meaning and a young girl's private world. She rubs her peeps to watch the dark blur stretch out across the floorboards.

Too late for salvation tonight.

So she closes her eyes just as tight as she can. Yes, that's it. Now she can't see anything and so he will disappear. Praying to God with more devotion than the last time she got down on her knobbly knees and asked for mercy.

For she's learned the hard way how to surrender at the altar to such beliefs, false as they may be. How essential to our mere existence and everything that follows one convicted member of the flock can prove in hindsight to have been.

Just imagine if it were possible that she alone could ever have the power to hit reset and start again. Clean slate, all the way down the line.

*More things are wrought by prayer
than dreams could ever be made of.*

*But blind faith can't make a dent
in the armor of real nightmares.*

Too bad, so sad. There's no difference in the darkness before her: eyes shut or wide open, it's still blacker than black.

Her ears are pricked erect. The shuffle of footsteps and sound of his breath fill her with dread. The closer he comes, the more still she lays.

As if not moving can make her invisible. Or else acting dead, render her body devoid of all sensation. If only she was formless – no, lifeless.

Regrettably, tragically, these things too are not possible. He leans over her tiny frame, covered only by a sheet that he unpeels without speaking.

She is cold. Instantly.

Everywhere except where she feels the scorch of his hand.

No, not there. Please God.

Make him stop.

She presses her skinny legs together as tight as she can. But her fresh bones have not yet hardened enough to resist. He pries them apart with no effort at all.

Like the pages of a diary that every girl keeps to house her most treasured secrets. She can hear him panting, somewhere beyond her silent cry.

Because she cannot make a sound, you see.

As he robs her of what she's too young to understand she possesses.

It will burn in the morning when she goes to relieve herself. As it always does.

And she will make herself just as small as she can. Sitting on the toilet, anxious to finish up for the others still waiting their turn.

So young. So shamed. Guilty as self-charged for the crime of falling asleep. The transgression of not shrinking away into nothingness.

Yet so proud that her feet touch the ground.

At last.

She thought she would never get bigger.

But she did.

1 Ebony

It was a lattice fence that separated their worlds.

Mary was content with that.

Through the space between the crisscross of the pickets, she could partake in the energy of her neighbors without intruding. The captain at the helm of the ship was a vivacious, youthful woman. Entertaining and intriguing to the older one, who peered through the gaps.

Mary had gotten on in years, but she was still as sharp as a tack. Watching but not probing. Listening, but never eavesdropping. Adjusting in no time to the new signs of life in the little yellow farmhouse.

Smiling and shaking her head at how those long legs strode back and forth across the backyard, tirelessly. And how those lean arms were made mostly of muscle and never empty. As far as aged watchful eyes could tell, that busy bee went full throttle from sunup to sundown.

The maternal reason for all that effort was crystal clear.

A dark curly head, bobbing by, fueled with little girl laughter.

Her fair-haired *compadré* with gangly limbs and awkward gait, never far behind.

The boy liked to run after the girl in hot pursuit of the giggles. Relentlessly armed with a tease or an admonition. Mary imagined that was the duty of every big brother to his little sister – if he was lucky enough to have one. Dishes clattered through open doors, carrying the promise that tea time was coming.

The mother's name was Kali.

This first piece of the puzzle had come straight from the Queen of the hive herself – the day after her small colony of three moved in next door not this summer past, but the one before it. And what an ordeal moving day had been, even watching from the sidelines.

An older gentleman with white beard and kind face had shown up to lend a much-needed hand. By Mary's standards, he was still a spring chicken. Mind you, at seventy-four years young, it was starting to feel like most folks were.

The happy duo had worked together all day with an ease that told Mary they were friends. Together, they filled that farmhouse with all the makings of a home and then some. Making countless trips from the U-Haul parked at the curb to that most unconventional front door painted bright plum purple.

So much crossed the threshold of that tiny house before the sun went down. Mary couldn't fathom how it all fit inside those old walls. The man who came to help, he liked to whistle while he worked. Giles, her late husband, used to whistle. Mary had enjoyed how that familiar chord floated back into her world for just one day.

As for Kali? Well, she buzzed alongside the whistler. Her sundress, soaked with perspiration. Proper thing. Some of the loads she carried looked heavier than she was. What was her inspiration in life, Mary wondered. Down the walkway. Up over the front porch. Then up a half step to clear a sill that was higher than most – and in through an entry much narrower than it ought to be.

Yes siree. This one was a real go-getter. Mary could tell, right from the start: there was nothin' average about this happy homemaker. Between lifting one end of the sofa, balancing a houseplant on her hip, and wrestling cardboard boxes overflowing with toys, Kali had found the time to spare a warm smile for her neighbor.

That was just before the grand finale as the sun set on moving day. A massive piano appeared, as if out of nowhere and Mary would never forget the sight. All those extra hands grunting and groaning to maneuver it around back to the double French doors. Even with them open wide, all the way, the instrument had barely passed through. Kali had insisted the movers find a way to make it fit.

She wouldn't take no for an answer.

That last hurrah was the dramatic finish to an epic haul west on the Interstate from Knoxville. The next morning, the ship's captain had emerged from her makeshift quarters bright and early to get straight to work. A mesmerizing master plan unfolded before Mary's eyes. Belongings, strewn across the back yard; then moved, one by one, to their brand-new home within a home.

By midmorning, all hands were on deck. Two to swab it diligently. Another four smaller ones to play delightfully. Loudly. Endlessly. The poor woman was visibly spent by the time the sun peaked in the hottest part of the afternoon – with no end of unpacking still ahead of her.

But that didn't stop Kali from introducing herself and the bare bones of her story to Mary through the lattice. In time, lessons learned and secrets kept would pass right on through that barricade made of wood and air. A friendly border, running the full length of the two properties.

Mary's to the East,
and Kali's to the West.

Marking the place where two worlds meet. Separating what doesn't serve from what's worth keeping. Like a sieve with a social conscience that performs its function equally well – whichever side of that fence a girl chooses to sit on.

The posts had never been quite straight. The paint, forever peeling. But it was well built in the way that mattered most to Mary. For it had invariably made for good neighbors.

Before this crew arrived, Mary had been happy enough to go along to get along with one renter after another. In truth, she had found it sad how none of them injected any real heart into the place.

Now she could feel the promise of love from next door.

Every September, like clockwork, the Blue Jays lined up to watch the sun rise along that Great Divide. Sure enough, they had returned this year right on cue. Each culprit balanced in a row. Ready to announce the start of each day at the top of its lungs.

Had Giles the chance to see this shocking display at sunrise, he would have chuckled at Nature's synchronicity. The Corvidae family. Giles used to call the jaybirds the motorcycle gang. Swore that distinctive whistle-warble was how they communed to plan their next heist right down to the last conniving detail.

They sure knew a fine perch when they spotted one. Now, with fall in the air and nests long forgotten, there was no reason for the wily gang members to run covert. Revving their engines just like teenagers getting ready for a road trip. Conspiring excitedly about what migratory route to take to stay one step ahead of Jack Frost.

Giles had an affinity for the jaybirds' notorious reputation. His wife didn't find the passerine rebels quite so endearing. Roused from slumber, to her ear, they sounded like they were protesting the nights getting colder and the long flight ahead. Squawking their

tufted heads off without a care for the dormancy of others. When all that commotion wasn't worth a hill of beans to an old widow's way of thinking.

Winter always came, no matter the level of mischief or conspiracy.

Mary had long since given up counting. Already, over a year had flown by since the tender trio next door had bid their farewell to the Great Smokies. On silver wings that carried time faster the older you got.

Mary had done enough living to know what remained of hers was precious. Now, she mostly sat back to receive what came.

It was what she did best as a widow who had lost her lifelong best friend five years ago. She had to sell their family home on the outskirts of the city. Far too many chores, not to mention memories.

Residential real estate in the major centers was on the rise again since the whole of the South had become a trendy destination for a certain kind of Northerner. Who would have thought? The capital city was no exception. It was a real stroke of luck to find something smaller and closer to the town center of Nashville that she could still afford.

Her bungalow on Johnston Street was perfect, really. For a spry old gal who was bound and determined to continue to live independently come what may. There were no stairs in her house other than to the basement so she could get around easily. Downscaling had been just the excuse Mary needed to divest what remained of a family who had flown the coop years ago.

Her most prized possessions were outdoors now and they didn't ask for much. Just a little care and attention once a day. Jacob, her youngest, put in the flowerbeds for his mama first thing. To ease her transplant from the environs she knew to a place she could manage on her own.

Mary had toiled the Earth, planted kindness and gathered love.

She could never leave her garden.

Succulents of all shapes and sizes, colorful and quirky, arranged in porcelain pots out front. A backyard oasis of shrubs and perennials; everyone kept in their proper place by the pretty stone path starting out as two limbs, then merging into one.

The broken china birdbath, sitting in the neck of the Y, next to a bench that Jacob had built for her as a birthday present. It was Mary's own wee corner of Paradise.

Through the fence, she had watched the revolving door of tenants next door come and go without attachment or enthusiasm.

A *for sale* sign went up two Augusts ago and then, it seemed, came right back down. Only days later, Miss Everything had pulled up to the curb in her charabanc of a Jeep with her kids in tow.

So pretty that it hurt an old woman's eyes as she went about her morning ritual of watering her charge. Kali had climbed the porch in two long strides, slipped her key in the lock and opened that odd fit of a purple door for the very first time.

And the rest was history. The consummate observer quickly found herself hoping this trinity would put their roots down and stay a while.

Living alone, she had grown to rely on her powers of observation to stay connected to community. The coal black eyes of this Negress were watery and more milky than when Giles was alive.

Her crow's feet, deeper in the corners, longer at the edges. She was a little less steady on her pegs than she used to be. But still nimble of mind and surprisingly resourceful when left to her own devices.

Hers was a quiet existence with contemplative routines and inspiring conversations with herself. Witnessing snippets of peoples' more enigmatic lives float into her purview was Mary's geriatric version of social time with the rest of the world.

From that most intimate distance, Mary watched and grew fond of Kali and her two chicks. She came to admire how the single mother juggled her life with her children and her life away from them. And she derived some measure of validation from the evidence she garnered through the fence. With all of those competing interests, Kali never dropped the two balls that mattered most.

X marks the spot.

Each criss and each cross makes up part of a structure that somehow seems inherently capable of change. As morphous as the dividing line between neighbors can ever be in a vision held by two women, each with their own separate yet parallel cause.

Motion turns the wheel of life and pours out reality in all its many forms. In the right place at the right time, the relics of forest and atmosphere might work together to become permeable. So that barriers break down. Separation dissolves.

And ownership and power are no longer destiny.

That old fence still stood as crooked and proud as it always had. But Mary could not deny the positive results of the odd experiment that began to touch her life. Starting the day after the whistler waved goodbye to the newest residents on Johnston Street. Fresh upward energy had floated over, through, and into her wizened but wondrous world ever since that nice man dragged the empty U-Haul away.

This was proof enough that some part of the female existence, as Mary had lived it, was still intact. Because in Kali, it was plain to see, hear and feel. The overriding motherly instinct was alive and well. In that regard, at least, this gorgeous creature of Nature seemed to the crone as woman had always been:

Indisputably dedicated to her children:
twenty-four/seven.

One baby girl, full of beans. The other, a boy not yet fully grown and charged with the task of collecting them. When those double doors to the backyard were open wide, the hullabaloo from over the fence brought welcome vigor into old ebony bones.

Truth was, it was not just the little ones. Kali was really quite loud, clanging about in her kitchen. The first time she called for that massive black cat of theirs, late at night, it took Mary aback. The volume and tone of voice far exceeded what she imagined could emanate from such a petite frame of unadulterated womanhood.

A girl with a voice is, by definition, a strong girl.

Kali believed, implicitly, unquestionably, her feline boy would appear. The old woman liked that cat. There was a dog-like quality in the way he responded so reliably to the summons. Bounding through the bushes and cutting through the darkness toward the light of the interior and the warmth of his owner.

Independent, self-contained, and yet so well-honed to his peeps, his place. Quite something, really, how he'd let out one last meow of defiance when he arrived at his keeper's feet. Before doing exactly as he was told, and following her inside with a strut that said there were no guarantees for tomorrow night.

Yes, it was quite a show alright, and so Mary didn't much mind the racket. After all, she imagined that single motherhood was no easy task. Coming from an old-fashioned place, it seemed strange to her that a woman in this day and age would choose to raise her children without a man. This was how Mary perceived things to be for another woman, so different from how she herself had been at that age and stage of life.

Kali was, by all accounts, beautifully exotic and fiercely independent in the way men preferred their wives to be these days. Yet, despite all the signs that pointed straight down the clear-cut path of obvious eligibility, Mary's neighbor was decidedly on her own. No husband or steady beau ever came sniffing around. Only a burly handyman carrying a tool box or an axe to fix an appliance or chop firewood.

Mary watched in disbelief how one awfully pretty little thing – full of vim and vigor – dialed every efficiency available to womankind to make things flow for her unconventional family. With that expert calibration, the triangle of relationship between single mother, her pre-teen of a boy and his toddler of a baby sister seemed to work remarkably well.

The old woman read between the lines, then, and made the inferences that came naturally to her. Perhaps no man was required, and so no man was there. This intrigued Mary's senescent mind and added a splash of color to her otherwise subdued existence. Not unlike watching a documentary on TV about some rare species of animal she knew nothing about.

Hers had been the traditional way of bringing up a family. Giles, may he rest in peace, had been the strong and steady patriarch for their five children. All boys, no girls – by some inexplicable, statistical aberration. Their sons had been the fortunate beneficiaries of a mother who stayed home and a father who worked a union job at the mill.

While she professed to love them all equally, her baby Jacob had always been her favorite. What a blessing, then, it was Jake who never found the right girl and chose to stick the closest to home. Content to care for his mama the way she cared for him as the last of five treasures.

Already, Mary had six grandbabies and her first great grandbaby was on the way. Looking back at how that legacy came to be, she couldn't have asked for anything more. When she was raising her boys, no one would have thought to inquire of a young mother whether or not she was happy.

Indeed, when she was in the thick of the hard work – sheer labor, really – Mary didn't recall ever asking herself such a question. Self-reflection of that kind wasn't a luxury afforded a woman in the 1950s with a whole tribe to tend to. Mary presumed the Fates had treated this timely mama bird next door in a different way. Not better. Not worse. A product of a more modern time.

Where was the cock for this dark hen's two bright lights? Believe it or not, Mary still didn't know their names. She was waiting for the little man of the house to stay still long enough for her to find out. Both baby birds had some of their mother's distinctive color although he less so than she.

For the little boy had lighter, curlier hair and more pointed features than his mama. But that squealer of a baby sister? Now she was one little biddy slice of ol' dark magic. Flitting about on tender legs. Trilling out to her brother the way she did. When Mary finally got a good look at her, she was struck by how close that apple had fallen to the maternal tree.

Now that curious hue of Kali's skin Mary couldn't quite place. Distinctly different from the fair-skinned Southern belles who were native to Tennessee. Come to think of it, Kali had none of the telltale signs of a woman who'd been raised in the mid-South. When she spoke, there was no drawl. But there was a hint of strange lilt or unfamiliar melody.

The sage detective suspected this unorthodox Spirit had blown in from the West Coast. Whatever her roots, she was sure as hell refreshing for an old black crone to watch in action.

Until May, Kali had clearly been a student attending classes at the college. She had a backpack stuffed full of books on her back and wore cotton T-shirts, faded jeans, and runners.

As soon as school let out, a metamorphosis occurred. All summer long, Kali fit the part of one clever-looking broad. Sporting a no-nonsense navy blue suit and shiny black high heels. Her new look didn't last long, though. Before the first leaf had turned color, Kali reverted to her less showy self. Back out came the jeans and no-nonsense pony tail at the nape of her neck. Her neighbor assumed Kali was returning to her ivory tower of higher learning.

But it didn't escape Mary that the woman beneath the simple straightforward cotton was forever changed. The backpack, for instance, got permanently shelved in favor of a tattered leather briefcase. The one that Kali had toted around all summer as part of her

professional look. When stuffed to the gills, that bag was larger than its Sherpa. All soft and splotchy brown, it made quite a statement with its lively patina of noble purpose. Two well worn straps, holding together precious contents, laced tightly through impressive old-style buckles.

The kind that never gave up.

No doubt more manly hands had worked them countless times before. The character of that bag made it such a conversation piece, Mary couldn't help but ask Kali about its provenance. Turns out her equally resourceful neighbor found it in one of those everything-goes vintage stores on the east side. Kali said the bag felt saturated in the law and those who worked so hard to apply it equally to every citizen of the world.

Little lady lawyer. Fancy that.

Mary's accolades for that choice of ambition tripped off her tongue. She felt certain that Kali was more than up for the job such a legacy would demand of her. In either mode – student or wannabe attorney – Kali had long since mastered the art of herding her minions each morning, Monday to Friday. And loading them into her beater of a Jeep for destinations unknown.

As Mary watered her flowerpots in her front-yard sanctuary, she caught glimpses of the flurry of morning activity on the porch. When something went off the rails and the clock was ticking, the fallout among all three players was enough to exhaust even a well-rested gardener who had nothing to hurry for.

Nature never rushes, and yet everything gets done.

Not one of Her creatures, overlooked.

During these meltdowns, Mary felt empathy for the leader who was trying to be all things to all people. Now that part of the female condition, Mary could relate to well enough. So when times got tough with those two chicks, she kept her head down.

And, with watering can in hand, minded her own Earthen business. Until that jealousy finally pulled away from the curb. Mary liked to get that task out of the way before the morning sun had a chance to build and scorch her own wee ones. It was just about the only obligation she had anymore.

To her delicate succulents in porcelain pots, and her more hardy den of perennials. This year, she was relying on Jake to help her put all the gardens to bed before the winter. Clean-up, composting, mulching; bringing all the prickly friends inside to keep an old gal company as the snow came falling down. Soon, everyone front and back would be taken care of until next spring when soils and temperatures were ready to receive them.

No matter the season, the two hellions invariably returned home in the late afternoon under the charge of a sitter who seemed to have a nice way with them. Without their benevolent dictator occupying her throne, they were bigger than life. Through the whole of a summer that had been hotter than Hades, they had shown no signs of slowing down.

Now, invigorated with the cooler temperatures, the double trouble from over the fence put to shame what Mary could recall from all five of her own boys put together. And her hours that followed a well-timed afternoon nap were brighter and better for it.

The old woman liked to make her evening cup of tea at six o'clock sharp. Her kitchen window open wide to welcome a cooler breeze come round to rustle the crisp, turning leaves. That was just about the time Kali would arrive home from a long day at school. She'd call out, as soon as she threw open that purple door and hauled her trusty leather sidekick in behind her. Announcing her arrival with a slam of solid wood on worn hinges.

Marking her role change from hardworking woman outside the home to mother with still plenty of homework left to do. Mary would hear the young boy asking for dinner or the baby doll crying out for her mother. Their demands often started as soon as the portal to the outside world closed shut.

She envisioned Kali, still in her good work clothes, rolling up her sleeves to get to work in the kitchen. It seemed such a shame to cook in such lovely togs. The old woman had the mental space to contemplate such grave matters.

For she had a lot of time on her hands and not a lot of visitors. That's why it felt good to be in the arm's length company of family. Not hers, it was true.

Manifested through the intention of another woman.

In a more modern time.

2 Luminary

The capital of Tennessee lies on the Cumberland River, cradled in the northwestern corner of the Central Basin.

Every evening, Mary let her cup of tea steep in ritual and contemplation as the sun sank behind the gently rolling hills far beyond the little yellow farmhouse.

It was her favorite time of day – and autumn, the last, most enchanting smile cast her way for another year. Every leaf, with its unabashed vibrancy, like a flower. She watched children go back to school, where they behaved best, and delighted in the thought that soon they'd be carving pumpkins to leave on stoops along Johnston Street.

Yes, of all the seasons, the fall requires the least from a woman well into her golden years. Only to slow down some and take the time to reflect on the deeper meaning of things past and present. Little rain over the summer months, and no frost as yet this season. The leaves would hang on for longer than most years, and the colors, be more brilliant for that attenuation.

Crisp air. Flushed cheeks. Long golden light. Mary planned to eke every ounce of pleasure out of another gorgeous Indian summer in north-central Tennessee. And, like every year, it would be well past the first freeze before this crone of habit stopped bundling herself up in wool and carrying her porcelain cup out back. To sit quietly with the remnants of the lives she cherished most now.

And for good reason: Nature's magic was different, each time the late harvest sun bid her adieu. No matter which scarf of swirling color filled the sky, it was never without a healthy swath of the soft tangerine light Mary lived for.

To an old Southern gal, still young at heart, nothing was more enchanting than how that first trace of pale amber deepened within minutes. To brush the delicate skin of that evasive fruit, only briefly, and then ripen to crimson gold. Moments later, the burning gobstopper slipped beyond the silhouette of dark ribbon that wrapped around Mary's part of the city.

Softly, surreally, like a bejeweled cloth worn as a crown of pure light on the head of a raven-haired beauty. Mary's was jet black, just starting to give way to snow white. That too would be splendid, when it came – in the way that only Black skin can make it. As the dry leaves rustled, butterscotch turned persimmon; then yielded to bittersweet shimmer: the shade of flesh closest to the seed.

Orange is the most sacred hue to reveal itself before darkness comes.

Showing up in full regalia.

Washing the whole of God's creation back toward Divinity.

As that great ball of fire surrendered its last rays to dusk, Mary preferred to think that only the autumn sky of Music City USA could make Heaven on Earth for a just few precious minutes each day.

