Paper children
Andrea Maria Ruggirello

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PAPER CHILDREN

Andrea Ruggirello

Thesis / dissertation submitted to the Eberly College of Arts and Science at West Virginia University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Fiction

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Abstract

PAPER CHILDREN

Andrea Ruggirello

*Paper Children* is a novel told from the alternating perspectives of two Korean-American adopted siblings, Vito and Leslie Verranzo. The novel opens on Staten Island in the days before Superstorm Sandy. Vito, fourteen, lives with his grandmother, as both of his adopted parents are dead. He and his grandmother are forced to evacuate when the storm hits and their house is flooded and destroyed. Vito’s grandmother calls his older sister, Leslie, 25, who lives in California, to come get him. Vito is doubtful she’ll come and decides to start selling paintings in order to raise money to build a tiny house for him, his grandmother, and his best friend Duane. Vito decides to paint traditional Korean folk art, despite not knowing much about Korean culture. He’s confronted about this lack of knowledge by a woman at a craft fair and begins to doubt his right to paint these images.

Meanwhile, we learn of Leslie’s complicated, contentious relationship with their mother whose borderline personality disorder took its toll on all of her relationships. When her mother passed away four years earlier, going off the road in the same spot their father did years before, Leslie, in college at Stanford at the time, refused her grandmother’s request to move home and become Vito’s primary caretaker. Instead, she went abroad to Madrid.

Now, when she gets the call from her grandmother, Leslie, who is now living in Oakland with her boyfriend, decides to comply with her grandmother’s request to come—but only because she wants to uncover the truth of her mother’s death once and for all—whether it was an accident or a suicide. She finds an RV for sale and decides
after she finds her answers, she and Vito will drive around the country together, searching for a suitable home they both agree upon.

When she arrives, they spend some time on Staten Island, reacquainting themselves and re-discovering their hometown. Leslie works to get ahold of some letters her mother wrote to her while she was hospitalized. Vito starts to have some success with his paintings while slipping farther away from his understanding of home and his identity.

After several days, they depart in search of a place they can both call home. Along the way, they learn more about their parents and each other and work to figure out who they are as adopted children without adopted parents or a place to call home.
DEDICATION

The author wishes to dedicate this novel to her parents and sister who prove that the saying “blood is thicker than water” is a scientific fact and nothing more.
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Finally, to the friends and family near and far far away, I wouldn’t have gotten through the last three years without you, and I truly mean that. Thank you.
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CRITICAL PREFACE

Four years ago, I began a novel about a family with three adopted children who take a road trip together. I wrote more than 50,000 words before hitting a dead end (pun intended). Something, unknown to me at the time, wasn’t working—something was missing. A year and a half ago, I completed a writing prompt in my fiction workshop about a boy who tries to raise money to rebuild his home after Superstorm Sandy. These two ideas, imagined years apart, snapped together as if magnetic. I started with my writing prompt and bits of the basic premise I’d begun in the earlier draft, and I wrote, with urgency. Mostly. I hit some traffic cones, splattered a few bugs on the fender, lost radio signal for a while, but I was on the right road, finally.

Okay, enough of the car metaphors.

I’m honestly not even sure if this is a road trip novel anymore. It’s at the point where the ending is no longer in my hands—it belongs to Vito and Leslie. I have hopes for them. I really want them to go to Graceland because I already know what they’ll do there if they go, but I’ll just have to see if they make it there.

These two characters mean more to me than any other characters I’ve written before. At a conference in September, I talked to author Matthew Salesses whose novel, *The Hundred Year Flood*, was one of the first I’d read about a transracially adopted person written by a transracially adopted person. Neither he nor I could think of many other novels that fit that same description. I recently read the YA novel, *See No Color* by Shannon Gibbey, but it wasn’t what I wanted to write. I wanted to write a novel that explored transracial adoption both explicitly and implicitly. *The Hundred Year Flood* did
this successfully and I am eager to add to this bare but hopefully growing shelf. I want to continue to expand the idea of the “universal” story. I still hear from classmates and students that the stories about the white people are the ones that are universal, relatable to all. One of my favorite quotes from Junot Diaz goes, “Motherfuckers will read a book that’s one-third Elvish, but put two sentences in Spanish and they think we’re taking over.” I look forward to the day when this isn’t the case and to being an author who isn’t hemmed in by audience in this way. I do believe this book has a place on the shelf of anyone who has felt a part of the “in-between,” struggling to reconcile the parts of themselves with the whole, the internal with the external. I guess that’s my elevator pitch.