Tonight, Nature's full spectrum was bouncing back and forth between dark clouds, the likes of which she hadn't seen for months. If this Tennessee girl didn't know better, she would have thought she smelled the promise of rain. Wouldn't that be something? If her beloved charges all got to drink from the skies overnight, after such a long dry spell.

Giles and Mary had moved to Nashville as newlyweds. They had not strayed far from home. Both were born and raised in the western valley of the Tennessee River, not far from where the Confederates had bemoaned the lost opportunity at Shiloh in 1862.

Despite the Union victory – achieved on the second day of one of the bloodiest battles of the American civil war – Major General Ulysses S. Grant lost favor in the world of public opinion. Demands for Grant's removal overwhelmed the White House, to which President Lincoln was said to have replied: I can't spare this man. He fights. Apparently conviction was enough, back then, to save the Soul.

As a young pupil in grade school, Mary had learned all about the Battle of Shiloh. That historic crucible poured its carnage along the ridgeline. On either side of a rustic one-room church named after a biblical place. How ironic that the Hebrew word *Shiloh*, extracted from the Book of Genesis, means *peace*. Two sides of one emerging nation defined by bloodshed.

Destined to meet some day,
far beyond the battlefield of right and wrong.

In 1954, the son of a black preacher from Atlanta stepped into the pulpit of a Baptist Church in Montgomery. Six months later, Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on the bus to a White person. In '56, the Supreme Court ruled that Montgomery's segregated buses were illegal. To Mary, Giles, and the rest of Black America, that was the start of better days.

Nashville had been a very different place, back then. 1956. The same year Elvis Presley recorded *Heartbreak Hotel* at RCA's Nashville studio. Redefining what could be done in the commercial center of the mid-South. When Mary looked back, it seemed that the city had grown up faster than her posse of boys did. Now the urban hustle and bustle could keep a country girl like her up for half the night.

She remembered when the U.S. Postal Service released a commemorative stamp on the hundredth anniversary of the telltale standoff at Shiloh. One of countless battles in a war that Honest Abe had insisted, at the time, was not about slavery.

In 1963 – one year after that centennial – two hundred thousand rabbis, nuns, farmers, lawyers, store clerks and students descended on the Washington Mall. They all came to hear Martin Luther King Jr. deliver the most enduring message of the twentieth century.

The freedom of one, is inextricably bound
to the freedom of another.

One man, set on fire by the example and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. Words can do that – when they resonate from one mouth to another heart. King believed in social change through the power of *satyagraha*: the force of love and truth combined.

The word belongs to the Sanskrit language of Hinduism and translates more loosely as *holding onto the truth*. Truth: naked; exposed; unarmed, other than with its own intrinsic goodness. Immutable, undeniable are the tenets of basic human dignity. They don't change – as much as the world changes around them.

Defining the inner realm of higher spiritual pursuit through music, art, and literature. Establishing those parameters and protecting them from the more worldly pursuits, more about extracting value than adding any.

Containing the outer realm of ego, rhetoric, uncommon sense, and politics. Taming the beast. At times beating it back – lest it devour the minds of the musicians, the artists, and the writers.

No animal likes to be caged. This one is pacing back and forth between anarchy and tyranny. Looking for a way out, fueled by illusion that's nowhere close to *E* for empty. Straying far afield from our morals whatever the country.

God willing, in our nation, politics has not replaced philosophy. You can fool all the people some of the time. Even some of the people all of the time. But you cannot fool everyone forever.

We can all remember better times than this. When noble purpose served the whole of society and our politicians resonated on a higher plane. But we're not all taught the same things in the classroom. We are not all served up the same lessons in life.

As a child, Mary didn't learn about the origin of words plucked out of some medieval version of India or Nepal. Such useless folly was not a part of the curriculum, as you might well imagine.

What she was taught about her nation's history, she took into her heart. Raised her own boys to never forget the hard work of brave African Americans who paved the way for them to succeed.

About the kind of change the civil rights movement accomplished without the need for guns or fists. How wave after wave of ordinary folk across the nation were moved to march in the name of freedom for every American. And about the well-timed, short-lived president who was blind to color, who joined the march for the ultimate moral cause.

John F. Kennedy told the nation that civil rights was an issue as old as the Scriptures and as clear as the American Constitution. His philosophy did not die with him. Lyndon B. Johnson shared it and saw to the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Time was then as time is now. Yesterday's still not ours to recover, but tomorrow is ours to win or lose, yet again. Years after JFK was taken from his family and the country in Dallas in '63, his younger brother Bobby posed the ultimate question not meant to be answered.

What if God is Black?

Mary and Giles always went to bed together. No matter the circumstance or nature of disagreement that may have come before. Even now, when she was roused and still half asleep, Mary would reach out across the mattress to feel for the ghost of her husband.

As it turned out, his quiet Black Spirit moved into the heart of the city when she did. Go figure. After fifty-one years of marriage, there was no coming apart for the likes of their

Union. And there wasn't a day that went by when Mary didn't think of him or feel his absence in some small way.

More than ever, she missed the peaceful solitude of small town living like when she was a girl. If she closed her eyes and spread open her most vital organ, she could let mind and memory take her back to every vivid detail.

The sights. The sounds. Even the smells of her childhood.

Her family. Her community.

Running through heaping piles of leaves. Shattering them into a million pieces of past lives. All the while, laughing with reckless abandon. That pervasive sense of well-being painted her tiny corner of the world with a soft brush in pastel hues.

While the seeds of vibrant change were being sown across our nation.

Now that she was closer to the end, Mary didn't have to go that far to return to the beginning. All she need do to make the journey was sit quietly, with more gold in her pocket than every other season combined. Sipping what had brewed long enough to bite back.

As she travelled, she heard the crickets chirping.

Egging her on with their steady rhythm, enlivening her old bones. The males, they played their harps just for her. Nature's angels never disappointed.

Reminding Mary of what seemed like yesterday. When her body could climb an old oak tree without any effort at all. And her imagination, conjure an entire world of comfort to rest in its branches.

Like every little girl who's fortunate
enough to know she's loved.

Who is raised to believe
in the content of her character.

The child Mary used to be felt safe and secure up there. High above the valley of despair. Deeply rooted in her own dream. Mary was thirty-two years old when MLK was assassinated in Memphis in '68.

One precious American, anointed at birth as Michael, who ignited the spark that spread like wildfire before it was snuffed out. The fatal wounds inflicted on Senator Robert Kennedy in Los Angeles would follow only two months later.

As all of America watched in utter disbelief.

Yes, it was one crazy mixed-up world that rose up to greet Mary's sons after they left home. Every American was filled with fear and dread. No matter the color of their skin or which kind of neighborhood they lived in. The best any mother could do for her children was to let go the reins and try to focus on the light.

Ask yourself: how was it possible? That one Black pilgrim born in Georgia in 1929 could be so electrified and inspired by a Brown-skinned leader born sixty years before him in Porbandar, India? Gandhi was a lawyer and humanitarian who dressed in plain clothes and walked humbly through the crowd. For the non-violent resistance to British rule he inspired in his People he was called *Mahatma* which means *Great Soul*.

Gandhi was seventy-eight years old when he was killed in 1948.

JFK was thirty-one in '48. Bobby, twenty-one.

And MLK, only nineteen.

Three bullets. Fired at point-blank range in the compound of a mansion in central New Delhi. That small-statured man who walked his talk in bare feet had declined physical protection from bodyguards. When Gandhi faced his assassin, he was immutably, undeniably *Bapu*: the father of a new nation. Naked, exposed and unarmed other than his own intrinsic goodness. His quiet Brown Spirit would endure and forever belong to the ages.

The youthful version of Mary had turned a blind eye to the forces of violence that took all of these men. But as she got older, she got braver. Now she could readily accept that harsh part of past reality, so fairly ascribed to her country and beyond. And trust that she was protected. Held safely in the bosom of timelessness, believing that color is truly blind and grace is the closest thing to every woman, whatever generation she's born into.

Mary may look old and weak.

But she's not. People are not always what they seem.

She is armed with an unshakeable faith that each of these men was an instrument of God. Put on Earth to show us how the right intention can move the very mountain of an entire country's cultural paradigm. Each one of these Divine gifts, made of human flesh, was taken by an act of violence that failed to kill the Spirit of what Providence had set in motion.

Spanning a century. Transcending ethnicity.

Through continents. Across oceans.

Very soon after dusk, Mary watched the lights come on next door, like clockwork. First, on the main floor in the tiny dining room, where the hungry pair of mouths gathered to be fed. Later, as night approached, upstairs on the top floor to hold their slumber and sweet dreams.

One – two – three.

Each child had their own bedroom.

Unheard of, in Mary's day.

Smoke was rising from the chimney of the tiny westward home with generous flame in the hearth tonight. Mary hadn't seen that warmth billow out from the inside since early last spring. Another sign that Jack Frost would soon be here.

By the time true darkness came, only one luminary remained. How amusing, she thought, that mothers throughout the ages were invariably nocturnal creatures. Whether by design or necessity. She remembered when her boys had been little and bouncing off the walls at bedtime. Giles used to threaten to knock them out with a ball-peen hammer.

She had been inclined to say *yes, please do*. There was always so much to get done in a day, and so little time. After all five had passed out cold, their father soon joined as the sixth. For Mary, the hours after lights out for the rest of her family had been sacred time indeed. That much, at least, had not changed.

3 Talons

I start awake. Sweat beaded on my brow.

Breath caught in my throat.

Not again.

Just when I thought he had left for good, buried by time. Or I hoped he had.

The truth is, I still leave my light on. Just a pale night light, plugged into the socket in the corner of my room. So if he comes in the dark, I can find my way back to the surface without screaming.

That would wake Georgie and Remy. They both need their sleep. Besides, there's no scream that can save me from the night owl that haunts me. He is not known to me. I have convinced myself over the years that if I only knew his identity, I'd be able to banish him for good.

It's the mystery that has kept him alive all these years. Some part of me needs to know, insists that I remember. That stubborn streak in my adult self has unwittingly reserved a spot in my psyche for someone who disturbs the rest of the woman I've become.

I get up, as I often do, in search of a remedy to soothe. Go downstairs to make myself the proverbial cup of tea. Chamomile calms me when nothing from the inside can do that same deed. I think it's because the flower looks just like a daisy. Ever so cheerful in the simplest, most straightforward way.

Since we uprooted from Knoxville, I have the nightmare less often than I used to. Somehow, the change of scene when we crossed the Tennessee River heading west on the Interstate 40 has put some distance between him and me. But the dampness of my nightgown tells me the dream world was most unkind to the form underneath this silk tonight. Nashville just isn't far enough away from the woman I used to be.

Moksha is in for the night. He can sense when the rain is coming and, like every feline, he'd rather stay dry. So, no need to go to the back door to call for him and unwittingly let in the night. He is my big black cat, who purrs so when I kiss him on his temple. Just above one eye – green and clear – where the softer tissue inside his ear begins.

The way he squints when I plant my puckered mouth could be mistaken for a display of irritation. But I know better, and my upper lip looks forward to that tickly feeling from the bristles of hair reserved for that spot. Sharper than all the rest. Set apart wider, to reveal pink skin underneath ebony fur.

My sweet boy turns up the volume – surrendering to what love can do – in spite of his cool aloof self. I settle onto the couch. My four-legged companion shifts his weight to get in closer. The motor of his life force is fully in my bones now, strong and steady. I, too, used to know how to purr from pleasure when I was a cat. That's why Mokie's my very best trick to chase the demons away.

Herbaceous steam rises to my nostrils with the promise that he and I are in the real world. I hear the sound of the rain falling on the roof of our little farmhouse, washing away what doesn't serve. I've been waiting for moisture for months; suffering, ever so dry and thirsty. The filth from the feet that trudged through my psyche as I slept is rinsing away with what descends from the Heavens now.

I take a sip. The sweet, smoky flavor reminds me of apples that will linger long past autumn. The ripening has been slower than normal; the transformation of every cell, more complete. Perhaps we'll skip winter this year. How unnatural, just the thought of it. Nonetheless, I am filled with the comfort of everlasting sweetness. Cultivated, then preserved for one moment in time – here, in my own delusional state of existence, where things are simply the way I want them to be.

If only I could stay here forever. It's tempting. Far better to wake up, though. Because in the real world, there's nothing and no one to fear. My eyes are open and so he cannot hurt me. I know this is true – because the cuckoo bird tells me so. Its twofold shout strikes the late hour with the same call that used to make me look every which way when I was a little girl. Mama gave the clock to me as a gift when I left home. The eight-day clockwork sounds only on the full hour.

Remy and Georgie both love how a tiny miracle pops out to beget that golden time. Then the caller's gone, just as fast as it appeared. They will be too – when they are called upon to perform their own miracles. I hung this piece of my childhood on the kitchen wall the day after we moved into our new home. As a timepiece to mark the innocence of my children who now revel in its song. Just like I used to do, when I possessed that same special quality:

faith in the impossible, even the very unthinkable.

My little birdie reminds me every hour, on the hour, that time marches on. In that mimic's routine, the child within me can still hear a hope – all the love she once longed for. Feel that wee surge of delight as I let my ears prick alive when all is quiet, except for the chirp, and the rest of the house is sleeping.

Some part of me still believes in magic.

Even though time has taken its toll on me and all those I grew up to love.

That no bell will ever toll for those who are growing up to love me. They too are vulnerable by virtue of this being human. Whether man or woman, no person is an island, entire of itself.

Every man is a piece of the continent.

Every woman, a part of the main.

Our Fates are intertwined. Our hearts, connected. That's what keeps one small bean in the soup like me safe. Even though, at times, I forget where my place is in this new society of mine.

Before I took my repose, I made our family a hearth light. The first one this season, now that the nights have drawn colder and the days shorter. Laid the foundation of kindling and paper with utmost care. Adjusted the flue in time for a slow burn. That's why the fire under our mantel still burns strong: a living light, dancing through my darkness.

Licks of blue flame coming and going, trying to merge with the warmer colors filling my pupils, clearing my head. Keeping Remy toasty warm underneath his heaping pile of blankets. Georgie always gets hot and throws hers off because that's what feels good to her tiny naked self. I derive great pleasure tending every hue in the hearth for my two sleeping angels upstairs, each in their own room. Looking in on my toddler and my growing son, still, to watch them dreaming.

Orange, red, and yellow. The hottest blue at its core. The pulse of what burns, the crackle of what excites – they all tell me to let go and forget the man I don't know. I get up from the couch to stoke the logs that fuel the flames. I know all too well that I'll be up for a while. I want this conspiracy of wood and air to warm my Spirit for as long as I require.

After I've seen to that chore, which I adore, I resume my comfortable spot. With my furry friend undisturbed, and my cup of tea piping hot. Long, slow inhale through the nose. Breathing in the essence of flowers laced with the remnants of birch, burning for the sake of four Souls. Me. My two miracle workers and their feline sibling. Years ago, he wandered into our backyard in Knoxville and never left. Now he's a Nashville boy and the neighborhood prowler on Johnston Street.

Then I exhale to grace. The breath, passing out through my mouth consciously, slower than when it entered my nostrils by a few seconds. That's all it takes for my parasympathetic nervous system to feel the cue and turn on. Epicranium muscle releases. Space between the bones of my skull widens. Shoulders sink farther down my spine.

Best of all, my heart has found its natural rhythm again. I am aware of how precious air feeds my lungs and a subtle but powerful current makes my heart beat effortlessly, endlessly. That most essential organ, born to be wild, contained behind my ribs so it will stay and continue to do what it's supposed to: keep me alive.

I will go for months undisturbed by him, but that doesn't fool me anymore. Because I can never predict when the night owl will choose next to visit me. When he does, the way he preys upon me is always the same. My bedroom. My tender age. My vantage, from my bed, lying down and roused from slumber.

Coming closer, hovering over me. The same feeling, rising up. Getting stuck in my throat. Stinging the windows of my Soul with tears that cannot push through.

No wonder. I have shut the louvers all the way. Dread. Violation. My desperate wish to disappear.

While I slumber, his presence is as clear as crystal to my subconscious. But when I awake, my conscious mind cannot hold onto that kernel of recognition. Tonight was no different in that regard and I am frustrated, angry even. Because try as I might, I cannot see who he is.

My perpetrator, ever elusive, has been with me for as long as I can recall. Sometimes I bolt awake, having saved myself from the worst of it. Other times I don't wake up until it's all over and he has finished what he came to do. Then I cannot shake my fearful state for half the day.

At least I know now that he has come. Until my mid-twenties, I recalled nothing of his visits. Nothing at all. I relived the trauma, night after night as I slept, and then

remembered nothing. The dream was entirely concealed from my memory. I would arise from bed confused and bewildered as to why I felt so horribly off put.

That feeling seemed alarmingly random and without any context – because I didn't even recall having a nightmare.

For years, a nebulous panic roused me from slumber and I woke up empty and frightened. As I got out of bed to face the day, that feeling morphed into a full-on heavy malaise with no reason why that I could discern. I dreaded the unknown and doubted myself. I couldn't trust the wisdom of my own sentiment to judge what felt right from what felt wrong. My deepest fear in that world of forgetting was one day the inexplicable dark cloud would descend upon me and never lift.

My light, never shine again.

It was only a decade ago that I started to remember any of it. Waking up and bringing small slices of the dream world back to the real world with me. Bit by painstaking bit, my conscious mind came to know what had happened to me – before my eyes fluttered open to receive first light and the slate was wiped clean.

I learned to be patient. Because trying to push past the wall before another brick came loose, and then another, was wasted effort on my part. With every small revelation, I grew more confident that one day I'd wake up to find myself in the middle of a full-scale revolution. Haven't yet. Perhaps I'm not ready for that fight.

The dream world is cruel, but not so much as to withhold an indelible truth from the dreamer forever. Rather, it serves up to a woman only what she can bear.

I require that mercy, as painful as it is to participate in this evolution. All at once may have broken me.

Wider and wider that round door opens, taking my consciousness to a deeper level of knowing. Clearer and clearer the events of that realm become, when I cross over to the other side. So that now I know why, without knowing who.

I am thirty-five years old. As much as I can, I try never to mind the hurtful ambiguity that's always with me. It's just a flesh wound compared to the lethal blow I took in the stomach less than two years ago that left me crumpled in a heap on the floor.

I am without a husband, though I did marry. How that came to be at my age is a whole other story. Not mine, but his, as I discovered long before Peter left me.

After that, I had to pick up the pieces – for my baby girl and my son who needs his mother, more than ever now, to become a man.

And put them all back together into a parent they could count on. To perform that most difficult procedure, I followed the blueprint the Black Gypsies left on my doorstep. Providence came knocking, inviting a broken woman to come on outside and reinvent herself.

The name my parents gave to me means *Black One*. Without that one constant to my identity, I may not recognize myself now. I don't believe the loose association of my forename to the pigment of my skin was intentional on Mama and Papa's part. They weren't the kind of people to look that deep into the meaning of things.

When I was a child who didn't quite fit in, I liked to pretend I was made of stardust that had tumbled down from the Heavens into the melting pot of America. My brothers thought this was funny, grinned like Galileo when he liked what he saw through his telescope, but failed to comprehend the object of his affection.

The color of my surface is not White like our citizens of European descent, nor as Black as an African American. A mixed up constellation, I am. Thanks to my matriarchal lineage. It's those Gypsies who made me so Brown. Like the creamy latte complexion of a Latino American and without a need for the sun to keep me that way. A crafty crew of nomads added a sprinkle of this and a dash of that. Then stirred the pot round and round to concoct the unique color of my Mama.

Her name was Eva.

And her skin was like Cadbury's but with more cacao bean, the Euro way. Fitting, really – for a young Hungarian girl who would make her way across postwar Europe to southeast Ireland and then across the Atlantic to America. Thanks to the secret recipe of her immigrant ancestry, mixed with my father's Caucasian genes, I appear on the surface one hue lighter than my matriarch: as I am in my heart.

Sitting right at the sweet spot.

Where all of the *rasas* meld together.

Perfectly balanced to the palate, like Hershey's: the all-American way. Cacao meets milk and sugar at the exact midpoint between two extremes, which I derive value from in equal measure. In the ancient language of Sanskrit, *rasa* translates literally to mean *juice, essence or fluid*. In the yogic tradition, a *rasa* represents the energy of human emotion directly affecting our physical and spiritual health.

Metaphorically, it's the sentiment invoked by art, critical thought or fearless debate. You know it when it hits you and the goose bumps rise up on the backs of your arms. That glimpse of whomever God is to you, reflected in the effort of one artist or orator who seems somehow touched by the Divine. That euphoric feeling when someone truly gifted puts themselves out there reminds us all of our own potential.

So that on the surface, it may feel like the source of pleasure is coming from the outside. When really, we are moved by what resides inside ourselves, waiting to be born. I am a yogi. Can you tell? Well, yogini is the female form, but that's a distinction without a difference in my books. Only the substance matters when a person takes a seat to try and find her or his center. Mine's still out there, floating somewhere between Earth and sky.

Oh, I have stretched my body a little further alright. Tried to find my midline in a balancing pose without shaking while I'm twisted up like a pretzel. Not easy to do after two natural births ten years apart. Worked with the body I possess that did the labor and has a mummy tummy to show for it. Teetered often in tree pose but grew nonetheless. Learned how to kick up in headstand when my world was turned upside down.

The year after Pete died, not a night went by without me rolling out my mat after I put the baby down. No matter how tired or wrought I was in the aftermath of losing the man Georgie would have called Papa – if she'd had the chance to say her first word before he had to leave us. That's when my true love affair with yogic principles began. When I needed them.

Good ideas step up like that. Barriers between cultures and generations can't contain them. Words are just the vehicles we create to convey those leaping monkeys. The notions behind the utterances, they possess the real meaning. That's why a word need not come from our own language in order to be understood and taken into our hearts. Made a part of our lives, affecting the way we think, even how we make the choices that define us.

Kali is the Hindu Goddess of Time.

Creation. Destruction. Power.

The word *kala* is Sanskrit for *time*.

Similarly, the Sanskrit word for *black* is *kaala*.

Gentle mother. Fierce warrior. That polarity is innately a part of the Goddess Kali, who can be kind to the ones she works upon. Or merciless, devouring everything in her wake. With her unbound hair and sharp fangs, she looks death in the face and laughs. She is the essence of the *animus* quality that hides behind the feminine aspect of Divinity. I have had to call on that aspect of the Goddess since I became a widow.

According to Carl Jung, the *animus* is an archetype of the subconscious mind, whereby a male part of the self is inherent in a woman. He felt that we girls can either accept it, or fight against it, which may suppress it but never banish it from our psyches. As my parents' only daughter, I fit into another category best described as the one for passive resistors.

Pushing the true meaning of my name down, deep inside the vault – much like that Jungian construct of a shadow we can't shake. I learned to walk, talk and act like a virgin. Most of us 80s girls did. What's more, I was touched for the very first time when I got married. Weren't we all? Well, the Goddess Kali doesn't put up with such false ideals that only give rise to shame.

My hair fit the part perfectly, thanks to a little backcombing and a lot of hairspray. Wish I had had the gumption to show my fangs a little more, though. Would have been nice to figure out in my twenties how creation and destruction, together, make power.

Kali destroys the paradigms that no longer serve humankind. One by one, they all fall down when her relentless purpose and noble direction strike. Clearing out the old to make way for the new. To stay kind for my future, I had to be merciless with my past. I put my husband in the ground almost two years ago. His grave lies in the Knoxville National Cemetery as a part of a circle that includes what's left of his parents' remains.

They are all together now, just as Pete wanted, in the northeast section of the graveyard. Where the Souls of Union soldiers guard the bivouac of the dead. Then I packed up my kids and moved them across state. I have discarded much of what we were all used to for a world of what may one day be.

Yes, I have managed to live up to my name, alright. But some vestiges of my former self still pull me back. Like that scar on the skin that refuses to fade. No matter how many years have passed since the cut was made. As it turns out, that man without a face who lurks in the shadows of my psyche moved too.

My ego insists on being seen. Its injury noted and its pain legitimized. Like that spoiled child who knows how to pout for as long as it takes to get what she wants. This one won't relent until she gets to see that most unfriendly face. Recognize it and resolve what remains of this mystery.

Wish I had been that child. The one who possesses such a high expectation of everything and everyone around her. I didn't believe that if I asked for help it would be given.

I should have known that we take ourselves with us, wherever we go. The best parts of who I am. The worst parts of who I have been. It all has to be unpacked, slowly. Cell by cell. Fragment by fragment. There's no other way for any person's evolution to take place.

In – to – me – I – see.

The Fates have held up a mirror to me.

Asking me to keep going. But it's late and I don't know if I have it in me.

Can you see the child who I used to be? I need someone to, someday. She lives inside the reflection of that woman in the snow-covered hills. The one who's much stronger and braver than I am. Who's begging me not to give up until she's had the chance to taste true intimacy.

Her center runs the full length of the ridgeline, as alive as the trees that grow through it. Each one swaying as the wind swirls, staying firmly in place as if there's nothing to it.

Whether I am young or old – tonight, I cannot say.

Far enough along to carry each act in my nightmare from slumber through to waking.

Still too fresh from the womb to have figured out who plays the part of the only actor in the play other than my little girl self.

4 Wildcat

I grew up in the Shasta Valley with my parents and two brothers. I am the oldest of the three of us and I have moved the farthest away.

In body, but not in Spirit.

No matter how far the winds carry me, I will always feel most at home in the mountainside desert of Northern California.

I possess that resonance as to place –
to that part of our country that raised me,
and then set me free.

Montague is in Siskiyou County. One small slice of the Old West, rich with its history of homesteaders who staked out their lands in uncharted terrain. Its nascence, in the shadow of Mount Shasta, was the completion of the Oregon and California Railroad in the late 1800's.

We were taught at school to be proud of the Great American Frontier and the Compromise of 1850 that facilitated California's admission to the Union as one Free State, with north and south combined. Many of the lessons I memorized in the classroom reach back as far as the second half of the nineteenth century.

Our historians added folklore to the facts of geography and emerging politics in the Wild West – inspired by romantic notions of what life was like for the pioneers who made their way across lawless lands. My childhood was imbued with impressive tales about defense of communities, use of land and birth of commerce.

The Gold Rush. The Oregon Trail.

The Central Pacific Railroad.

Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.

These iconic building blocks of our nation's West Coast heritage will always be a part of my own story. It's one of the reasons why turning back time is so easy for a California Cowgirl like me. Too easy, really for me to follow blindly in the footsteps of the *vaquero* – wearing my split skirt for riding astride.

Shooting as straight as Miss Annie Oakley. Playing nothing but sad, wailing tunes on my harmonica. Lamenting the loss of how things used to be. All of the things that no woman can change, no matter how hard she tries.

Mama used to say if you dwell too much on the past, you run the risk of losing yourself in it. When there's a whole future to live.

The Spanish arrived in Mexico in 1519 and showed the natives how to tend the cattle to serve their needs. And that was that. Our nation's very first Cowboys were born.

With one stroke of a pen, the script was written for the greatest, all-time American actors. Conquest and negotiation. Trade and treaties. Persistence. Struggle. Survival.

As a child, I took my infinitesimal place in the epic story of the people and cultures that merged to give birth to America. Now, maybe you can understand why I saw myself as such a trite phenomenon of Nature.

It's in my blood.

I was raised to perceive the events of my life as a mere drop in the vast ocean of tradition that came before Silicon Valley and the apex of Cal-egalitarianism at its finest. All ideas, no matter how batshit crazy end up on the ballot come voting day in my home state.

If you think something small can't make a difference, try sleeping with a mosquito in your bedroom. Those tiny molecules of hydrogen and oxygen, comprising the microscopic contribution made by one girl, turned college student, were the tidal wave that broke the record when they rose up and rolled all the way to Tennessee.

I allowed that fetch to carry me because the ride, as scary as it was, felt smoother to me than staying on the shore with my nuclear family. I think of my relations often and I love them all dearly, but not without discomfort. In retrospect, moving down South was the gift of perspective that Pete gave to me, on bended knee.

Along with his gilded proposal that I leave my fold so that he could return to his.

I accepted because his tribe was less daunting to me than my own. I take a sip of my tea, in honor of that harsh but clean truth. It's still hot enough, a reminder from my friendly cup of daisies of how long a night can stretch and how fast the mind can whirl.

Time invariably stands still – somewhere between that slow lengthening and rapid spinning – after the bird of prey is gone and I am left with the detritus. When it's just me and the cat in the aftermath. Every minute seems packed so full that each tiny increment plods along slowly. How can it seem, then, that the hours fly by to reach that first light of dawn so quickly?

Still, it's too soon for me to go upstairs and try to go back to sleep. My disturbed sensibilities need a while longer to languor in the arms of the Great Mother of us all. The one who always understands what I need. She's still crying the words I cannot say.

The sound of her tears, rapping on the roof, is sad but fine company. While I stay up to listen to the heartbeat of so many Souls, all at once, waiting to be born. It's the least I can do. They too have suffered through a long, dry summer that was hot as heck. Such prenatal patience is a true miracle that deserves my witness.

I cannot see the cuckoo clock from where I sit, not without some considerable effort at least, and that's a blessing. Part of me wants to lean forward and crane my neck to see its face – all made up with Roman numerals to serve its purpose.

But I must resist that urge.

Because then I'd just do the math, calculating how much remains for the thief to rob before the rest of the house wakes up. And let's face it, countdowns have never done much to relieve the pressure of completing such a delicate task as calming one's self. So instead, I stroke the furry abdomen of the one who sleeps tonight with no trouble at all. I like that Moksha responds to the most gentle of my caresses.

A shift in the cadence of his purr.

A little more lean into me.

Perhaps nothing more than the sweet punch of exertion, on the exhale, in a kind of feline sigh. Any or all of these instinctive reactions will work to remind me that I am the pleasure of his cause. That I matter to the well-being of those I take care of: the inevitable, enviable *dharma* of each woman born before or after me. Whether this life's purpose is a burden or a privilege depends on the day and your perspective.

Not to mention stage of life. Remy's old enough to remember me before and after Pete. No doubt in my mind, then, he'll choose the girl who defies any stereotype. A real light who plays the game of life both taking and giving care as she strides through this new

maze of what women must master. Georgie I'm less sure about. The way she wags her little finger up at me already, telling me to spend more time at home. I'm a bit afraid that she'll be enticed by some conservative boy from this next generation of Southern men and in the long run suffer for it.

Dependents with two legs are complicated. You never know who they'll turn out to be. Those with four are more predictable. So I lean right back, feeling the rise and fall of Mokie's pure peace and utter acceptance. I need that surefire validation, on a night like this, when no one came to take care of the little girl inside me.

The one who never found a sameness with the members of the family she was born into. As if she was hatched from some mysterious egg, laid by another species. Or was left by the Gypsies on her parents' doorstep as an orphan child who needed a home.

Of these two, I prefer the more exotic and less tragic explanation. I emerged from my shell, soft and sad that I didn't belong. Tried to fool myself that having the same blood as the rest of my murder meant that we all shared common ground.

But those contrivances only ever led to my disappointment. For I was so very different from the rest.

Although I learned to find the joy in life, that sadness stayed with me. One tiny seed, planted in my earliest days. It grew into full-bloom despair when Peter died. Yet, I have always known that we humans are all the same, really, when you get right down to it. Cut from the same Divine cloth regardless of the pattern on the surface.

Mosaics don't matter.

We all need the same things to live.

To feel safe when we're young. To believe – when it's time to leave the nest and build our own – that we can. As a little girl, this juxtaposition between how I felt, and what I knew to be true was confusing and curious to my spry mind and tender heart.

Needless to say, the musings of an inner-world child did not have a place at our dinner table. Mama sat at one end, Papa at the other. To ingest what was required for physical nourishment, and then rise to clear the dishes. My brothers and I were there to be seen and not heard. It was implicit that challenging the worldviews of those who put the food on the table would not have gone well.

As the eldest, I was the one who was supposed to set the example, not test its very premise. The truth is, neither of my parents would have liked what I had to say, had I been up for it. In the deepest place, I did not have faith in my father's love. I never trusted in the veracity of his commitment to our family. When his frustrations manifested as anger that was too much for me to bear, I ran away from home to seek reprieve.

I always came back. Because I was a child, I had to. Even then, I was wise enough to understand that it was really my father who wanted to run away. As if the shackles of obligation to his wife and children were too much for him, and he was living every day on the verge of flight. Real or not real, I was afraid that Papa would one day abandon us.

He was an ambitious man. His work was his distraction, and no doubt, his credible excuse to spend time away from home. Mostly, I remember his demeanor being cagey and less than forthright. His M.O. was to keep separate the discrete parts of the whole of his life. Whether or not he engaged in *liaisons amoureu*x outside of marriage, to which Mama turned a blind eye, I cannot say.

Children don't go there until they understand what a lure sex can be for those adults who get none. My perception, rightly or wrongly, was that what we had to offer our patriarch wasn't enough. That he was dissatisfied with the life he had and wanted more. Or perhaps something else entirely different. This was a heavy load for the sensibilities of the daughter, born first.

I watched two little boys grow into their own comfortable form of banter with our father, just between men – as the space between him and me grew wider. So I averted from Papa and what love he had to give. Sometimes, when I'm weak, I still wonder if he's the man with sharp claws who preys upon me.

Oh, how I wish I could stop myself from sliding back to that place of the unthinkable, the worst imaginable. I far prefer how I feel when I am certain this can't be true. I worked hard to get to this place. But when I'm exhausted – lost and alone in the dark – I find myself wandering back into the land of doubt. Forgetting how much better it feels to live just about anywhere else.

When I met my late husband at college, our romance made up for what was missing back home. We married, brought our blessed little boy into the world, and then we moved to Knoxville – far away from my roots in NorCal. I took Remy and went back out West to visit my parents regularly.

No longer the vulnerable child, I decided when and for how long we would stay. Stepping back into the fold in that discreet way gave me newfound courage. I was able to meet my father. Finally, I could look straight into his clear blue eyes. Once, they had been the ocean to me. Now they swirled with a frost that was sad but necessary. For him. For me.

Like the ice that sits for centuries, on the cusp of the glacier. That dense, cold slab of Nature's magnificence. Constantly shifting under its own weight. Its edges changing from solid to liquid, and then back again.

Time takes its toll on all things great and small. That massive form, which once seemed so immutable, begins to shrink. Everything melts, eventually.

The water turns to snow –
then turns back to water and transforms – one last time –
into rivulets of endless tears.

Somehow, by some miraculous force of Nature, they were all held at bay – by one stoic old man. For one silver strand of hair shy of an entire lifetime.

Like most men, that dam gave way before Papa went to meet his maker. When he had his stroke, I went back to Montague without Remy, knowing it was the last time I'd ever see him. The doctors were kind; they let our father go home to die.

In his own bed, with his dutiful wife by his side, he was frail and ever so grateful I had come. His tired eyes glittered with all of the sentiment he could never express when he was a younger man with every option in the world at his fingertips.

What I saw, behind the frost, all but dispelled the thought that my father was the other actor in my dream. I could see how tender his heart really was. How much of his own pain he carried that had nothing to do with me.

After I said goodbye to the man who made me, I came back to Tennessee. To the man who would one day break me. Peter could see my pain. When he looked into my eyes, his own filled up with the emotion he felt but could not convert into words to console me.

I recognized that color blue.
It was the same one I had left behind:
frost, but wet with sorrow.

I knew then that I would stay until my husband no longer needed me. It was a noble vow that I made in my heart but did not pledge out loud. The strength of my intention was not meant to be tested in a span of years, as it turned out. In just over three – ready or not – I was released from my wifely duties without ever having to ask.

When I lost Pete, that tiny seed of sadness I was born with grew like the proverbial beanstalk. Still, it threatens to overtake and strangle me. Full blown grief washed over my adult feathers, coating the essence of what used to make me fly.

So much loss, so much pain in one chapter of my life that may define the rest of it. The jury's still out. Try as I might, my little bony feet won't leave the ground anymore. I trust the day will come when I can spread my wings and find joy again.

Raindrops are falling, still.

Pitter-patter on my windowpane.

The train calls out in the distance, making its way through our fine city. The whistle blows, but it will not wake the children. For they have grown accustomed to the rhythms of this city.

Music, music, everywhere. Churches, literally on every block. The buckle on the Bible Belt has been good to us. I'm starting to believe that, here in Nashville, genteel politeness and good old-fashioned hospitality extend to every stranger the benefit of the doubt.

The churning of the locomotive grows faint.

It's just passing through.

Not here for long. None of us are.

I'm much too young to be a crone. As far as I know, I may not ever achieve that status. Yet I can't deny an ancient knowing – far beyond my years – has brushed up against me, to make me wiser than I once was. Before I walked onto the Vanderbilt campus last September, I had already learned the harsh lesson that everything can change in an instant.

That's why, when I finish my Doctor of Jurisprudence degree next year, I will not graduate with the arrogance that some others in my profession might project. I will never profess to know everything and try to claim the expert's seat. I want to hold onto my beginner's mind for as long as I can.

The long days of this past summer came to an end, along with my internship downtown. I hung up my two suits at the back of the closet and thanked my lucky stars they were both slightly different takes on navy. The kind of midnight blue that goes with everything. Both were summer weight, too, so the partners never saw me sweat in the way that threatens to give a novice away.

Slid back into my comfy casuals with no resistance at all, and started my second year at one of the oldest law schools in the South. I love the thought of that already, despite the pomp and circumstance that comes with the privilege of a legal education in our country. Our courts possess a quality of ceremony that has stood the test of time.

Endure. That's not easy to do, believe me. And still stay flexible enough to change when society demands that it be so. No, the law has not proved to be an ass to me so far. As an intern, I got a good taste of the dirt in the trenches with some of the Nashville Bar's finest warriors.

I took that back into the study hall to hone my skills this year. No doubt what happens to me in and outside the classroom will continue to keep me humble.

I'll never be at risk of taking myself so seriously as to consider myself superior to any other American less fortunate than me.

Change one thing, change everything.

My attitude of gratitude for how the Fates have carried me since Pete's death preceded the start of my legal education last year. I trust that when I'm an attorney, I will be able to bring out the best in all those who participate in the justice system.

Thanks to my professors and mentors, my brain has been sufficiently rewired. My legal mind, born. I think differently from how I used to, and I still have almost two years left to go before I finish my degree. I suspect those new synapses will fire over and over again. Until they become permanent and part of my anatomy.

Who knew that education could do that to a girl?

To any eager, impressionable mind.

I am becoming a critical thinker. I trust that my tired, broken heart can mend and still pave the way. Those two reservoirs of knowledge play together. Heart and mind. Mind and heart. They can work together; of this much, I'm certain. Because in this whole wide world, there is no heart like mine. And in my head, there's no thought that can save me from the night owl. I suspect the sweet spot – if I can find it and hold there, balanced on the head of a pin – will serve me well, serve my children well.

Remy and Georgie are far more important to me than the promise of a career in the law. They are my spiritual mentors, and Spirit is everything. Each of my two gifts from God will never cease to amaze and to amuse me. You should know from the outset that I consider the latter just as vital as the former. Because the tickling of the funny bone is an essential ingredient to my getting through the tough days. The ones when I don't want to get out of bed to face the day.

There is no father now, for either of them. Only me – doing the best I can, every morning when the sun calls out my name. Then rises to chivvy me along. I wonder whether I am vast enough. If I can keep going to finish what I started.

Not without a good night's sleep, that's for sure. And it's too late for that tonight. On this particular day of the lunar calendar, sadly, obviously, the opportunity's past and cannot be recovered. I have to believe that tomorrow will be better.

I am one of those lucky latchkey kids of Generation X, who grew up somewhere in the history of time after hard copy and before cyberspace. We watched the Berlin Wall come down and the Soviet Union disintegrate. Bobbing and weaving our way around any real tragedy of our own. But as always, there is another perspective: even for us, for whom the seas parted.

Because everything is relative.

And to my mind and heart, I have walked a thousand miles.

Growing up, I relied heavily on Mama. All three of us kids did. Now that I am a mother, I appreciate everything that Eva did for me and my brothers. For starters, she brought us into the world. When I was a young girl, my rose-colored glasses helped to take the edge off what was missing in our matriarch.

That gentle hue was less sharp for my sensibilities, so I could idolize Mama for what she gave me. Rather than damn her for all she did not. I accept that bare-naked truth, as much as it hurts me.

Even now. Sitting on the couch. Feeling the purr of the third creature of Nature who depends on me – as much as his feline nature will permit. Through the window pane, I can see the chimney smoke rising through a clear night sky. When did the skies part so silently, so completely?

The stars have come out to play.

The ones whose dust came together to make me.

The waning crescent moon has revealed herself. She sees me, through the glass, and everything I have endured. One thin slice of hope that the clouds will lift from my celestial mind's eye to show me who it is that's been hiding behind them.

Too bad, so sad.

The Heavens will not shed another tear for me tonight.

Clear moon, frost soon.

No more blanket to cover the Earth's atmosphere.

Not to worry. The logs I stoked in the hearth are still burning strong. Their dance is slower. Gone is the blue flame at their center. The fire will go for hours yet, to keep out the frigid air which a cloudless sky brings. There's still plenty of warmth inside these old walls for me to stay up to finish my tea. Though I am waning, too, and there'll be a hefty price to pay when the sun comes up.

Mama was our rock. She was the caretaker of the home and overseer of all, even though she, too, worked full days outside the home. She juggled everything; that's where I learned how. Never cracking under the weight of Papa's explosions, which took their toll on my brothers and me. He had his reasons, no doubt. But we would have been lost without the security our mother represented.

The family belief system was that Mama put up with a lot to keep the peace for our benefit and protection. The boys were sometimes hard on her; they pushed her away as they grew up into men. Who she was, did not overtake them. Me, on the other hand, I

am forever indebted to our mother and would do anything to please her. I looked to Mama for emotional attunement, to find my safe place.

In these ways,
Eva was vital to my existence.

And so I built a construct of reliability on the shaky ground of her suppressed emotion. While she was resigned to the hand she'd been dealt and showed no signs of anger on the surface, I have to believe now, as a woman myself, that Papa's behavior hurt her deeply. Despite that pain, she expressed no negative emotion that I ever saw. Instead, she pushed it down.

It had to go somewhere: deep inside the rock. As an adult, I recognize the resentment Eva carried – just beneath the surface – for what it was and naturally should have been. I have come to understand that Mama had feelings and preferences, albeit unexposed to her family. That she was not a fiction of a woman devoid of wants and needs. And with these harsh admissions, I make to no one but the cat, please believe me when I say they were truly a revelation to me.

Because they are not commensurate with what I observed of my mother's behavior when I was a child. Endless chores met with tireless effort. One flat facial expression, chivvying all things domestic along. Head nodding up and down in agreement. Emotions shut down, turned off: for what working mother of three had the time for such folly? Not mine.

She possessed the relentless optimism reserved for people who have suffered truly arduous times. For Mama, apparent apathy was a flip of a switch. War can do that to a girl. She told her baby birds that the bad things she went through were not so bad. With a little repackaging, even pain can be dressed up as pleasantries or challenge that builds character. Atrocities were rationalized, and trauma, belittled or dismissed as trivial.