Other authors and books who’ve influenced this one:

- Everything by Jhumpa Lahiri: she gave me permission to be a writer with *Interpreter of Maladies*, but I don’t think I even recognized that until recently. That book told me that the voice of “others” mattered, that the non-belongers was a group I could belong to, and that these things could be talked about quietly, honestly, wrenchingly.

- *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Diaz: Oscar is always in the back of my mind somewhere, so it was little surprise when no less than three letters from my first workshop of this novel came back with comparisons of Vito to Oscar. His appeal as a woebegone yet fire-filled character is unforgettable and moving.

- *Swamplandia!* by Karen Russell: The changing perspectives of this novel, particularly among the siblings, was a great help in thinking about my own novel’s changing perspectives. The inconsistency of how things switched was
freeing to me – I worried less about consistent patterns and matching lengths, and instead just let their stories unfold.

-Classics: *The Great Gatsby* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* will always have an imprint on anything I write. *The Great Gatsby* was particularly helpful in thinking about how backstory influences present character choices (more on this later).

-Recently, I read *Another Brooklyn* by Jacqueline Woodson which illustrated a particular version of Brooklyn with such a vivid and sure sense of place that I knew I wanted to do with Staten Island in my novel. Bias aside, I do think my hometown is an underused setting and also works as a metaphor for the in-between that my protagonists inhabit.

-I also recently read *The Mothers* by Brit Bennett, which gave me many things to think about regarding how mothers are portrayed. (Spoiler Warning) Bennett’s portrayal of a young woman dealing with her mother’s suicide was enlightening in how I wanted to approach this same topic and how I didn’t. The subtle and overt ways the character of Nadia reacts to this life-pivoting event were in line with what I wanted for Leslie. But I thought Nadia’s mother was too unknown, never really seen on the pages, and I didn’t want that for Leslie’s mother. I wanted her to feel somewhat known to the reader, even if it was through other character’s eyes, as they grew to know her better and also recognize there are parts of her they can’t know.

Speaking of Leslie and her mother…at AWP this year, I attended a panel on structuring your novel. I sat on the floor of a packed room, right next to the garbage can. A prime location for a humble young writer such as myself to absorb some wisdom. Since I
couldn’t see from my vantage point, I wasn’t sure which panel member spoke about this, but she expanded the concept of an inciting incident in a novel. Coincidentally, she referenced an essay by Matthew Salesses, where he proposes three types of inciting incident: the inciting of plot, theme, and then the inciting incident of the past. He uses *Gatsby* as an example: Nick moving to New York incites the theme, Gatsby asking Nick to set up the meeting with Daisy incites the plot, and, the key revelation for me: Gatsby and Daisy’s relationship is the inciting incident of the past that propels both of those things.

During the panel, I thought about these ideas in relation to my novel and it struck me—Leslie does not return home to fulfill her duty as caretaker of her brother, to do “the right thing,” or to please her grandmother. It’s the inciting incident of the past – her mother’s mysterious car crash and her desire to understand whether it was an accident or suicide—that sends her homeward to find the letters that might answer this question. This was a vital understanding of Leslie’s character and motivation that turned out to be the driving point for her entire character arc. I wasn’t sure what she wanted until I realized this. Now I know. She wants an answer.

I do think all of these things, these books I’ve read, the writing prompt, my impending MFA thesis deadline, that AWP panel, all came together at the right time when I was ready to write this particular story. A call from the universe. I’m eager to finish this novel, to find out whether Leslie gets her answer, if Vito can come to terms with his dual identity, if they’ll ever even make it off the island. The last third of the novel will get written one way or another, so stay tuned.
The Sun & the Moon  
A Korean Folktale

Once there lived a poor mother with her son and daughter. She got some rice cakes at a rich man’s party and hurried home to feed her children. Along the way, she met a tiger.

“Give me a piece of rice cake. Then I will not eat you,” the tiger said. The mother obliged and yet the tiger still followed her.

“Give me a piece of rice cake. Then I will not eat you,” the tiger said. She gave him another piece. He repeated this until all the rice cakes were gone. So the tiger ate her.