No, in times of peace in our world, Eva didn't let the little things drag her down. After all, there was food in the cupboards and no imminent threat from the enemy. Life was safe and secure, compared to how it had been when Eva was small, displaced and frightened.

My parents provided us with the necessities of life, it's true. And there was peace in our day for my brothers and me. But little people are also dependent on their adults for the things they cannot see, or touch, or taste – for what they cannot help but feel. These aspects of the human experience are also vital to a child's prospects of growing up

happy, healthy, and whole. I absorbed the undercurrents that moved beneath the superficial dynamics of our family.

Just as every child does with the things that are not named,
but that are there nonetheless.

Formative minds pick up the vibrations present but not evident. Like the offspring of primates in the jungle, the young of our species work hard to stay close to those they need to survive. That drive is the basic human instinct, from which we all begin.

And so I made my feeble attempts to respond to the tensions my mother carried inside herself. In that bleak process of trying and failing to connect, I took on her emotional blueprint. Absorbed much of what Eva did not or could not express.

I don't believe it was her fault. It wasn't anyone's fault.

It is an undertow between mother and child that still pulls me under.

With age, I have come to accept that Mama did her best with the skill set she had. Her abilities to nurture me were defined by her experience as a wee refugee of the Second World War. When it was over, she continued to save herself because that's all she knew how to do.

And so she could not save me.

I have tried to forgive Mama for what she never possessed or what she lost as a war-torn child. I know that is the only path forward for a woman: to make peace with the mother. It is a crucial reckoning for those of us who want to do right by our own children.

I am that woman.

Eva passed away last year:

the last of my three losses of those to whom I gave my heart.

They say that in marriages that last forty, fifty years, the spouse left behind soon gives up living too. Mama fit that profile. She was a widow for less than two years after Papa died. Unlike her eldest child, there was no part of her that wanted to grieve her husband and then forge a new existence.

I appreciate that she waited even that long, for I know what an arduous life she had. After Papa was gone, Mama could finally seek her solace. The official cause of her death was acute myocardial infarction: heart attack. I believe her poor heart failed because it was broken and she did not care to mend it. That was her prerogative, I say – after so much sacrifice made for others.

I know that her ultimate heartbreak was the loss of communion with a man who, in truth, did not want to stay with her. With us. Upon my own grave reflection, perhaps not with anyone. I know now not to take these things personally, Papa. Not anymore. And as it turns out, this cat's more reliable than you ever were.

He comes home when I call. He wants to be close to me, and asks for nothing in return. And when I caress him, he purrs to announce his unabashed pleasure. What else could a widow in her mid-thirties really want? What more could she ever be brave enough to ask the Fates for?

We are our own crossworkers,
adding the sparkle to rough gems, unearthed by circumstance.

If we do our work,
then the diamond can reveal its own brilliance.

That's what every girl desires:
a diamond of her very own to show off to the world.

There's a clarity that comes to me, on nights like this. Under the soft light of that wry lunar smile that's promised to stay up for as long as I will. With my mind quieted, and no interruptions, I can work fastidiously to position the facets of that polished stone at just the right angle. To catch the rays, when they come – with just the right refraction.

Then I'm able to perceive the full spectrum of light.

To give myself the gift of all its splendid colors. See? There's always a silver lining, Moksha, my boy. My pain is my fledglings' gain. The commitment I've made to provide my offspring with every sustenance they will need to grow, to flourish, comes from the place of my own suffering.

Physical growth, yes. But also emotional growth so they won't suffer the same deprivations as I did. I watch them with eyes that are prepared to see who they really

are. They will never know anything else from me. I have that luxury and can make that promise, never uttered, always kept: thanks to my parents and what they gave to me.

This part of my heritage, I know to be true. I grew from their soil – and when my flower bloomed, there was enough light to inspire me to keep going. To reach up for it and learn how to make that distinction between what's essential and what's extra. Then assign priorities to the must-haves as opposed to the wish list.

The highest level, to the heart.

Mark my words, Mokie. With your ever-steady gaze that penetrates the night. Remy and Georgie will not be afflicted with the same hardship as I. Because I will not pass it on to them. Do me that courtesy, would you? Do it for the hand that feeds. Like you, darling boy, they are lovable. It requires almost no effort at all to give them love.

Oh yes, you can be difficult. So can they, at times. But such is the innate disposition of your bloodline – and mine when I was a cat. I can see now that you are amenable. The slits of your green eyes narrowed when I asked you to step up for your two-legged sibs. Perfect. Just the answer I was looking for in spite of your sinuous ways. They are, to a lissome girl like me, the very best of all ways.

Supple, agile, limber.

Inebriated and flopped over.

Poised to walk the narrow line when you must with your tail as counterweight.

Ready to pounce from your steady center, the one that resides behind those two emeralds of yours. Vertical pupils can cut through the night, without fail – to find the light that brings you home. Someday, I might agree that the circular fovea of my human eyes can't do what yours can. But not without resistance on my part, which, in truth, is based on admiration. That's why when I call out, through the darkness and you come, it's a great comfort to me.

If you promise to accede to my request, Moksha, then I will give you something in return. I shall be ready for whatever's brought upon your brother and your sister. For they too will have their burdens. We all do. God willing, theirs will be different from the fissure that opened up beneath my feet. The talons that still prey upon me. That single, inevitable truth – in isolation from the rest – brings everything that matters into focus:

My children will not suffer as I suffered.

That is not their destiny.

God bless you, Mama. You put one foot in front of the other. You never faltered or asked for reprieve. We were your baby birds with open mouths, waiting to be fed.

I ate what you gave me. I drank from your breast. Then I spread my wings and flew away.

Built my own nest – far, far away – in what, for me, is a less crooked tree. I disassembled the old family patterns. All that was left, when I was done, was the one true mantra of my matriarch:

Every woman for herself.

It was deeply engrained in your psyche. To protect and preserve one's own self, above all else. Passed down to you – from your mother, my maternal grandmother.

I called her Bubba. Her name was Anya.

5 Truce

Anya left Hungary when Stalin came in 1945 to escape the *malenki robot*. Eichmann was gone, but the karma from the mass deportation of Jews to the death camps came to roost. In the aftermath of the war, tens of thousands of Hungarian civilians were deported to forced labor camps in the Soviet Union.

Eva was the oldest of Anya's three children.

Like I am.

We are the same in that way, Mama and me.

For her, Uncle Endre was the next in line. Then came the youngest, my Aunt Birgitta. When they fled from the Russians, my mother was only seven years old. Her family bore a Hungarian surname: Gábor. A quite common one, as it turns out, within the Transylvanian Romani community. The Roma are widespread: a race without a homeland, still. While they do not share one national identity, together they make up the largest ethnic group in all of Europe.

On account
of their dark complexion,
my mother's people have been called the Black Gypsies.

Gábor translates in English as *Gabriel*. Like most immigrants displaced by war, we never gave up our heritage. My grandparents continued to identify most with the Heart of Europe, the Pearl of Danube. Hungary. The country they would never have left if they had a choice. The Romani heritage and traditions share a spiritual resonance with the Orthodox Jewish faith. Both practice a Sabbath-keeping Christianity. And, like the Jews, the Roma have been persecuted throughout history for their remarkable qualities.

At times, even, they were forced into slavery.

Their home was wherever the heart of the Gypsy found herself in the grander scheme of world happenstance. That unconventional lifestyle earned them a somewhat checkered reputation in the eyes of those whom history chose to treat more kindly.

Artistic. Romantic.

Carefree. Wanderers, as it were.

Traveling from town to town in their caravans.

With their children and all of their worldly possessions onboard.

Self-contained. Taking their self-sufficiency with them, everywhere they roamed.

Misunderstood. Dirty, unwelcome guests.

Even thieving.

Undesired by hosts unable to entertain anyone they couldn't recognize as sufficiently similar to themselves. Throughout the ages, the Roma have been labeled as uncivilized, irresponsible. Or, better yet, intangible. Because that's what makes my quick and nimble relatives so difficult to corral or to control.

As with every race within our species,
our instinct insists on the right to exist.

The Gábor family considered themselves Hungarian first, Romani second. In Hungary, the matriarch hailed as the core of cultural identity. The mother was the heart; the church was erected in the center of the village. As I recall my Bubba, there was a proud, almost defiant, quality to her aura. I remember that part of her radiance with great affinity.

She was fond of reminding us that our ancestors once occupied the highest economic class in Romani society. Told us never to forget that we came from a superior bloodline, thanks to my maternal grandfather, Tata Gábor. How, back home in Hungary, she and Tata deserved their lush farmland in the Rába Valley – as of right – over the lowly castes. In Anya's view, that noble aspect of our heritage was justified based on its Transylvanian origins. It took precedence over any ethnic nationality.

In that way, my Bubba was a rare combination of opposites that can result in the oddity of an arrogant immigrant. A stranger in a strange land. Thick with accent. Wedded to her unfamiliar rituals of moorland mud soaks, sage and paprika, stuffed cabbage and sweet millet. But without the baggage of feeling like she didn't fit in or had to pander to the locals.

To my grandmother, the soil on the banks of the River Nore, where Kilkenny sits, could never yield the bounty of the rich dirt in the Rába Valley.

Nothing Irish ever stuck to her.

Anya married up when she wed my grandfather. As I understand it, Romani societal order had dictated that Anya's own family was to farm the less fertile land.

But love, I guess, saved her – so that she could toil the land, plough the fields and save herself. I remember an old but strong woman who could punch above her weight in just about any category.

Bubba was the firstborn prayer in what I gather was a litany of siblings. Many hands made for lighter work on her family's farm, built on rock and sheer effort. Mama once told me, in all, nine children survived being born; eight who came after my Bubba. When it came to running the homestead, the older ones pitched in to help raise the younger ones.

My grandmother was second in command, as the eldest. She answered only to my great-grandmother. Out of historical fact and family folklore, I made my own concoction. Painted myself a colorful picture of a happy-go-lucky band of feisty but loyal thieves. In my story, Bubba's family had a wagon that rolled along as part of one traveling community. When they had to, they all moved on together.

One after the other.

Each chariot, inextricably linked to the next in line.

No vessel in the convoy was ever left behind.

To that mix, when I got a bit older, I added due and sobering consideration of the tall tales the Romani are reputed to have spread about themselves. Woven, they say, for the benefit of gullible Europeans as a way of gaining favor with the citizens of towns they happened upon. They would set up camp on the outskirts of a settlement, then set about carving out a niche in the tight-knit world of local commerce. To embellish, slightly, or more, was a crafty shortcut to get to credibility.

The exact potency of untruths was contrived by the most imaginative minds of a resourceful tribe pretending to conform to the norms of the society they found themselves in. Reinventing themselves, over and over. Each time they moved, they perceived the need to prove themselves all over again. To call upon the kindness of strangers, gain advantage and find opportunity. A phony title of ever illusive royalty or

an ill-gotten letter of support from someone supposedly prominent only served to enhance that likelihood.

Deception was all mixed up with
good intention by virtue of necessity.

And so my heritage was shrouded
in myth and mystery.

My uncle and aunt were too young to remember the war and what humans were capable of. Eva was not – for better or for worse. On rare occasion, she would speak about the betrayals she witnessed when she was a young girl. The transgressions that pitted friends, even family, against each other and that sacrificed the innocent.

That desperate need to constantly anticipate and strategize to stay one step ahead of the next unnatural radical change of circumstance. Motivated, when the chips were down, by a primal fear overtaking morality and noble conscience.

Declaring new and unexpected allegiances. Aligning with those who held the power. These mechanisms of defense were wrung from society's best citizens. The ones who were to soon find themselves displaced and homeless – after making such sacrifice and dedicating their lives to serving their country. Mama had faint memories of what life and people were like before the war. And clearer ones of the harsh lines drawn during and after.

First, between neighbors. Later, to define entire nations.

She remembered the farm her family kept before they fled Hungary to escape Stalin. The pigs. The goats. The chickens. Fresh fruits and vegetables. As much as any child could consume. Everything she, Endre, and Birgitta could have ever wanted, Mama used to say. All of that was lost, overnight. Taken from them by the unannounced vagaries of war.

Austria. Switzerland. Then France.

The Gábor family moved from one refugee camp to the next. Forced to wander as their ancestors did, in keeping with a legacy written long before World War II.

Anya got separated from Tata somewhere along that broken road from Hungary to Ireland. For long stretches, the children were without the protection of their father and had only their mother to rely on.

At times, Anya had to leave the children to their own devices. Go ahead to procure food to supplement the meager rations doled out to refugees. Or to secure the next place of shelter. I like to imagine that my grandmother entrusted her children to the care of other like-minded women. But I know that much of the responsibility to look after little Birgitta and brother Endre fell to young Eva – while my Bubba did what was required to sustain them all.

Anya was a survivor.

So, then, was her eldest daughter, Eva.

It's a miracle that no fatal illness or tragedy took even one Gábor life. Both Mama and Bubba used to refer to themselves as sturdy stock, as if that alone could explain it. Resilient. Innately capable of fending for themselves.

No doubt that's true – and that my mother's clan of Hungarian refugees was blessed with a healthy dose of good luck – and a spattering of well-timed mercy – such that the Fates carried them all through, unscathed.

Or at least not extinguished.

The family was reunited and came to settle, eventually, in Ireland. Tata was a resourceful bloke with a strong work ethic and higher-than-average street smarts. He found a small plot of land to rent. It was on the farm, close to Kilkenny, that the Gábor family finally put down roots.

And so the Black Gypsies began their new life on the banks of the River Nore among the Black Irish. Re-created, with the flip of an arduous switch. Forever immigrants in a country tolerant enough at the time to receive them. These are the stories of my Eastern European heritage, passed down to me through my matriarchal lineage.

I see the moon and the moon sees me.

The thin slice of sickle reminds me that oral tradition is a part, but not the whole of the woman I've become. The rest, I will give birth to slowly and consciously, in the light of the faithful satellite who knows all my secrets.

God bless the moon and God bless me.

Bubba lived in a nursing home for many years after my grandfather died. When she passed, she was well into her nineties. I guess, in that way, Anya stayed strong and sturdy till the end. Mama used to say that she and her mother were bound together forever, across the Atlantic Ocean. Anya once wrote me a letter that told me the feeling was mutual. She said that when her eldest child immigrated to this great country of ours, all red, white, and blue, she lost a piece of herself that could never be replaced.

Red for hardiness and valor.

White for purity and innocence.

And, best for last, blue:
vigilance and perseverance.

Justice.

Old glory. New calling.

God willing, our colors will never change.

Bubba was a practical woman who didn't make a habit of disclosing vulnerability. To me, she was superwoman. She endured and yet adapted, overcoming impossibility. Using everything in her power to carry her children across continents and oceans to land my mother, my uncle and my aunt safely in a new nest they could rely on.

Her emotive words, recorded in that letter, made such a lasting impression on me. So, I kept what Anya had written, and I gave it to my mother, Eva, when her mother passed away. I strongly suspected they were words written to the granddaughter, but never spoken to the daughter.

Bubba, may she rest in peace – she wasn't one to dole out compliments to her offspring, lest they shatter before arriving at their destination. Besides, the basic necessities of life trumped all. There was simply no room for the luxury of taking care of the emotional psyche of her baby birds.

Having not received the other more subtle kind of nurturing as a child, Eva could not so nurture me. I expect that, to Mama's frame of reference, my brothers and I were simply and unequivocally blessed – as modern-day Americans. Growing up with every First World amenity the Golden State had to offer a child untouched by war.

So I stopped looking for what was not available. I learned to rely on what my mother did have to offer me. I focused on all the positive in her efforts, and I answered the calling to take care of myself in the other ways. As the eldest, I was the first to do most things. The birth order dictated that I was the most cherished, the most invested in.

It seems fair, then, that amongst my siblings, I had the lion's share of responsibility. That, in Mama's eyes, I had the greatest potential for success. As no doubt, she did, in the eyes of her parents when they adopted southeast Ireland and embarked on the semblance of the Gábor family's assimilation.

Moksha shifts away from my legs such that I feel the absence of his vibration, no longer humming in my bones. In the newfound stillness, I hear the tick-tock of the pendulum swinging back and forth to keep time for the cuckoo bird. It strikes the hour, telling me to go back to bed, lest I have no more sleep at all tonight.

At long last, I give in to the temptation, and crane forward to find out if that ancient chirp has brought to me a tale of visionary hours tonight. Yes, time has passed, alright. And largely without my perception up until now. Such is the effect of my mind on reality when it wanders like the Black Gypsy I partly am.

The flames of the fire have exhausted themselves. I can feel the departure of all things warm and wonderful. There is nothing left but embers in the hearth. My head is finally growing heavy with the desire to meet down feathers again. I shall finish this very last sip, which I've been saving. Savoring the thought of how pungent the deepest, richest of yellow will taste on my tongue before the leaves at the bottom of my mug are all that remains, cueing me to head back up to bed.

It's at best lukewarm, but still, it soothes me.

I'm always hard on myself in the aftermath of my nightmare.

If only my eyes could hold on to everything the very instant they open. And my unconscious mind, as it's roused, grant my conscious mind's imminently reasonable request and remember.

That's why my perpetrator won't leave me alone. I know that he is trying in his own perverse way to take me to a higher place of knowing. And that if I ever get there, he will leave – once and for all.

Knowing what, you may ask.

Why the beating hearts of unborn Souls console the night sky when it cries. What the train wants to tell a restless mind as it whistles down the track. How feline energy can move a woman to a safer place without any effort at all. And, yes – where my aversion to some part of the woman who birthed me comes from.

I cannot deny that my mother's smell, the way she kept house and cared for her body, used to make me cringe inside. And yet, I have the fondest memories of burying my face in her tummy to breathe her in through the silk of her nightgown. Try as I might, I cannot understand where this incongruity comes from.

Mama is gone now and I miss her deeply. What she did give me – what she was able to provide – no other person on the face of the Earth could have replicated. After Papa died, I knew her work was done and it wouldn't be long before she too left this world. She wanted to stay with the Soul of the man who had not truly wanted to stay with her.

How pathetic. How romantic.

How impossible to understand unless yours is one of the two hearts engaged in the conversation. Why the ones born insist on being so judgmental about the ones who birthed them, I'll never know. Love is the absence of judgment. There is no other kind. My children feel that from me, so God willing, I will feel it from them when they are grown and gone.

They won't ever reflect on why Pete and I stayed together or why we came apart. There is only one apparent reason for what was taken from them. There may be less tragic ones for how the void gets filled. I didn't encounter parental death at a young age. I can rationalize about my parents until the cows come home.

Suffice to say that some strange force of magnetic attraction held them together all those years. And that's good enough for me: a daughter who still believes in happy endings, even after death confiscated mine.

They say that some Souls come together in more than one lifetime. Perhaps they are not done learning everything they need to from each other. Roles may reverse so that the caregiver becomes the one who needs caring.

The persecutor, the punished.

The sister, the brother.

The parent, the child.

Perhaps my papa will take better care of my mama's heart next time. Eva may have explained it all to me were she still here. If she cared to. If she knew how.

I may never understand why I felt the need to protect myself. Why I held back from drinking in the full potency of a mother's love. Without that explanation, I fear it may prove impossible to forgive myself for how I wore that tension – between wanting Eva close, and pushing her away – while she was still here.

Perhaps waiting, ever so patiently, to receive my love.

If Eva ever did turn her face toward the sun to feel it – that rare golden light, from her most cherished child – it would only have shone half-light. Any measure of warmth she received would have paled in comparison to what it could have been.

And time waits for no one, I'm afraid.

Once the light of the day has faded to dusk, the best any woman can do is look forward to the darkest violet of a clear night sky.

If she's lucky enough to get one, that is.

And the wind blows through to banish the clouds and summon the stars to dot the meadow of the night.

6 Sepia

I rise from the couch.

Resigned and ready to be done with this morbid train of thought.

First my father. Then my husband. And, finally, my mother.

Three Souls departed in rapid succession.

The two men who had my heart, both longed for a life other than the one they created for those they professed to love. And Mama? Well, when I was a child, it seemed to me that she longed for nothing at all.

Now I know how wrong I was. Every woman has desires. For some, her wants become needs, and she must leave to pursue them. For others, heart's desire is taught very well how to go to sleep and never wake up.

The rarest of gems is waiting to be discovered by that particularly skilled miner. The one who can see what shines within the rough stone. Perceiving the potential, that's the key. If she has that skill, then she's one step closer to accepting her mission.

To find and then satisfy true heart's desire.

That's where Nature's finest brilliance lies.

I wonder what that would feel like – to be cherished in someone else's heart. To be encouraged to mine for what matters to me and for no other reason. I fear that I may never know.

I have burned the heart that was my childhood twice over now. All that's left of the forms that housed the Souls of my parents is ash. They were cremated, as my mother requested. My father didn't seem to have a preference or else, like most men, he couldn't bring himself to consider what happens in the end.

I committed that deed in part so that I would have a good shot at using my adult head to rule the rest of my life. Having surrendered to the flame, I thought surely the potency of what happened to me as a little girl would be gone for good. But the mark of who I come from and what I went through has proved to be indelible.

Despite that clearing with the fire,
my parents and their parents are still a part of me.

Half of him. Half of her.
Genetically speaking, of course.

It took that much more courage, still, to put my wifely heart in the cold, hard ground between these two cremations. I don't like to think of Peter's form decomposing the way it must be down there. With the worms crawling in and out of what's left of my late husband's bones.

But he asked me to return him to the Earth, and so I respected that. I watched his coffin slide into place as Nature unleashed her fury. That white wooden casket didn't waste any time, let me tell you. It sank straight down – into the wet soil Pete grew up in.

Oh, how I wish now that I didn't know the truth about the man I chose to marry. It was the torrent of his desires unmanifested that took over that sky. I remember the exact rhythm of what came pounding down, like it was yesterday. Completely filling the space between my ears until I couldn't hear anything.

Not the pastor's words, searching for solid ground.

Trust in the Lord, with all thine heart.

Not even Georgie who felt the swell, too, and was crying inconsolably in my arms. But only Nature's most dramatic symphony: bidding *adieu* to the single-most love I've ever known.

I shake my head to try to rid myself of the worst of it: Remy. My poor, sweet, broken boy, standing alone under sheets of rain. Forced to press on in a fatherless world.

How awful it all must have been for my firstborn child. Witnessing the bones and everything beautiful about the man who made him sink below his feet. Curls plastered to his angelic face.

Head up, chest out, away from the mud caked to the soles of those little black wingtips I helped him tie so the bows would be perfect. My son's heart, that much closer to the eye of the storm. As if that gesture of defiance, or perhaps reprieve from all the madness, could launch my little music man in the other direction.

Remy was the one who didn't cry, or so he says. I think he likes to remember it happened that way. His prerogative, I say. Who can tell the difference between tears and rain on such handsome rosy cheeks? Not me and I'm the one who brought him into the world.

Perhaps no one looks into the eyes of a child
and knows their pain.

My son hasn't played music since his papa died. And I haven't told him that he should. I pray that one day he will find his harmony of perfect sound again.

Moksha's still lying there, splayed out on the couch – though I have risen and thus disturbed him. He's in too deep to fully voice his displeasure so he protests with one preemptive half meow to try to stop me from heading back upstairs.

Here I stand in nothing but my nightgown. It's silk and still slightly damp from my nightmare, and so less of a veil in the fading glow. This shall be the last hurrah of dying embers. The woolen throw no longer covers me. It sits in a pile on the couch, and I am shivering from the chill. Without the burning heart of the home, these tired old walls cannot keep the cold at bay.

The kids and I made our family altar on the mantel of the fireplace together. I am raising them to believe in worship and the power of sacred intention. Tiny hands got busy arranging our relics of the past and tokens for our future. Originally, Remy created it and Georgie napped in her bassinette all the way through it.

Now, little Miss Mischief climbs up to rearrange things as and when she likes. Drives her brother to distraction.

Of course, as the baby, she wins that battle. According to the house rules, Remy must lead by example. That doesn't stop my son from trying his best to quietly put things back where they belong when his sister's not looking. But, alas, his act to conform is futile – and for big brother's intrusion, there's invariably hell to pay as dispensed by a toddler. Directly below this long and narrow stage where siblings to and fro is where I get down on my knees. Every morning when I awake, and each night before I retire. To ignite the flame that fuels their Souls and, when it gets chilly, warm up the space between them.

A simple collection of framed photos.

Two modest urns, sitting side by side.

That's how Mama wanted it: their remains divided into thirds by me, the eldest, to be shared with my brothers. Entrusted to each of us equally, not that Evan and Jonah really care about such things. There was a practical elegance to Mama's final wish that came as close to sacred ritual as I ever witnessed in her. I care deeply about the dust of them both. Housed in containers made out of hand blown glass, once molten, now fragile.

One, the palest purple.
As when the sun rises over lavender fields,
reflecting what's underneath:
my mother.

The other, lime green.
Fresh and elusive, showing itself only briefly –
then, gone until next spring:
my father.

Next to these vessels is a lovely photograph of Eva when she was a girl. She looks so much like me, but with what I have always perceived to be sadder eyes. She used to say the photo was one of her favorites of herself because it showed her free of war and happy to be living in peace.

Next to hers is an old tattered photograph of Bubba. The edges are curling and turning yellow, but, in my heart, it cannot be replaced. This memory of one moment in a woman's life has that reddish-brown hue to it due the manner in which it was captured. Reminiscent of the rich pigment that hides in the ink sac of a cuttlefish.

Anya's face would be dark anyways – and beautiful – like Mama's was. Like mine is. And like my daughter's will be when she grows up. For we are all Black Gypsies who wandered off the beaten track. We got lost for a while in Europe, but then we found the United States of America just in the nick of time.

And we found ourselves. Americans. No one loves this country more than us. Eva used to call it the greatest place on Earth and tell me and my brothers that here, nothing threatens to snuff us out or slaughter our ambition.

Now, my kids can be anyone they want to be.

It took time for me to be proud of my heritage, the way Mama was.

But watch out world: 'cause now I am.

In the salvaged photo that stands next to Eva's, my grandmother is looking over her shoulder while she works in the garden. I like the way she's doing that, as if to pay homage to the past. Anya kept a massive garden on the farm in the Rába Valley and she tried her best to replicate it on the banks of the River Nore.

Mama used to say that my Bubba could make anything grow.

The Anya I now gaze upon is held together by a simple wooden frame. Its four sides are no longer strong and sturdy like they must have been when they were first put together. But the woman held inside them remains the star of our family's history.

She wears a calico kerchief around her head. Cream, with orange block print. To tie back her raven hair. With the sepia tone and dripping texture of the paper, the color in the calico print is more like blood than orange. Blood that runs the same through her veins and mine.

Orange.

The color of feelings and creativity.

Spinning in my pelvis. Making my loins ache like a deep and everlasting sunset.

Once the orb of memory sinks below the horizon of my conscious mind, only the cold darkness of questions without answers remains. A feeling of dread sweeps over me. The wave comes not through the walls but from the inside: a familiar but unwelcome sensation that cuts me to the bone.

I must look away from those faces and go up to bed. It's long past the time that I should have. Could it be that my mother turned a blind eye to the deeds a man did to me? I asked her the question once, a long time ago, and she denied that it was true. She wasn't aware, she said, of any man ever abusing me sexually when I was a child.

I didn't believe her. I did not disbelieve her. Truth is, I'm still suspended between the two. And there I shall remain for she cannot help me anymore. Not that she would. Not that she ever could. There's no end to dwelling on the nature of this discomfort that I bring upon myself. I cannot blame the photos that sit at the center of our worship.

In the deepest place, I don't feel safe from harm. And there is no one who I recognize to fault for it. There is a barrier to the free flow of my sex that's decidedly unnatural. Certainly, for our half of the species: born to attract, to consummate, then to propagate.

What's stuck inside me, what I can't get past, goes against the grain of why men and women are both here: so that polar opposites can be drawn together to conceive a living, breathing icon of perfection who humankind still searches for.

Georgie may be the one to change the world. Or Remy, the right person to lead it to higher ground. Generation after generation. This is what we are taught: go forth and propagate. This is what we have done, what we are supposed to do.

Surely it's more than just a handful of us who are no good at doing what we're told. Based on the edicts of straight men in white coats and machines with no feelings.

There's a bit of rebel in all of us. That wild card, the essence of which cannot be told what to do, grown in a Petri dish or plotted on a bar graph. The intangible, the mysterious, the unimaginable. That product of grace, capable of achieving the impossible. It's what makes some of our kind superhuman and distinguishes us from the rest of the animals who inhabit this planet.

The same. Conventional. Average. Ordinary.

Different. Strange. Exotic. Extraordinary.

Which one would you rather be?

My own Great Divide is not like most for it's made of brick and mortar. Alive, oscillating, changing its thickness. Like a membrane made of tissue that's part of our female anatomy.

Thick like cement or thin and effaced, it's always there. Blocking my way through. Stopping my unbridled desire from getting past the point of no return. To break down that wall, I need a name.

An identity for the night owl who haunts me.

I have no specific memory of an event of sexual abuse when I was a child. My lack of precise recollection has at times afforded me an excuse to look away. An opportunity to make up a story about a little girl, who no one ever dared to touch in the wrong way. For there have been long stretches of time when my nightmare seems put to bed.

But then my perpetrator resurfaces and I know that my subconscious mind does not lie. The violation I am forced to relive in my dream world is harsh but true. I was ruined by

someone else's sickness. He stole my virginity before it even had the chance to become a part of me.

Mirror in the sky, what is love?

Can the child within my heart rise above? Below me, tonight, there's no scuffed hardwood that makes a floor anymore. Only blackness. With that reckoning, I avoid getting sucked in too deep and begin my ascent up the staircase.

Half way up, I stop on the landing and glance out the small portal of a window.

The crescent moon is sitting squarely in the center of the circle of glass. It's always been my favorite moon because it comprises mostly the absence of what will manifest, and not the presence of what already has. Promising all those who gaze upon her a kinder, gentler world when the sun comes up.

The Sandman is telling me to go back to sleep, where I can write my own ending to this convoluted tale of musing. For it has stretched long like the night, and whirled as fast as my mind can travel through time. Now I'm hanging between the tick and the tock of my mama's clock.

Keep going, skinny legs and all, to the top stair and then down the hallway. Closer to my sleeping children, who have always brought out the best in me. Now, I wish to dream the way they do.

So I lay my weary head on the pillow. Monkey mind sinks down, conforming to what the goose has so graciously donated for the sake of my comfort. Or what was taken from her despite all her hissing and pecking. Either way, the cradle for my thoughts is most welcome.

The house is quiet and ready to receive my slumber. It feels best kind to be held by the mattress, and I know that, in the grand scheme of things, I chose well to stay up. Rather than force the gift of rest before it was ready to be given to me. But now I need my beauty sleep, like all us women do to appear beautiful. And a little is better than none at all.

Moksha is a Sanskrit word that means *liberation*.

Freedom from suffering.

Freedom to manifest in the way that best aligns with true heart's desire.

Every time I go to the back door to call out for him to come home, I am reminded of my own longing to be freed from the clutches of my past. Who would I be without this scar that's etched into my being? Would I have been a better daughter? A better wife? Would I be a better mother? A better attorney when I graduate? Over the years, I have learned how to guide myself back to a more gentle version of reality – like this:

I imagine what life would be like
without the burden of my childhood trauma.

Such a frolic into the world of what if helps me drift off. Feels just right to curl up on my side, knees to chest. Here, I can feel the warmth of the sun that will soon rise. In a different kind of dream, I can reach out for its light. Trusting those rays are just around the corner.

I should know by now how impossible it is to touch the first light of day.

But in the imagination of a little girl, she can try.

For her, anything's possible. That's how it ought to be. As she waits for the cuckoo bird to pop out and announce her God-given right to pure unadulterated innocence. My relieved and relaxed mind makes the final shift of gear away from the reptilian. I almost believe I will never be preyed upon again. Time, now, to unfurl my limbs from fetal position, roll onto my back, and let myself sink into my mortal enemy, turned dear friend again. Skin melts over weary bones and all thoughts drip back down into the Earth. I start to feel the sprinkle of sweet sleepy dust from head to toe.

All is well in my world.

This is my last waking thought: a lullaby mantra I have grown fond of repeating to myself. Like counting sheep in a pasture where there are no lions and never will be. As the sun peeks through the curtain, I drift off to a better place.

If only for a brief spell.

7 Les Yeux

Georgie! Remy! Come along now!

Kali called from the bottom of the staircase. Her kingdom for just one more precious hour in la-la land.

If not, you'll be late for school!

Her daughter, just shy of five years old, came flying down the banister. Sliding on her bum. Little feet extended and adorned with mismatched socks.

Good morning, Mama!

(Subtext: Look at me!!!!)

The good mother should have known Georgie was long since roused and ready to take on the day. Her second-born had always been an early riser. It seemed like a curse when Kali was still nursing her as an infant and would have given anything for just one morning a week that started after six am.

Now it was the blessing largely responsible for getting her kindie to school on time. Not that Georgie's teacher would have noticed one baby bird tardy to join the flock. Kindergarten was a mania of compatriot five-year-olds hither there and everywhere. No doubt herding cats took precedence over roll call.

Georgie padded over to the kitchen chopping block, climbed up on her favorite stool, and set about gobbling down her bowl of Cap'n Crunch. She preferred to take full charge of pouring the milk and it was always a generous amount. After she finished all but just a little, she placed her bowl on the floor for their big black cat to feast upon.

Moksha rounded out the family as true King of the house. Georgie's argument, first delivered as a toddler, had been an unabashed appeal to emotion and so tough to counter. It would be unfair to deny their four-legged the pleasure of savoring the last few drops of sweet creamy goodness. Part cat herself, the little girl had been able to plead the feline case from an authentic place.

Kali had relented, never imagining the daily gesture would last for as long as it did. The ritual made it easier for Georgie to leave her beloved pet at home alone for the day.

That's why Kali pretended not to notice her daughter's clumsy version of stealth executed every morning for the sake of her baby bro.

In Georgie's mind, Mokie still occupied the place of third and last sibling despite the interspecies distinction between herself and his kitty-cat nibs. Quite a promotion from the stray who had adopted Remy when he was a kindie himself.

Kali preferred to think of the cat as a talisman. Almost five years ago now, she had tucked him and his magical powers into her pocket and carried them from Knoxville to Nashville. Moksha embodied the exact opposite of the superstition so often paired with his color. Bringing all three inhabitants of the little yellow farmhouse good luck each time he sauntered home from his neighborhood adventures.

Besides, what the Captain left behind at the bottom of the bowl was hardly the biggest digestive challenge – for an outdoor cat who had no trouble downing an entire carcass of his kill. Whiskers, tail, and all.

A smart mother knew to save her chits for more important matters, like teeth and hair brushing. Both of these were a struggle to convince her pretty little girl to take seriously before it was time to head out the door. As if that wee jewel already knew: with that face, she didn't need much. And though she was but little, Georgie was fiercely steadfast once her mind was made up about a thing.

Remy was the exact opposite when it came to personal hygiene. From day one, Kali's son had been fastidious, fussing in the mirror while that look of consternation stared back at him. As a toddler, her son never needed a bib to eat his mush and he took the long way round to avoid the mud puddles. Now, at fifteen, he rarely if ever skipped a step in his protracted bathroom regimen.

This morning, he rounded the corner in a clean T-shirt and tightie-whities, rubbing his eyes the same way as he had done when he was a little boy. His mother could tell that the soft down on his cheeks had been freshly shaven.

Mom, where are my fave pair of jeans, d' you know?

A loaded question given the mounds of laundry that amassed each week from her son's frequent wardrobe changes and her daughter's regular mishaps. It would all get done on the weekend; for now, there was more in the heaping piles than there was hanging in the closets.

Just give me a moment, dear, and I'll have a look. Now, come and have something to eat. Every growing boy needs fuel to start the day off right.

As if she hadn't delivered that message before. Her firstborn child didn't have near the appetite his sister did. Remy was long and lanky and wanted to stay that way. Kali ruffled his hair as he bent to sit down at the table. Without that handicap, she couldn't reach the top of her son's towhead anymore.

She loved how the gesture, intended to convey her affection, ruffled his feathers so. Remy had a quiet pride about him. Kali was fond of that, too, and refused to ever see it as brooding. His strong sense of personal space was, to a loyal mother, the flip side of the same coin.

Not at all like Georgie, the family hellion. She was like a brand-new puppy not yet honed to home. She'd go with whomever expressed an interest in her shenanigans. Effusively crawling into laps and bestowing her furry-purry kisses on many an adult cheek. Each one, invariably delighted to receive them.

Kali was beginning to worry that Mama Bear's lecture about the few bad apples in every barrel wasn't soaking into her daughter's wild and wonderful psyche. No matter how many times they read and re-read that tattered old copy of the Berenstain Bears, still cherished from when Remy was young.

It didn't help legitimize the golden rule of don't talk to strangers that, so far, Georgie had been met with open arms and good intentions from virtually every stranger she came across. So little. So fierce. The combination was unbeatable. Her daughter seemed destined to be adored – on account of the fact that she was so adorable.

Yes, in many ways, Kali's two offspring were chalk and cheese. Yet to their mother, they went together unquestionably well, like cake and ice cream. Minor squabbles were natural between two little people, each with their own growing pains. It was at least true that they didn't overtly quarrel much. To Kali's way of thinking, the stark differences on the surface allowed them to lean into each other. With an ease that defied the more notorious stereotype of sibling relationship.

Or perhaps it was the age spread that created enough room for both children to be themselves. Without the need to dominate or manipulate to individuate. Either way, Kali rationalized, with a decade between them, they could hardly feel the need to compete with one another. She derived a great deal of satisfaction from the dynamic between brother and sister as she perceived it to be.

The two of them looked nothing alike at first blush. She, with her tousled head of dark wavy curls, just like Kali's, but without the gray. He, with his flaxen highlights and tighter curls. It used to be blond like the sun, but genes turned off and on. The yellow dawn goddess took her leave after puberty. Still, the way each corkscrew fell across Remy's forehead was so reminiscent of Peter as a young man.

Past the surface, underneath the degree of pigment and color of mop-tops, Kali's two children were the same in at least in one respect. Boy and girl alike possessed the eyes of a Black Gypsy. The very darkest brown. In fact, as close to black as that color could be.

Bottomless pools
that made the most of any source of light.

Every glint or spark,
a catchlight of *anime* unable to penetrate the surface.

Such organs of vision are a mystery on account of the fact that the ebony inside the pupil is not so different from the color of the iris. Without that contrast, the response of the eye to what goes in cannot be so easily read. As between two nomads, riding side by side in the same caravan, under the same roof, on the same street. Perhaps in the same realm to forge their existence, perhaps not.

What if he was her, and she was him?

The little girl, driving this stagecoach in the direction she chose as best. Remy, the guard with his shotgun, warding off bandits or inviting them over for dinner. Destinies reversed. Personalities traded, such that each one found themselves liking each other more than he or she planned.

Alas, games where tiny people with big imaginations can just snap of fingers and switch places are not real. Each child made of stardust plays with the light as its served up to them. Stakes a claim in the land where the prospect of acceptance for their own combination of flavors seems the most palatable. Or moves on, until magic land appears, that place where they belong.

To Kali, the eyes of her children were mirrors no matter which set she gazed upon. Each set of their black on black reflected back to her what she shone out to the world. That bounce-back of *rasas* was reliably and mercilessly exact, exposing the very best and worst of her parenting.

How easy it is, in the beginning, for any mother to see what resides behind the windows of a newborn Soul. Cradling the sweet-smelling new arrival in her arms. Looking down at the face of an angel. Every infant's visage reveals that quality of pure wisdom we are all born with. A mother remembers, when she first sees that in her child, that she was once that way too.

Then that baby grows up, and the one who lives to serve its needs forgets. Unless she gets another chance to cradle a newborn life she brings into the world. Again. To be duly reminded, and so on.

Kali had been fortunate in the way that each of her children chose her: first a boy and then a girl ten years later. That trait of all-seeing and all-knowing in Remy showed up based on her and Pete's clear intention to procreate. He was cherished, even before sperm met egg.

Georgie was another matter. Delivered at the confluence of sacred but uncharted waters. Yet, when that creature of Nature arrived, she possessed that same unaffected knowing as her brother had. There was no working around this angel of a problem. The only way out was through.

Some of the best gifts in life are unexpected.

With one stroke of a pen, Kali's story was rewritten.

8 Fisherwoman

She worked hard to find her feet as a single mother and novice attorney fresh out of law school. Making her mark, case by paltry case, over the first two years of her burgeoning career.

She was patient, hardworking and appreciative of each client who sat in her office to ask for help. Grateful for the chance to make a difference to other peoples' lives. That sentiment called in good fortune and paved the way for Kali's advancement.

By year three, the list of those she served was starting to shape up as diverse and rewarding beyond her years. One of an attorney who preferred to fight for the underdog and still get paid for it. Remy and Georgie were getting older and so her parental duties, more easily discharged than they once were. Kali had more time to devote a steady stream of intention to her vocation.

Both children were capable of understanding a little better why they were expected more often to fend for themselves. At least Remy was. He hardly ever complained – about anything, really – unheard of for a teenager. Had a good head on his shoulders. Seemed to do fine with the job of tending to his sister's needs.

As for Georgie? Well, Kali didn't spend too much time worrying about her. Since day one, it was in that little girl's nature to stand up for herself. As light as a feather, she was. But she'd kick you right off her cloud if things got too heavy. She didn't need anyone to fight for her cause. Never did.

No fear, what a gift.

Kali was tickled pink with the thought that her second-born emerged from the womb as her own best advocate. When she was a toddler, Georgie had glommed on to her mama every chance she got, like fluff to Velcro. Later on she had no trouble lodging her grievances with the ultimate authority in the house if she felt neglected.

Yes – already, Georgie could look way up, at just about any adult. Wag her wee pointer finger, furrow that little brow of hers. Then say exactly what she thought about a thing. Persuade you in no uncertain terms that her way was the right way. Or at least the most fair for all concerned.

Like mother, like daughter.

By the time Remy finished middle school, Kali had found her stride as a legal advocate for just causes. While every litigant's fact pattern was different, she began to fill the reservoir of her legal mind with what was the same or similar among them.

Extracting the nuggets. Assembling her repertoire to better assess the risk of how the courts may pass judgment and seal Fates. As that picture got bigger, she honed her ability to cut to the chase and get straight to the heart of a lawsuit.

In short, the attorney got more sage and more efficient. Time went further in a day, it seemed – whether she was at work, or at home with kids who now could pitch in. Forces combined such that Kali was no longer in survival mode and struggling to keep her head above water.

And so she began to make a habit of leaving the books behind in the study, every now and then, to go outside and walk the shore a little. Maybe try her hand at fishing in the deeper, more intuitive waters.

She had stayed indoors for so long, where the cadence of life could be more easily controlled. Forgetting how fresh the air above Nature's rushing waters feels. How it fills up a woman's lungs and causes her diaphragm to expand with the smoothest ingress of pure oxygen.

Exploring the edge, now that she could afford to. Paying attention to the current, so effortless, yet so powerful. No forcing and no holding back. Just as unbridled as her kids used to be when they were clear and clean and frothing with unimpeded energy. She dipped her toe in – then stepped into the flow.

Swirling water, all around her.

Inside every cell of her. Keeping her buoyant.

Pushing her under – then, *pop* – back up to the surface, she comes.

Kali's freedom from suffering lies in remembering that every Gypsy has her own reservoir of timeless wisdom, hidden away, which only she can call upon when the time is right. That grace is the closest thing to any woman who takes a chance and ventures outside to fish for pleasure or for profit.

The more she tunes in, the more she'll learn to rely on that skill she was born with. To make smart choices about where along the river's edge to stop and cast her line. When she commits to what and who she loves, she'll feel a river of joy moving through her.

It's water, not blood, that flows through her veins. Inflating the very essence of who she is. Injecting the vision of who she may become all the way back to the Source.

In time, every woman who lets go and leans into it, arrives at her own steadfast belief in that Greater Constitution. Her best ally is faith in herself. Helping her negotiate past danger when she must. Riding the tide with her.

Then coasting, when the worst of it is over. Meandering around the gentle bends, watching the Jesus bugs walk on water. Reading the signs as they present, before they float on by.

Or else missing them completely.

Kali will always be thoughtful of those downstream. And when called upon, she'll do the hard work to rub through rock and forge a new path. Ever more an expert, wading in deep, past the lip of her gumboots to finally break that nasty habit of second-guessing herself once and for all.

She will learn to trust that if something feels right, then in all likelihood it is. As her two chicks and legal legs continue to manifest, she'll discover that her odds of success in whatever she does go up commensurate with her ability to have faith in the outcome.

Until one day, when every tendril of her hair has turned the silver of sage – and her children have gone fishing to catch their own light – her intuition shall be perfect with all of its imperfections.

Oh, yes – my, oh my. Kali's reputation downtown as a member of the Nashville Bar shall precede her: that skinny, tough broad in well-tailored suits you can call to dig you out of a real mess. So long as you can afford the big fat retainer.

Don't let her good looks fool you.

Her mind is the real femme fatale.

Kali's best offense will undoubtedly be to smile arrestingly and speak in that calm, sultry voice of hers. As she drives a strategic stake straight through the heart of her opponent.

One day, this brand-new prototype of an age-old archetype will land the Big Kahuna and be set for life.

When she does, some may watch – how she makes the perfect flick of her wrist at just the right moment to snag the unwary prize fish – and call it clairvoyance. But this Gypsy will never give herself the gift of so grand a label. It will take Kali years to sort through all the tackle and pick her line.

Find her own midline, and hold herself steady in the eddy of the current. After the great process of elimination that comes with living a truly liberated life in the great outdoors, she will find out what kinds of bait don't work for an angler like her.

Then, so informed,
she will learn to tie feather, fur, and hook –
to make a lure that does.

She will stay true to her promise: made to no one but the cat and one small sliver of moon, kind enough to care when the rest of the world was sleeping. To never forget that her edges expand past the frame of who she comes from – into the vast open space of who she can become.

Bit by bit. Fragment by Fragment. Cellularly. Slowly and consciously, in the light of the faithful satellite, who has since become a faithful confidant of another member of this household.

Success for this woman will not come with the arrogance of men. Because Kali will stay sufficiently humble and open to receive what's next. In that way every woman can feel free to – once she understands her path to success diverges early on from any man's.

Like most of us girls, Kali will always be her own worst critic. Feeling the pull of guilt when she's at the office and working late. Or less than enthusiastic about a lazy weekend with her kids when a well-deserved client, by rights, needs a bigger piece of her.

To this fly fisherwoman, the graceful arc of her cast may never be quite smooth or long enough. But Kali will never stop trying to improve upon that motion, which must come from the center to make the best catches in life rise to the surface.

Then jump
– based on one surge of instinct –
to try and get a piece of what she has to offer.

Remy didn't talk much about Peter.

It was just never in his nature to express himself that way when he was a boy.

He didn't have to use words for his mother to understand. It was painful for Kali to admit that the gleam in Remy's eye was already tarnished by the young seer's experience. The loss of his father had dulled his senses and stopped the music for almost three years.

She was so relieved, then, when he finally pulled back the bench and took a seat to lay his hands on the keys of the baby grand again. The notes he played with reckless abandon were his sole candor. Then in high school, her sweet young man expanded his repertoire and started to sing.

Like everything about Remy, Kali was enthusiastic when she first heard his soft voice carrying a melody. He had been coy in response to his mother's accolades. Saying it was just a little something he was working on.

She came to accept that the hours upon hours her son spent immersed in music were his own private form of therapy. It really was best not to pry. She ought not to have looked at his music sheets without being invited to. But she couldn't help herself.

Something subtle had shifted in Remy's heavy cryptic ways. In the end, maternal curiosity won over self-restraint. Kali was so relieved to see what he'd written. Each letter shaped so perfectly. Every word, floating freely underneath each assigned note clinging fast to the bars.

I'd give up forever to reach you.

I just want you to know who I am.

Kali hoped that whoever the young woman was, she'd turn around one day soon and notice her son. Then smile and ask him the million dollar question. Somewhere deep inside, past all of the hurt and the loss, she still remembered how much beauty can start with a simple exchange of names.

Her daughter was still that jewel who had first met the world with eyes wide and heart open. She spent a lot of time in "Georgie world", where she used dexterous hands to

organize tiny things into miniature empires. But she could also do anything grand that a boy could do – only better, in her own enthusiastic self-assessment.

She loved to climb the biggest oak tree on the boulevard. The only one that didn't stand up straight, with the hairpin crook starting right from the base of its trunk.

The strong and pretty dare-devil practiced, over and over, how to get a good running start on her way up that ramp. She used to say that Nature designed it special: for every kid who was not afraid to fly.

Her big brother liked to go to the highest knot in the branches, which made for the best seat in the house. There was another one, down lower which he saw fit to assign to his sister. Judging that vantage was high enough for the likes of her.

Remy would yell at the top of his lungs when she disobeyed his command. Ordering her to come down, right now, or else. But the clever vixen had lofty ambitions of her own. She would just laugh and yell back that the view was way better from up there. Her brother would stomp his foot and make further demands, but it was no use.

Some things are written, no matter how hard a little boy, born first in his family, may try to change them. Once resigned to defeat, Remy would fold his tent and wander off in a sulk. Seeking his solace and solitude under the one lone willow tree on the whole length of Johnston Street.

Different than all those oaks, perhaps even special as compared to Nature's crowd of look-alikes. That willow was always on his side. It could relate to Remy's plight and so it wept with him, not for him.

Mary had always loved the way that tree's branches swirled in gusts of wind like hair of a creature more alive than any other affixed to the Earth by a trunk. The old and friendly neighbor never got tired of pulling back the sheers on her living room window to watch this spectacle between siblings play out – no matter how many times it ran.

With some emotion approaching glee.

As if expressed from one adventuress to another.

Two kindred hearts who knew that friendship is a sheltering tree.

Yes, Georgie's luster had no limits, alright. And no girl can ever go back to yesterday because she was a different person then. This one was growing in leaps and bounds, every day. Soon to soar right on past the highest limbs of that old oak tree. She didn't miss a beat as she skipped through her years of elementary school. Pure joy was her secret weapon and good looks, her superpower.

For the sake of that sparkle, Kali tried to tell herself it was for the best that Georgie never knew her father at all. But this mother had seen enough to know how many disguises sorrow could wear. That, on some level, George would always miss the man she never got the chance to recognize and then adore as the other person who made her out of stardust.

With nothing more than a sideways glance from her son or the defiant rise of her daughter's chin, Kali caught a glimpse of the sadness in their eyes.

They each carried something broken that could not be fixed.

Not even by her.

Darkness cannot drive out darkness. Only light can do that. Try as she might to be all things to her children, Kali saw the absence of a father in both faces.

Remy had been only ten years old.

Georgie, just a newborn.

9 Torrential

It's a noise he's never heard before.

No child should ever have to.

His mama cries out: a deep and agonized wail. Rousing him from listless slumber, the kind that comes as part of the sleep-wake cycle of every person no matter how young or old.

He rubs his eyes and climbs out of his big boy bed. Pads down the hall on bare, uncalloused feet, larger than average for his blossoming age of one meager decade. As he rounds the dark corner, he can see the light at the bottom of the stairs.

He begins the descent, for he is drawn to her.

Like a firefly is to a burning flame.

She sits in the foyer, her limbs splayed out on limestone tile. The small table, right beside her, is where the telephone for the landline normally lives. It's a vintage one, with cradle and dial: a relic from his papa's childhood home, salvaged from when he was a boy.

The receiver hangs by the cord, fully taut, not quite long enough to reach the floor. The palm of her left hand, open and empty. Her mind, struggling to kick-start after that late-night phone call from the hospice ward. The messenger cannot bear the tension, and so it gives way and falls to the floor.

A loud bang with a broken ring when the whole contraption hits the bottom startles Remy and brings his mama round. She lifts her head, raises her right hand to reach out for the comfort of her blood in a boy.

One look at her contorted face and he knows he must be strong. He will have to be brave. Without words, he descends the final few stairs towards the foyer to be swallowed up by another world. But the baby starts to cry and his attention is diverted.

Thus his mothed wings will not be scorched tonight.

Remy turns around and heads back upstairs, to the crib in his parents' room. He must check on his sister, who cries because she can do nothing more.

Obligation is a powerful motivator.

For boys – who later turn into men. It makes them big and strong. It keeps them brave, as far as the rest of us can tell.

And what about the women? Are they so different? The duty of the nurturer. The duty of the provider. Both end up in a tight place. Held fast. Bound by what is owed to others rather than to self.

Duty bound, as it were.

That fateful night is the only time Remy can recall his mother not giving the baby what she needed. What women will do for their children. What her progeny will fail to appreciate has been done for them. The sacrifices that have been made.

By his mother. By his father.

Unlike most teenagers, Remy actually thinks about such things. But then, he's not your average young man of eighteen years. He likes to look through the lens of one gender, and then the other. Both fit nicely on the end of his kaleidoscope.

It's easy for him to go back and forth between the two. And he detests the rut of unconsciousness that comes with stereotypes and labels. To a guy like him, these are useless constructs that confuse and confound, getting in the way of the average person's ability to make that flip.

And though Remy's waters are mostly still, the depth of what he keeps to himself allows him to see straight through the optics of his peers. He doesn't fall for the multiple reflections that spellbind most of them – when they look in their many mirrors, positioned just right. Contrived grunge and indie labels can't fool someone who's customized with a little something special, no matter which app he orders his new rags from.

America's ideal has always been youth. As handsome as that optimistic beginning to life is. As empty as that dimension turns when it's stretched past its due date. Everyone, forever trying to assume the optimal position: exactly in the middle of the aperture. Because once we get there, then all we'll see is our own perfectly formed selves, shining back at us. That's how most young women or men want to appear.

Perfect – when someone else is watching. But there's a side to Remy that no one sees. Things he says that aren't true and never will be. This young man knows what it feels like to be wearing the wrong skin. No adjustment of angle or trick of the eye can alter the discomfort he feels when he looks in the glass.

So he keeps to himself and tries not to be noticed. As a youngster Remy learned how to blend in; by his midteens, he had mastered the art of appearing unremarkable. Became a pro at distracting and deflecting unwanted attention without causing a fuss. He never talked out of school about the way he got bullied when he didn't see it coming. Instead, he checked out. Turned the other cheek and walked away as the ultimate revenge.

Even now, he refuses to think about those who have hurt him. To give them that power or any part of his mental space. He finds most teenagers to be self-centered and myopic anyway. From where he sits, banished to the corner by judgmental hands, they have little to offer in terms of a way out.

Remy prefers to spend his time thinking about who he wants to be – when no one else is watching. All by his lonesome. Deprived. Focused on one thin ray of hope. Afraid that without a good excuse to look outward, beyond themselves, his entire generation of Millennials will just turn out to be another one that's dazed and confused.

Lost, even.

Ants, marching, one by one.

All in a line carved out by the true masters of popular culture, social media, and the never-ending soap opera called American politics. Every head down, forging ahead, advancing with great strides in technology. Each winged insect believing that the path it's following – without even so much as looking up – is for the betterment of the colony.

Eusocial, well intentioned; yes. Organizing, communicating in chat rooms and blogs, cooperating faceless to faceless. Workers, soldiers, sterile females, winged sexual males: all committed to the pretense of a common cause but devoid of an altruistic Queen.

Without a center,
from which to build a new nation.

Tiny insects with red or black antennae, waving their blue screens back and forth in unison. Recording the moment, instead of enjoying it or trying to understand its long term significance. Scanning news feeds, day and night. Following talking heads,

resigned to their assigned place in the march – while the crimes of society grow deeper and more members get excluded.

The whole, twisty-turvy, forever dotted line of them. Not knowing what they don't know and not wanting to. Not even caring what Rumsfeld's unknown unknowns grew up to be. If anything at all, that is. One artifice after another, lying in the weeds, draining our precious energy. Watching, waiting to run interference and mess with the head of any soldiers who breaks rank to blaze their own trail.

That number is growing. People smarter than their phones are starting to unplug and tune out from the barrage of need-to-know headlines. And tune in to the sound of their own voice – beyond the Twitter chatter and snap of Instagram.

'Cause this frequency's higher than the one that's been filling all the space between our ears. How many times do we need to get caught in a web that's woven out of the very absence of discernment? Before we learn our lesson?

Just imagine. Finally, free from the spell cast on multitudes that something could ever have been built out of nothing. Like the one that was cast on our parents, when they fought for what they believed was right. Or the one that enticed President Wilson to get our great-grandparents involved in the war to end all wars.

Look at all of the resilient, seemingly resourceful players. Generation after generation. Heads bigger than bodies. Eyes dichoptic. Even with one peeper on each side of that engine, such much goes unnoticed. There's too much out there to see what's coming.

Antennae up, in every living room, trying to feel or smell what will show up at our door next. During the ad breaks, each prehistoric creature of Nature must march on six legs to get the job of everyday living done. Together, carving out our path of least resistance on American soil.

Working hard to pay the bills.

Never finding our way to higher ground.

When Remy looks down the rabbit hole, the mosaic he sees is always unique and never predictable. Little pieces of what people are, beyond the surface, arrange themselves randomly to his artful eye. He likes it that way. He pays attention to every bit of colored glass, cut with such precision.

Those fragments come together, every time, to make a pattern he doesn't control. Remy's not privy to the reasons why the substance of a person arranges itself the way it does. He isn't meant to be. Still, he enjoys that tube with mirrors and likes to shake it, ever so slightly, to set that plan in motion.

See what happens.

Every piece in its rightful place.

Lest there be no geometry, no symmetry.

But always fragility.

For what the eye can see down that tunnel holds together only for an instant. Until the hand wavers, and then what was there – so meticulously arranged – simply falls away. Feeling no obligation to stay the same. No regrets. Utterly unapologetic for failing to announce its impermanence or warn of its departure.

Letting go of what had seemed, mere seconds before, like the natural order of things. Letting him go, farther and farther, down that proverbial tunnel under the hedge in the garden.

Curiouser and curiouser.

Mother. Father. Son.

The way it used to be.

The way it's supposed to be.

That little boy who was looking down the eyepiece never felt the nudge from behind that disassembled everything he ever knew.

That was eight years ago.

Since then, Remy has learned how to welcome the little boy back with open arms.

Each time that innocent, enthusiastic guest shows up for a visit. The two of them look so much alike; they must be related.

All except for the hair on their heads. One, so golden, so arresting. Like the sun when you stare directly into it. The other, the kind of dark ash that comes from irreparable loss. He suspects that his visitor is in fact his former, younger self. That frightened ten-year-old with wide dark eyes and flaxen hair who awoke to the awful sound of maternal despair.

If he's correct, then that boy's the repository of everything Remy has ever known – all that he can remember – about the man who was his father. That is why he likes the little gaffer. Besides, he's young and reckless and so he's not afraid to jump. All Remy ever has to do is make one cavalier motion over the edge and say "after you." The cherub face, underneath pale yellow curls, does not hesitate.

In which case, Remy doesn't need to be the one to act so strong or so brave. He can let down his guard and follow behind another, who goes first for a change. At his own pace and measure, without much effort at all. Remy can simply hit the replay button as many times as he likes to run that well-worn tape.

The scream. The staircase.

His mother's face. His sister's cry.

Down, down the well he goes. Of every wish cast that has never come true.

Falling very slowly, on purpose, so he has plenty of time to test his memory along the way. As he descends, he handles every jar. Examines each box in the cupboards and on the bookshelves of his childhood. Looks at all the maps and pictures he was so fond of.

All of these cues, distantly familiar. Still just as they were when his father was alive. You see, Remy has fallen often, and so he's had lots of practice. He repeats the same story, seamlessly, over and over, as many times as he cares to. Each time he knows what will present, even before it happens. Just like the last time.

It's a sojourn of sorts – as weird a connection to Spirit as this exercise may sound. His own contrived rediscovery of the past. Sadly, sweetly, that's the real why behind the cherished resistance he exerts – against every molecule of air touching his skin on the way down the well of memory. He doesn't want it to end. And yet, the one who falls feels

compelled to repeat the adventure, time and time again, despite the inevitable truth that gravity will kick in.

Lest he forget everything about who his papa was. Then, when there's nothing left to grab on to, Remy lets go. Without exertion, only ease. He races the rest of the way down to join the fathoms of each unsatisfied longing, every hidden desire. Faster than before now, to get it over with. Sliding effortlessly into the creases of those synapses carved out especially for this remembering. Always in the same way. Asking the same questions and then parroting the same answers by rote. Every time, ending up in the same sad place.

This chain of inquiry has become automatic. Spliced in at the end of the reel. It's Remy's way of completing the tragic tale of his father's passing in a way that his little boy self can control. He likes to try to convince himself that his mama couldn't hear the baby crying through her own fog of trauma. Or else, she was paralyzed by some venom of shock and, though she heard Georgie, she couldn't get up off the floor to tend to his infant sister's needs.

Yes, one of these incapacities must have been the reason why Remy was forced by circumstance to turn away from the light and retreat back into his own cruel world. Both of these theories explain, well enough, what has stuck best in his memory. The one omission that never changes – no matter how many times he tries to slow it all down and rewrite the ending.

His mother never responded to Georgie,
crying out in the night.

To believe in the truth of one or the other conjecture, then, affords Remy some measure of the comfort he requires. Because now, more than ever, he has to believe that his mother's goodness is steadfast. Her love for her children, without condition or reservation. Because, you see, this is the beginning.

Before all of the gold on his crown disappeared, Remy could recall in vivid detail what followed this climax of his childhood tale. Each step that he took when he was ten to his mother's side or his father's grave.

Separately. Chronologically. But someone naughty's hit the fast-forward button and now the rest of it is one big peripatetic blur. He remembers a gathering at the cemetery hall. Hushed voices. The smell of banana bread, fried onions and coffee.

And he will never forget the rain.

It was coming down sideways. The wind, howling: in honor of a man taken long before his time. One member of the flock who still had so much art to create. So much beauty left to make. His papa was killed by a disease that rages like a storm through human organs and, in the end, engulfs the whole of a person.

Once unleashed, cancer alters the very cells of the body. Causing them to divide uncontrollably and drown out the life force. Nature paid homage to that rage inside the artist, who had not yet painted the one thing he longed for most. All who gathered round to witness his descent were swept up in the torrent. To be spared at the end of the interment, when they were free to leave the dead behind.

Remy couldn't because Peter was in his blood.

Corkscrew curls, plastered to his forehead as he watched them lower a stark white coffin into the grave. He can still recall how petrified he was: that what was left of his papa, inside that long wooden box, might be flooded, with so much water filling the hole. But there was no one for him to ask the question of. Certainly not his mama. She was busy holding the baby, trying to calm the one who was squalling like the sky.

While the mud was rising.

Fear penetrated every cell in his wet, cold body: that the casket would ride off like a sea kayak on that growing tide of earth and water. And then be lost forever. The stormy weather refused to abate. The pastor's words of condolence droned on.

Not another person there to mourn the death of this artist felt the same way as Remy did. No one else could even begin to comprehend the feeling. Every man is an island. And every woman, an ocean, lapping along his soft edges.

Rhythmically trying to reach the center, where the animals frolic or volcano simmers, ready to blow. She may expend all of her energy on this heroic endeavor. The best years of her life – all for not. But we give it a shot.

For we need our boys to make our worlds go round.

In what remains of his little boy mind, Remy's not standing at the gravesite. Quietly. Respectfully. Playing the part of the good orphan Oliver. No. He's yelling at the top of his lungs. At everyone, dead or alive. In the very face of God himself.

Hurry up!

Or my papa will be washed away!

As Divine forces join his choir, unleashing their fury at the bones inside the box.

Lightning splits open the sky, setting fire to the rain. And everyone hears what Nature intended.

But Remy's not a kid anymore. His adult mind knows better, that what was left of his own family missed the truth of the boy. They were too busy missing the man. In such a lost cause, nothing turns on the details.

Any tears that he shed in this process would have been in vain.

All mixed up with what wept from the sky – as that stoic boy watched the tide wash one-half of his born identity away. Such violence has no feeling for girls suffering inside boys' bodies.

Count the number of seconds that pass until you hear what comes next.

10 Turn It Up

Remy is finally old enough to vote or buy a lottery ticket the corner store.

People treated him differently, give him more responsibility.

His mother, more space to take care of himself.

But at the age of majority, he feels more in the minority of an undefined class of Americans than ever. His growing pains are getting worse, not better, as he teeters on the cusp of becoming an independent thinking, breathing, leaving unit.

That deep ache in his bones when he puts his head on the pillow refuses to abate. Remy has no idea that the bones of a girl ache too until she's done getting taller. But he's found a way to deal with it.

He's taught himself to raise his words
– then his voice –
to make his own thunder.

For a while after they put his father in the ground, everything went black. His broken Spirit could no longer see the notes. The hole that Peter left behind almost swallowed up his son. But, by the Grace of God, it did not consume him.

Because Remy was not meant to give up on the music then. That wee person who watched the mud rise could still hear the melody. Ever so faintly in some far-off, distant place, two Divine instruments caused hammer to strike strings both ways: vertically, first and then horizontally. Together, they didn't miss a beat in their young master's rhythms.

His faithful first love still stood upright and proud, albeit elsewhere now. After she got traded in for a new model, she never lost her loyalty to that sweet child in the music corner. She knew best what sent him, how to summon him back to the music.

As for the baby grand? She picked up where the prior administration left off. And proved to have more depth than her perfectly polished exterior ever let on. She stayed with Remy through that long dry spell of almost three years. Watched him grow into the makings of a man. Sitting, all spread out, the way she likes to do. Occupying precious space, but serving no useful purpose in the interim. Waiting, ever so patiently for him, splayed and unplayed.

Her bench completely in the way of foot traffic and pressed up against the double French doors leading out to the backyard on Johnston Street. Good thing they opened outward. So that everything the baby grand had to offer could be housed and cherished until Remy was ready to play her again. Yes indeed, that gorgeous specimen of musicality proved in the end to be a most solid investment.

She never left the young boy's side. Biding her time – until the cold abstinence finally melted, and gave way to perfect harmony. Love conquers all. Or nibbles away at the shell to expose the raw emotion.

When the young musician was ready, and not before, he returned to the place where his heart lay. Picking up right where he left off: tickling his baby's ivories and making sweet song again.

Fingers working keys amid the tide between treble and bass, all wrapped up in the perfect note. A swell of laughter and forgetting for two young lovers to sail away on in a beautiful green-pea boat.

All that eroded was the landscape of Remy's mind.

The pieces of one single but formative pattern, impossible to hold onto.

One child's ability to recall the first decade of his life, it came apart – a little, then a little more. With every passing year, those bits of cherished glass in the object case got harder and harder to put back together into the design that once was.

His father's gravesite still stands as part of the circle – right where they left it.

Once a year, his mama and George go back to the U.S. Knoxville National Cemetery to place a bouquet of flowers on the marble headstone. Its stature always struck Remy as not quite the right fit for his own memory of the man.

Unusually slight of frame. Fine boned, even, and at best, of average height.

Remy never liked going back to Knoxville and no one makes him anymore. For what would be the point? The details of his father's face have long since washed away.

That distinct gait, an out-turned stance you could spot from blocks away. His laugh. His voice. When he spoke firmly or with tender words. On a good day, Remy thinks he can

remember them all. That's when he picks up a pencil and his manuscript pad to draw symbols on the staves.

In truth, he's no longer certain what's memory, once real, and what's fantasy, contrived to fill the ever-growing void. Five lines above, five lines below: ten chances for each note that he births to play on the line that separates the two.

Because at eighteen years old, Kali and Peter's son has stepped into the realm of what a person can bring to life with the power of intention. He has figured out it all begins and ends with the mind. What we give our strength to will have strength over us – if we let that dictator dressed up in democratic togs sneak up and take over without a fight.

At a time when Nature's urging Remy on to manhood – the place he most dreads ending up – it's the music that comes the closest to meditation. Songs can silence those stories that get stirred up in the space between his ears. They are salve for an aching heart and solace for the Soul.

The artists who wrote the songs, they can take a guy like Remy to another realm altogether. Where, sitting on the cusp of adulthood, he can imagine that Nature's processes can be radically altered. How – with a whole lot of conviction and a little help from modern medicine – life can manifest as a young female heart desires. Past the form, to the very substance of that ladylike ticker, who's been held fast in the wrong cage made of twenty-four ribs and never permitted to come out to play.

Lyrics are poetry put to music. They set a fine example of how to channel pain into creativity. So that when a person tunes in – at just the right volume – he, she, they can lie down in a meadow and let the poet's intention wash it all away. The art of those Remy perceives as more talented than he is can still his mind and bring him back inside himself.

To the essence of herself.

When all is calm, and every demon has been rocked to sleep, only then does she feel safe enough to stick her neck out and hum along for a few bars.

The notes inspiring her to reveal.

So, crank the tunes. Drown out every naysaying notion. Then she'll muster up the luster and give it a go. However modestly that one pendant on the chandelier may compare to all the rest. 'Cause when the music stops –

She cannot help but conceal.

When words fail, music speaks. It's always been that way for the woman inside the man. For so long as the song floods in and through, Remy can see what shines. Though no one else living can. Yet.

So he adjusts his earbuds and turns up the volume to try and coax her into making a solo appearance. If that girl's not up for it tonight, no matter the track, then the thought of her showing up tomorrow will have to be enough.

The potential of her, sufficient to take the edge off.

Either way, Dave Matthews can always lend a hand to bring Remy back from his broken visits with the mere strands of his father. This jazzy song's an upbeat backdrop for the tragic headline act the troubled teenager has just run through, for old time's sake.

And that he's done with – at least for one more evening of this phony existence. So Remy lies down, his back, nestled in the cool grass and stares up at the night sky. Up there, a pulse beats to set the pace for all things not yet on center stage.

Stars, hide your fires.

Let not the light expose my black and deep desires.

The brightest ones don't listen. Why should they? Tonight, they are swollen and radiant. Shining brilliantly despite the moonlight infusing everything up there and down here. Laughing at what feels right, and forgetting the rest.

They are honoring the effort of the performer. They cannot help but dance. Oh, how he wishes that he could feel the heat of that celestial flame. Please, God, he prays, squeezing his eyes shut.

Let me feel. Something. Anything.

No tears come anymore. The source of his fountain has long since run dry.

Only when his own digits caress the keys does Remy transform into someone other than who he's duty bound to be. As he plays the music, he believes he's got the jam to go get his girl. That nothing can stop this decidedly natural process, meant to unfold this way from the beginning, before Nature confused the musician with someone else.

Just Remy and his baby grand, sharing their brilliance. Two of the brightest stars of all those scattered across the meadow of the night. When this song is over, he'll return to that flat zombie state. Putting one foot in front of the other to get through the day. Then another one will start, and he'll do the same plodding job of living it.

Maybe soon, things will start to shift.

God willing. Even just a little, to give him a taste of what's to come. Remy reaches into the pocket of his jeans and pulls out the bottle of Estrofemâ. Estrogen is still reputed to be the most important part of any regimen to transition from male form to female.

There's hope in that bottle. A brighter future behind the fine print on its label. As he swallows his pill, all of his pain from the past subsides and slips away into the night.

To join the stuff that stars are made of.

The moon knows well of alchemy: the kind that can change desire into necessity and concoct the strongest intention ever known to humankind.

And so she smiles down upon the future of her.

She's round tonight, so full of potential.

Of all things feminine, which seem closer now than they did before Remy filled the prescription. Every particle in the atmosphere is more pronounced, more remarkable. Arresting in the lunar glow. It almost feels like Remy can reach out and grab hold of the mystery.

Yet this stargazer's too old now to be fooled into thinking that one man on Earth can reach across the galaxy that way. JFK made enough of America believe we could put a man on the moon. His critics all but laughed him out of the room.

But he never gave up. Remy admires our nation's most beloved son for that. Even though that cratered surface might have turned out to be made of nothing but cheese or popcorn. Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin never would have made it, not without the ultimate dreamer who launched our ambitions on that trajectory.

It's Remy's vision of a different future that's giving him the balls to embark on one of the greatest adventures of modern history.

Next stop: the other end of the galaxy.

Tonight, the moon is on the opposite side of the Earth from the sun. Fully illuminated by that star's light.

Under the spotlight, our lunar planet looks like a white orb with a face. Remy knows every one of her well-worn disguises to see through to her core. Sincere or charlatan, kind or cruel. Her visage changes with the tides. Like the pariah who lies down in the meadow to admire the mercurial Heavens, a part of the moon is always hidden. From that vantage, bathed in brightness, her greatest admirer can see clearly now.

In this moment, fully and completely illuminated.

Remy has chosen to have faith in the promise that one woman, locked inside the body of a man, can break free to join that ever-elusive sphere of the night. He likes to think he's the only person who can see that unabashed wink of the moon's one eye. As she presides over all God's creatures down below. All the wee insects, with their antennae back and wings clipped.

Una apis, nulla apis.

One bee is no bee.

They must all work together to rebuild an intricate comb of social good – the sweetness of which everyone deserves to partake in. If not them, then who will mend what those who came before us broke into a million pieces?

He refuses to accept the ludicrous notion that others like him are not asking that same tough question. That they are all content to be marching in comatose time to the rhythm and rhyme of one master puppeteer. How can it be that no one's looking up to see who is pulling the strings attached to an entire generation's future? As the crimes between us grow deeper.

Look up.

Way up, at the night sky.

Take in all of the constellations.

Behind every one, there's a name and a story.

Connect the dots. Find the pattern. Let the dark side of Nature remind you that every pinpoint's a star, moving along at a fantastic speed. Because the one who lies down in the meadow to take it all in cannot detect any change. Incremental. Insidious. Not for a very long time. Until it all adds up, if ever, most of us are destined to miss the true splendor of the moonlight.

Remy cares about every pinpoint of light, that's the thing. Even if none of them care about him the same way. No doubt, they are all industrious, but they are going nowhere. For they possess no insight and have no choice but to follow her command. Some say that the moon determines everything in Nature. The tides of the unconscious mind. When creativity flows, when it ebbs.

When a man or a woman cracks wide open or finds the resilience to hold it all together. Even the artist is nothing but a conduit for how that great orb of the night waxes and wanes. Inspiring greatness that we grow to rely on, then retracting the source of inspiration, leaving us to wonder if it was real in the first place.

The painter and the music maker, just the same.

Then, lights down, you up and die.

We all do it the same.

We all do it the same way.

Remy listens intently to his source of luminescence tonight. He's a diehard and devoted Daveslave, always has been. He loves to reach back in time to hear the master sing his sad truth with that signature skip in his voice.

The volume's turned up almost all the way to ten. So it can fill every cell that's made of stardust. In its raw essence, Dave's is a raspy voice that's made a clear difference to music in America. Even slightly off-key when he hits the high notes.

But he doesn't care.

Why should he? He's livin' the dream.

Free. Belting it out, to nothing more than the bare-naked strum of his acoustic guitar. Under the spotlight. All by himself. Riff after sweet riff, flowing through one man. Who had, by all rights, reached the moon.

Oh, how Remy wishes he could be so bold. So honest with what he has to offer. Tonight, he'll let himself be carried away by someone else's freedom.

He still requires something from the outside to launch him into orbit. Until he can feel any shift on the inside.

He can remember being small like it was yesterday. Playing under the willow tree and dreaming about a nebulous concept of another life.

He's on a roll now. Almost an adult, really. No time like the present, that's why we call it a gift. And so he also does another thing that is very strong and very brave, even at this volume.

He allows himself to imagine how wonderful it will feel to wear the skin of the woman he truly is and not the man he was born to look like.

If only Remy can break rank from the unconscious march.

Pump her prehistoric wings, and fly away.

To higher ground.

For the greater good of a different kind of colony.

Then, she will strut her stuff to the moon, with all her faces.

11 Dream Girl

Kali always wanted a little girl.

For as long as she could remember.

When she first started to menstruate, moving that much closer to womanhood, she first conceived of that desire. She dreamt of a daughter with coal eyes like obsidian and long raven curls. Wearing a ruby-red dress and playing in fields of emerald green. Giggling over and over, as she spun round and round.

She was the reason that God made a boy: to be hers.

The grasses blew, her skirt spun, and her ebony laughter echoed through to the real world. Kali awoke knowing that one day she would have a little girl. That flash of green and splash of red stayed with her.

It journeyed, every year, to drink from the center that blooms with spring's arrival. The ruby-throated hummingbird prefers to feed on flowers that are red and orange. The trumpet creeper. Honeysuckle. Jewelweed, bee balm, and of course, the morning glory.

Kali was never much of a gardener; still, she hung a feeder filled with sugar water out back, every April, to attract Nature's tiny miracle. If she was lucky, she'd catch a glimpse of one of those elusive precision flyers when it paused in mid-air to take a sip through its long, narrow beak.

In full sun, as the tiny bird hovered – for one split second, the purest *rubrum* of its throat and fresh *viridis* of its back came out to play. Glittering like that mixed-up jewel who twirled with glee in her field of dreams. Before it vanished, with a zip, on to the next nectar source.

Tiny, yes:
weighing less than a penny.

But also mighty:
like the dreamer was.

Like the daughter would one day be.

The hummingbird flies across the Gulf of Mexico in a single epic flight twice a year. Five hundred miles. Non-stop. Like most females, Kali chose her mate after attracting him with her scent, put out to magnetize. And like many women responsible for that fatal but vital pull, she didn't choose after that to adopt his history as her own. It just happened.

She and Pete left NorCal with Remy to make a new home in the mid-South. Far from her roots, Kali foraged for twigs and foliage to build a nest where she could tend to the needs of her first offspring.

He was just starting to toddle, and she, just finding her tiny bird feet. They evolved to be so light and delicate that she couldn't walk or even hop. But only scoot sideways, guesstimating where they were in relation to a novel scratch or unfamiliar perch.

That didn't stop Kali, though.
No sireee.

She used the fine strands of a spider's web
as the mortar to hold it all together.

The youngest of the brood? Well, Georgie chose her own sweet time to make the great migration. As is any girl's prerogative. She waited, until the nest that her mother made, with so much loving care, no longer had integrity no matter the patchwork attempted.

Then, that tiniest of hummers swooped down to drink from the sweetest elixir in all of Nature – only found inside the maternal flower. Yes, when everything was falling apart, the girl of Kali's dreams brought her rapid beating heart across the miles.

To stick her landing in the womb of a woman whose husband would soon be dying. Her birth would defy the maudlin tumble-pass her mother may have otherwise spiraled into.

Instead, this gift from God would perform her flips and tricks from day one.

To please the only crowd that really matters to a newborn.

Kali's son came into the world as her first and blessed child.

She and Pete believed at the time that Remy would be their one and only.

When they uprooted from Humboldt County, north of San Francisco, their son was just starting to walk. He was one year old. A seedling with so much promise transplanted in his early days to the Great Appalachian Valley.

There, Remy would learn to take his boyhood stride among the grove of mighty tree trunks cultivated in good old Southern soil. Destined from his beginning to be the product of his parents' combined and focused attention. To Kali, he would always be her gorgeous West Coast boy – the one she balanced on her hip, as she turned on her heel at LAX and boarded that plane to Knoxville. Leaving behind everything she'd ever known. Everyone she thought she was or ever would be.

Remy grew up to share his mother's far-reaching affinity for their native state of California. Perhaps it was the same resonance to birth place or else a sign of some deeper enmeshment. But her nostalgia became his living memory of what he'd been too young to remember.

With that inherited blueprint, the young man made up a story of what it would have been like to be raised on the southern cusp of the Pacific Northwest. He romanticized about how wonderful life would have been in the only State that was Golden. The last bastion of true liberalism. Where every little person could still believe they were a moon child who could stay wild. And a little boy crowned with the paragon of female beauty could be any gender he wished.

Peter's head went from being flaxen straight to white near the end. His son's blonde curls didn't last the same way. By the time Georgie was born, the tow of her big brother's head was already starting to fade.

In middle school, Remy's hair would continue to darken to a warm, more colloquial nutmeg brown. By the time he turned the age of majority, a few interspersed highlights were all that was left of the gold. After that, only the sun could tease out those iridescent strands. When its rays kissed his head just right.

Mostly, they were subdued.

Like the boy. Before he became a girl.

To Kali, those gorgeous curls never lost their luster. She stole every chance she could to bury her face in her son's head no matter his age. Breathing in the smells of her own youth, so unique to NorCal.

White sage. Wild mint.
Lavender fields.

Ginger cedar forests,
mixed with the sharp, pungent evergreen of
pine, spruce and fir.

In her maternal heart, these invocations would never fade or change into something else. That geography of memory would endure despite the retrofit of her son's landscape. After Pete died, she believed that Remy would always be her rock from the Shasta Valley.

Sacred. Solid.

Until her entire world was rocked and her little boy lost forever.

Not everything dies when the form of a person is shed. The smell of her first born child would always take Kali back to the land of endless mountains and rivers.

The best parts of her past and where she came from.

Where they both began, regardless of how each of them ended up. For the sake of every yard in between those two goalposts, she put that beauty kid in a time capsule: buried, but preserved. She refused to give up on what stayed the same about Remy.

The past can define the future if you let it. And there are junctures in life when reaching back in time is less daunting than eyes forward. Like when a woman is afraid of what she didn't see coming.

George was the opposite of Remy in relation to their mother. She was the compass that pointed Kali towards the future. Since inception, she was the pioneer. Visionary, prophetic even. A guiding light to cut through the darkness and illuminate everything a woman can accomplish when she sets her mind to it.

Apocalyptic for Peter. The hope of a future that could not prevail. His remission gave him and Kali cause for faith that things could be different, but it didn't last. When his cancer came back, it was a raging fire. Pete's recurrence progressed to stage five. Irreversible. Terminal.

When he could no longer get out of bed, he exerted himself to shift his weight on the mattress. Raise one arm and extend a palm to touch his wife's growing belly.

Get in as close as he could. Then whisper to the fetus who was George that he would always love her. Said he'd always be her soldier when the world was spinning out of control.

My aim is so true. I wanna show you.

I'll try forever. I promise I'll never surrender.

Pete knew better than to say he would never leave. Life had taught him that the best way to keep your word is not to give it. Every day, the child within grew stronger as the patient grew weaker. Gone was the young, vivacious artist who stood before a blank canvas full of passion not yet expressed. Riddled with an angst not yet revealed.

Pete was next to death and closing the circle.

That's why he felt nearer to the unborn life the second time.

People who rode the same elevator at the hospital as Kali had looked away from her protruding abdomen. Watched with empathetic faces as she got off on the 8th floor and headed for South B Chemotherapy.

Though they meant well, they didn't understand.

Who could have known the incredible measure of strength she was able to derive from within. She'd never forget the first time she felt the flutter of the fetus at five months. Sitting at the foot of Peter's bed, having just tended to his bed sores. Witnessing his pain. Feeling it vicariously, deeply.

When it hit, that flutter was more like a helicopter prop than a butterfly. Kali realized, then, that she could do anything. Those heroic hormones descend, like a wave, to galvanize the psyche of the female carrier. For she must stay committed to the cause, no matter the misfortune that befalls her.

This was a mission in the name of potential life that took precedence over certain death surrounding her, at times, engulfing her. That flutter is what gave Kali the strength to carry on. Her tiny bird-to-be was always with her, from that day on. Hovering above it all, watching over her.

The wee hummer was already practicing how to make her wings turn in opposite directions. Then reverse them in a figure eight, back and forth, again and again.

How an unborn girl could suspend herself in mid-fluid like that, Kali couldn't say.

But wherever the mother went – whatever she was called upon to do – she could hear the faint hum of Nature's sweetest miracle. She had to be fearless. She had to keep going. She couldn't afford to give up – be caught by a dragonfly or snatched by a frog. Not now.

Not for a long time. Because she had purpose, times two.

To protect herself, then, Kali used the whirling twirling light that shone out from the inside. There came a time in Pete's illness when there were more bad days than good. At the end of each one, before the start of the next, his steadfast caregiver laid her weary head on her pillow and let the mattress hold her engorged belly.

No more bedside. No more care. Just bed.

She couldn't help but cry herself to sleep. That little flash of brilliance, suspended in maternal plasma, hummed her tears away. Kali got so big and awkward she couldn't fit between the treatment stations in the cancer ward. Each man, woman and child attached to their separate drips of toxic drugs. Necessary toxicity: designed to kill off the cells taking over the body and leave behind the others vital to living.

Senses heightened, heart open, Kali could feel that potency coursing through her husband's veins. On the longest yard, she truly felt like Heracles – and the child she carried, an extra shot of Zeus to transcend the status of a mere demi-god.

But then those hormones left, like traitors.

Nine months after they descended on the woman to so empower her.

Then human adaptation kicked in. Estrogen and progesterone levels plummeted, almost overnight, once baby was born, their job finished insofar as biological purpose was concerned. The emptying of that vessel – from such a high to such a low, so quickly – threatened to plunge Kali into depression.

It's more common than you think: a dip in the valley most new mothers move on from and then never talk about. A few of us never come back to ourselves. Even a woman who

delivers a happy healthy child into a safe secure world is vulnerable. Kali's set of circumstances warranted more than just a mild case of the baby blues. When Peter passed away, her infant child was shy of two months old.

They had agreed to name her George.

For the short time he had, Pete treasured her.

And she would never forget that he was on watch for her cause. He liked to call her Georgie and tickle her under the chin to make her matchstick legs pop up like a jack-in-the-box. Lying in his bed, breathing harder and then harder still, he would close his eyes to listen to the sound of the infant's gurgles and her coos.

Soothing his pain. Telling his Soul it would be easier next time round. Pete got the smallest, sweetest taste of that baby girl's wonder. Little did he know how the infant would insist on existing – and her tiny but mighty presence work its Heavenly magic to get his widow back on track. Little Georgie couldn't help but flitter her glitter of all the good things in life still to come.

As only little girls can do.

The wee hummer grew, and as she did, she drank from the well of pure feminine exchange between mother and daughter. Kali truly got her – in that way only females can ever understand each other. The young girl would never doubt how much she was loved.

But that didn't mean she would not suffer. All her life, George would long to know her father. For most of it, she would search for a man like the one who had her heart right from the very start. In that way, Peter's absence defined her presence long after she left his nickname behind.

Both faces of Father Clock have their innate difficulties, you see. No amount of guilt can change the past. And no amount of anxiety, the future. Forward and backward – both ways are hard.

12 Thank Heaven

A female hummingbird builds her nest and lays two eggs.

Each one is the size of a pea. Three is almost entirely unheard of.

Kali knew that she would never have more children. That chapter of her life closed when she stood in the rain with one chick standing by her side. And the other in her arms, squalling with regret for having just left the place that sea kayak was destined for.

The male hummingbird has no penis. Only an opening. He mates to deliver sperm to egg without penetration. After he does, he leaves. He's not meant to stay to help raise the offspring. The female is on her own, then, to care for her eggs.

When they hatch, the babies have dark skin and no feathers. She sits on the nest to keep them warm and regurgitates insects to feed them. By two weeks, those babies are covered in pin feathers. Soon, they will grow real ones, and at three weeks old, their mother shows them how to catch bugs and find nectar. Before chasing them off to live on their own.

Kali applied for admission to the Faculty of Law at Vanderbilt. She would never know exactly what possessed her to take that step. The clouds parted, making space for new light to stream through.

No more bedside. Just self-care.

Only in retrospect would she recognize how the color of such tiny newborn feathers changed so dramatically when kissed by those long-forgotten rays of sunshine. Inspiring her to make a change. How rapid, beating wings make a sound that a mother can distinguish from any other.

Inviting her to begin.

The speed of every hummer's wing beats is unique. Thus the distinctness of the hum. Georgie's were fast and furious, and when that little nectivore chose to land, it marked a profound shift in how Kali perceived herself and her role in the world. It was, quite simply, a gestalt. After that, nothing was ever the same. Who would have thought something so small, so infinitesimal, could effect such change?

Pete's death cut through the tie that binds family together. It removed the last of the tethers of who Kali had been in the world. The wife, turned mother, turned widow, was transformed amid the ash of what once was.

When law school started, Kali did the best she could with what she had left to give. She was completely maxed out, so exhausted that sometimes she thought she could fall asleep standing up.

What she gave to one chick was often denied to the other. Every now and then she caught glimpses of the green-eyed monster that rose up in her son. Through her own veil of grief, she judged his jealousy of the baby as natural. To be expected, considering everything he'd been through.

Remy had been the apple of his father's eye, after all. No wonder it was so hard for a boy still so young himself to share his mother's love. Kali didn't care to dwell on that minor insecurity in her son. She much preferred to focus on how helpful he was with the baby.

Build Remy up, every chance she got. Focus on his successes and say how proud she was of her little helper. When she did, he'd stand up a little taller. Push his chest out a wee bit farther. It was his nature, Kali believed, to be helpful. And so he was, to her.

She had faith that her two chicks would grow to love each other. She pictured a day when she was gone and they would have only each other to rely on. They would be Soul mates in her afterworld. Having gone through a war together and both survived, thanks to their different skill sets. One day, they would thank God that they had each other. In Kali's crystal ball, George would always look up to her big brother.

No other man would compare.

And Remy? Well, without little girls to cherish – what would little boys do? He would watch her fly, of course. Amazed, forever in awe of how she was able to work her knife-sharp wings up and down, then sideways and then backward and forward. A brilliant blur of red and green. Tough for him to fix his eyes on and then hold in his heart.

For what man will ever truly understand what makes a woman flit so?

To most observers, the young boy's grief was not plain to see. Kali didn't fret too much about it. She believed that when her son was ready, it would all come out.

Meanwhile, he continued to be helpful. Even changing the baby's soiled diapers didn't seem to faze him. Folks marveled at how responsible he was for a preteen. How much he was prepared to do to be of assistance to his mother.

Nurseries, caregivers and babysitters all pitched in where wee Georgie was concerned. And while she was cooperative, delightful even, she came to rely mostly on the company of her imaginary friends. From day one, George had to be her own hero.

She was remarkably industrious and took her work of play seriously. Finding all kinds of creative ways to entertain herself. She liked to draw, paint, dress up and put on shows. Perform magic tricks and build forts in the bushes out back.

She made outfits out of paper for her dollies, painted her figurines with Mama's nail polish and built villages for everyone to live in: happily ever after. Move even one plastic figurine, Lego piece or building block, and she would admonish the culprit, then put it right back where it belonged.

As a preschooler, Georgie mostly taught herself to read. Her appetite for the written word was voracious. She was a sponge and couldn't help but ask why about everything, no matter how strange the subject matter. Those who were expected to have the right answer were awfully grateful for Google.

As a result of all she took in, she developed a remarkably wide vocabulary. By the age of five, the little girl's tongue was already well-trained. And though her use of it was often quirky or incorrect, each misusage tripped out of her mouth with the blazing confidence of youth.

George was direct. No detours. She went straight to the source to lodge a complaint or make her case. Perhaps it was because she never learned how to play two parents off against each other to work around a problem. She didn't have all the necessary players. Such indirect means would always be foreign to this one. As a result, she was more self-possessed than most children. A tad disarming for adults who weren't used to meeting the full force of young Spirits head-on.

When she was upset, she'd show it plainly without fear of reprisal. And when she was happy, she'd lather a froth of pure gratitude on the person who had made her that way. The latter disposition was her natural inclination far more than the former. And so she called in the light instead of the dark. In that way, the seas parted for the little hummingbird.

Best of all, Georgie loved to climb trees. Find that perfect perch where she could sit and look out over her hood and be on guard for the frenemy. When one crossed the perimeter, a little dirt and a few cuts and bruises never stopped this tom boy from making a quick descent to launch her own friendly attack.

Her imagination never stopped spinning. The narratives flooded out of her, as did the multitude of names for every character in her life – and the voices to go with. Remy would just shake his head, wondering how she could keep all of her fans straight. His sister's games of make-believe grew up with the gamer.

The world got bigger and her adventures, ever more complex. But the wonderful world of George was never far behind. She watched her mother step into her power and took a page out of that book early on. Looked for the justice in things and never let anyone pick on another kid in the playground without a fight.

George was pretty, strong and soft. She innately knew how to handle fragile things gently.

And if she thought she knew the answer in class, she put her hand way up high. In conversation with adults, she was not intimidated. In fact, the wee linguist embellished English as they knew it with words from her own private onomatopoeic collection. Her coinages and double entendres were theatrical and invariably entertaining.

Her act matured as the girl did, giving more pause for thought than just mere chuckles. By high school, George's sharp and sassy tongue could confuse, confound, and recondition any ear that was up for the challenge. It was her practice that made this skill almost perfect.

Precise. Surgically administered. By the time George reached her twenties, this would be her forte. The envy of every young woman who couldn't make her point with a pow that lasted.

Yes, in just about every arena of life, George would have no trouble asking for what she wanted. Just about. Because a girl is not truly tested in such matters until she makes herself vulnerable to a boy.

Kali wasn't accepted to law school right away. She was waitlisted by the Admissions Committee and knew as soon as she received the news that her chances of getting in were slim.

To protect herself, she made peace with Vanderbilt being nothing but a pipe dream. Rationalizing that a move to Nashville as a single mother with a young boy and a baby would have been too much anyways.

If it doesn't open, it's not your door.

By July, her ambitions of becoming a lawyer were a distant memory.

That was right about the time when she received word there would be a place for her at the start of the academic year. September. With no time to waste, Kali walked straight on through. She put the family home in Knoxville up for sale. It was newly renovated and in a central location. Her asking price was fair; in retrospect, perhaps too fair. It sold within mere days.

In comparison, the little yellow farmhouse on Johnston Street was just that: little. Clearly Kali needed to downsize before making the move. So she began the physical clearing of things. This quickly evolved into an emotional purge too.

She kept a modest collection of Peter's paintings for the children to have when they struck out on their own. Other than that, if she foresaw no practical use for an object, then it was discarded, recycled or passed on to someone who had one.

Sentiment got swept away – along with the broken twigs, dead leaves and strands of cobwebs she used to call home. Before she walked out the front door for the last time, she took a few quiet moments to stand upstairs in the master bedroom under the vaulted ceiling.

The space was now empty, awaiting its next inhabitants. She sat in the bay window, once adorned with the billow of white charmeuse curtains. Her evening ritual had been to draw them closed; then pull them back when she awoke to let the light in. Though the window was stripped bare, she could still feel the smoothness of that fabric between her fingers.

The renovations she and Pete pulled off had reconfigured and rebuilt most of their house. But a new home did not a revived heart make. The view from this perch had

stayed exactly the same, despite all the forced change around it. It took more than hammer and nails to move the mountain.

The Great Smokies were timeless. Distant. Ever present. To any eye looking up toward the horizon: immutable, over many lifetimes. In her wistful mind's eye, just as majestic as they were the very first time she had gazed upon them. Back then, Kali had been a follower, not a leader. Filled with honest intention to embrace everything that was positive about this strange new land of Peter's.

She never thought she would have to go it alone.

Now, she was on the move again.

From that perch, and with that perspective of motion reinstated, Kali said farewell to every memory infused in those walls. Remy's growth chart on the back of the pantry door. The broken door knob to his room, that only rotated to open that portal when handled a certain way. She closed her eyes and recalled that one irrevocable afternoon – when the very seas parted, sunshine poured in, then flooded every cell of her body – and emerald green and ruby red came together.

For one, precious instant. Suspended in time.

Then it was over – never to be repeated.

And Kali's life was forever changed.

She brought her hand to her mouth and – into the air he once moved through – she kissed her Divine messenger goodbye. Then she bowed her head, put her palms together at heart center and surrendered to the greater Forces that had carried her entire matriarchal lineage this far.

In the beginning, Gábor was Gabriel.

And in the end: Gabriel, Gábor.

That made for a perfect circle, the last time she checked. She. Kali. Timeless. Black. Made of pure fire and conflicted desire. The one who put the last piece of that concentricity into place. Recklessly. Unwittingly.

Round

and round
and round she goes.

Where she stops, no one knows.

The mystery's the beauty and the beauty, the mystery. Perfect reflections: each one of the other, such that anything can happen. Once a woman takes that first step past the artifice that binds her feet and believes in her ability to climb that ladder as high as she wants. Then look down on the other side of that ceiling made of marble. Realizing that, in her essence, she's always been a magical moving work of art.

From that sacred place – humbled by the mountains – imbued with every possibility – Kali prayed for a good life for herself and her children. She turned the page when she set that crystal-clear intention.

If only she could have seen into the future. Waking up next to the only man who could ever hold her close as she slept. Gliding across the hall and into her daughter's bedroom. Sliding under the sheets to feel the warmth of her small, changing body; delicate bones, balanced on the cusp of adolescence.

Watching the pure peace of beauty sleeping; the precious chest with budding nipples, gently rising and falling with every sweet breath. Smiling to herself at the thought that, one day, her daughter would trust the new lay of her land enough to wear that soft pink training bra, still tucked away in the top drawer of the dresser. Knowing that when George was ready, she would take that step.

Remembering that when she did, there would be no turning back from the woman she was destined to become. For that little girl in the red dress, there was no rush. No reason for the one with obsidian eyes and raven hair to leave her fields of green too soon.

If only Kali could have known, then – when she bowed her head to the Smokies and prayed, hands to sternum – how she would someday lean in to kiss the soft cheek of her daughter. How her smell would be so different from her brother's. A scent that invoked the future. Exotic. Aromatic. Old world and varied. Like wandering from stall to stall through a spice market in Kashmir.

Cardamom, clove and nutmeg.

Saffron, cumin, black pepper and fenugreek.

All the *rasas* – every taste of life. Each treasured ingredient, brought back from a faraway land. The depth of every flavor melded together in one most unusual dish. Cultivated with a mother's love. Yes. With just one breath in, as her daughter breathed out, a mother will find her sweet satisfaction in the morning dew of the good life she's so humbly asked for.

Feet unbound. Climbing.

Moving artfully. Open to every possibility.

Not yet fully understanding how the moment a woman definitely commits herself, then Providence moves too. And every woman who came before her steps out from the shadows to help blaze the trail and lend assistance when it's needed.

Events she never dreamed of shall occur.

There are Forces less magnificent than the mountain range but just as powerful. They, too, know nothing of time, distance, or memory. But they are ever present, waiting for a sign that a woman has the boldness to begin. Mark my words: one day it will be a very good life for Kali. Befitting of a woman whose feathers once shone every color of the rainbow when she was a little girl. One hundred percent goodness, as a matter of fact. Delivered to her through one of God's creatures, gently roused from sleep:

Mama, I just had a dream that you were kissing me.

Did you, darling? Do tell.

Yes, I did, Mama. Really I did. Who says dreams can't come true?

A female hummingbird likes to bathe several times a day. Splashing in shallow water. Perching where the sprinkle of the river or the waterfall can reach her.

When it rains, she may find just the right branch where she can sit and spread her wings and tail wide. After she's washed by the Heavens, the hummer from that more particular half of the species wants to spend her time oiling, arranging and cleaning her feathers.

She can only do as she would like if she has the precious time to devote to herself. If everything aligns just right and all manner of unforeseen incidents, meetings and happenstance come together. Then, and only then, will she be able to use beak and claw

to take care of all that Nature has gifted her. That's when she'll know she's living the good life.

If only the Gypsy who prayed from beneath her black veil knew it then. When the very fabric of life as she knew it was slipping through her fingers. That one day, not so far off, her mountain would be moved in the dream world of her little girl.

13 Catcher In The Rye

Remy was such an easy baby.

His name means oarsman, derived from the Latin name *Remigius*.

As a toddler, this one worked hard to row his boat to shore. Yes, it's true; parents like to say such things about their firstborn – how smooth it all went, in retrospect. Kali would always picture her son of tender years like a wee football she tucked under her arm and took anywhere, without issue.

That easy baby grew into a happy-go-lucky toddler. But by the time Remy turned four, his impeccable track record was peppered with outbursts that seemed to come out of nowhere. A temper tantrum from the only child in the house quickly escalated into the inevitable and unconscious triangle of a most unhealthy coping mechanism between all three involved:

One red flame of a kid, with two reactive parents –

each adult, headed in the opposite direction from the other.

The main reason for Kali's frustration was always the same. Child's might meets father's right. Like oil and water, these two forces didn't mix well when emotions ran high, such that derailment by the mother was difficult, almost impossible.

Conflict between father and son became a *fait accompli*. The occasions when Kali came to Remy's defense did not go well. Peter viewed her intervention as a challenge to his authority. His silent treatment was the hefty price she had to pay, and it could go on for days.

Women can look ahead to see what's coming. Their men are truly Zen in the sense that they exist in the moment, trying to extract the greatest benefit from the here and now. That's why women used to rule the world, or so some historians say. In her fiefdom, Kali became the master at recognizing a storm was brewing. Then applying her salve to quell it before the pressure built past the point of no return.

To fulfill her self-proclaimed mandate, some might have said that she was waiting for the proverbial shoe to drop. Always on guard, trying to anticipate the mix and chemistry so she could dilute the dynamic when it got too sharp on a grown man's tongue or too

bitter for a wee boy to swallow. This was tricky to say the least. Kali stayed on her toes and watched for the signs from either of her boys.

She learned how to look up and get ready – with both hands free – to catch that shoe, when it came barreling down from the sky. Sometimes, that crafty falling object was made of glass, reflecting the light, blinding her. Transparent and so tough to see. If she missed it, then all she could do was stay out of the way. It would shatter into a million pieces when it hit the ground.

In truth, both parents failed to understand the reason for their child's anger. Both struggled with how best to deal with Remy when he acted out. Kali's preferred strategy was to wait it out. Let the tornado rage, sticking close but at a safe distance from the kicking, screaming boy, knowing it would not last. Then, when he was done, gently clean up the debris of an exhausted, deflated little boy.

Better out than in, she always said.

Careful what you ask for.

Peter's buttons got pushed, time and time again. The man who held his own anger close, often suppressed, did not do well with the child who showed his. Pete couldn't help himself, his impulse to wade in and seek to control Remy's onslaught of negative emotion.

He chose to see his son's dysfunctional behavior as a sign of disrespect. A power play. An assertion he felt he had to meet head-on and then rein in. And so the escalating tension between father and son seemed set by the time Remy started school at age five. Kali felt badly, for both her boys. She knew how hurtful it must have been to Pete that the activities Remy was finally old enough to participate in did not, in the main, go well.

Hey, son. Let's play catch. Come on outside and let's give that new mitt of yours a try before dinner's ready.

Team sports hadn't featured prominently in Pete's childhood. Now he had a romantic notion of how father and son should share the experience. It was another one of his lofty ideas he insisted on floating despite the fact their son was not athletically inclined. At times, Kali's husband could be a tad unrealistic, overly enthusiastic, but that was also part of his charm.

No, Daddy. That hurts my hand. I don' wanna.

Come on. You just gotta break it in, Remy. And the only way to do that is to play with it.

Okay, Daddy. I'll try.

Once the game of catch was underway, Remy made gallant efforts to please his father. But the mitt, on his wee left hand, was stiff and clumsy. Over the years, that leather just never got soft enough. All the little boy really wanted to do was to put on his red hunting hat – as outlandish as it was – with its extra-long bill facing backwards, and its ear flaps hanging loose over his flaxen curls – and head out into a world with a different rule book, smiling from ear to ear. Instead, he donned the fielder's glove to prove his love. And he slapped on a fake, well-practiced grin.

Kali could see how much Remy tried to do – for his father's sake. And how badly Pete wanted to mold his boy into the makings of a splendid, clear-thinking young man from East Tennessee. She recognized her son's delightful attraction to unusual qualities, in people as well as in objects, early on. But what she didn't appreciate – what she couldn't anticipate, no matter how artfully honed her abilities concerning shoes made of glass – was what one angry, confused, kind, horny teenager would someday be prepared to do.

To save himself from the sanatorium.

At the beginning, Pete gushed his words of encouragement on a little boy whose bottom lip trembled. Remy responded to the praise by hustling his pudgy legs in the direction of where the ball had landed. Then, stopping abruptly in wobbly stance, picking it up and throwing it back. Dad gave more instruction, and Remy tried harder.

Every time Remy dropped the ball, his little frame tensed up tighter and his father's voice boomed louder. As the light grew longer, Kali's Spidey sense started to bristle. Peter's commands turned sharp, and his mannerisms, seen through the kitchen window, too animated. Remy went from sad, to mad. What came next, Kali did not see coming. She had missed the telltale signs of trouble.

In retrospect, she felt responsible for not ringing the dinner bell earlier. But it all happened so fast. She was multi-tasking. Another skill stereotype awards to the softer side of the ledger who sits opposite the hard face of the myopic, single-minded male. *One thing at a time, dear, one thing at a time.* If only she had that luxury. But I digress. Kali was busy, like the bee she was, both before and after Pete: setting the table, doing predinner dishes, and taking the casserole out of the oven.

In between all of these tasks, she made the mistake of taking her eye off the ball and leaving father and son to their own devices. As she sliced tomatoes for the salad, Pete was well on his way to receiving and reflecting back Remy's anger in a way she would never forget. Kali looked up from knife, red juice, and seeds when she heard the racket. Remy had thrown himself onto the ground and was kicking and screaming. Pete was moving toward him with purpose. Then leaning over him and yelling.

Now the silly man was attempting to pick up the flailing child. As if moving an active volcano could stop its eruption. Remy's arms and legs thrashed everywhere. Voluntary or not, his body resisted being gathered up and controlled in that way.

One, manic limb came loose and whacked Pete in the face. Kali heard her husband yelp and watched him let go of what he had picked up off the ground. Remy landed with an audible thump. Stunned for a moment by the impact of the hard ground on his bony back, the screaming ceased.

Before he could fill his little lungs to let loose again, his roaring father leaned over and smacked him. Right across the face. Kali felt the sting. Instantly. Her husband's imprint on her son's soft cheek. And then it was over.

She rushed outside, down the stairs of the deck, onto the lawn. Without so much as glancing at her husband, she scooped up her whimpering son and hurried back toward the house. But her five-year-old was heavier than he used to be. Kali had lately made a point of not carrying the boy any great distance in order to save her petite frame.

Somehow, without thinking or feeling, she managed to get him back across the grass and almost to the top of the stairs. She couldn't see her feet on the way back up, and she was rushing, frantic, which caused the misstep. Her toe caught on the very last wooden step. Her stomach leapt with the thought they may both go down, her son first, without her arms free to brace their fall.

How she managed to right herself, she would never know – other than the mama bear instinct kicked in to do what needed to be done. Once inside the house, she immediately ran a bath for Remy to bring him back to the womb. After he soaked the worst of it away, she read to him – as she often did to help him settle. Remy read along with her; the easy words, just. He loved to giggle at the funny parts he knew were coming, having followed along in the same book so many times before.

This time, he participated in just that way. When they got to the part about the ducks in Central Park, he asked his mama what the ducks did in the wintertime, when the pond

freezes over. Right on cue, like he always did. As if nothing had happened. Remy loved all the little routines of life. They grew up with him and lessened his pain as the kind of friends he could count on. Cling to, when everyone else felt like chaos or strangers not to be trusted.

For now, he was still young, and joy returns to every fresh mind and open heart with seemingly so little effort. What Kali observed as normal behavior informed her decision that what had happened did not stick with her son. That was what she wanted to believe. And so she oriented to that result, as mothers so often do when it comes to delicate matters about their own children. It was less painful to think that, as she tucked an exhausted boy in to bed and kissed him on the forehead. Rather than admit to herself that her son was in need of a guardian.

To stand at the edge of the rye field
in case he went too close to the edge of the cliff.

What edge? Everything was fine. They'd work it through, all try harder next time. It was a losing proposition, in any event, to try to save any child from losing their innocence.

They all skipped dinner that night.

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