He put on her clothes and went to the house. He pretended to be the children’s mother to trick them into opening the door. The brother noticed the tiger’s tail and told his sister they had to run away. They climbed a tree to escape the tiger. The tiger followed but could not climb the tree.

“Get some sesame oil!” the brother called down. The tiger did so but this of course made climbing harder.

“Silly tiger, get an axe!” the sister said. The tiger got an axe and began cutting notches in the tree to climb.

Just before he reached them, the brother called out to the heavens: “If you want us to live, thrown down a rope.” The rope came down and he and his sister went up into the sky. The tiger called for his own rope, but it broke. The tiger fell back to earth.

The brother became the sun. The sister became the moon.

“I am scared of the night,” the sister said.

“I will be the moon for you instead,” the brother said.
So the brother became the moon. And the sister became the sun.
Chapter 1

October 2012

After fourteen years, and as a storm bore down on the island that had been home since he could remember, Vito Verranzo decided it was time to change his name.

The young woman behind the counter at the county clerk’s office looked up from the book she was reading as Vito approached. She had a blonde pixie haircut, the kind that had been trending lately that Vito hated. Why did girls want to look more like boys? he wondered. Boys were ugly—and he would know since he was the ugliest one at school. His black hair sprung from his scalp so straight and sharp, he got actual hair splinters. His beady dark eyes sank into a pudgy face, not unlike clay that had been left in the kiln too long. His stubby fingers reminded him of mini hotdogs. If he had to say something nice about himself, like his first-grade teacher had forced him to, he’d say his ears were normal-shaped, he supposed.

“I want to change my name,” Vito said into the little hole in the plastic divider as clearly as possible. His grandmother always got on his case about his mumbling habit. He told her he only mumbled about stupid shit, and she’d slap him upside his head for swearing. When he thought about the last doctor’s visit, the rattling noise her lungs made and the vials of blood, he rubbed the back of his neck and wished he’d held her hand while they poked her arm black and blue.

“All right…” The woman’s black fingernails click-clacked against a keyboard. “It looks like you need to fill out a Name Change Petition, and then bring that plus your
birth certificate and $65 to court with you.” She hopped off her stool and walked over to
a filing cabinet.

“Court? $65? Why do I need to do all that for?”

“Well you have to see a judge and explain why you want to change your name.”
She eyed him. “And you need to be eighteen or your parents have to do it for you.”

“My parents are dead.”

The clerk stopped her search through folders to fix her gaze on him. “Who’s in
charge of you then?”

Vito thrust his chest forward. “Me.”

She waited.

“And my grandma I guess,” Vito mumbled.

“So you need her to sign this.” She pulled the form from a folder then pushed it
through the slot. Vito pulled at it, but she held tight to her end. “You know, sometimes
you grow into your name. You grow to like it. What is yours anyway?”

Vito yanked the form free. “It’s Bond. James Bond.” He walked out of the office
to her snorting laughter, but it didn’t bother him much. He was used to that sort of thing.

***

On the walk to school, Vito thought of what he might say to the judge: *Vito’s an old man’s name. A cranky old man with a Joe Peschi-voice who threatens to break your kneecaps if you mess up his early-bird special. And that he hated the way teachers looked around the room at everyone but him during roll-call on the first day because of course no one was expecting the chubby Korean kid wearing knock-off Jordans to be named Vito.*
Vito wasn’t just plain Vito either. He was Vito the third. In Vito’s opinion, The Thirds should be reserved for rich white polo-playing polo-wearing boys who knew what it meant to “summer.”

He hadn’t even known the man he was named for, not really. His father died when he was five, just over four years after Vito was adopted, and photographs mixed with fleeting memories in his mind until he couldn’t tell which were which. Like coal, stories can become glittering memories if you apply enough pressure, he’d learned.

“I’m sick of your attitude about your name,” his mother snapped at him once when he’d complained that the other kids made fun of him. “It’s a family name. Show some pride in it and maybe the other kids won’t pick on it so much.” The next day during recess, when Vito said he was proud of his name, the other boys called him a faggot and shoved him backwards off his swing.

Maybe his grandmother would give him the $65. He thought of asking her, of her berating laughter, then grimaced and considered his other options. Drugs, prostitution, armed robbery. He peered at the old woman who approached him at the street corner where he waited to cross. How easy would it be to grab her purse and run?

“Did you push the button?” the lady asked as she approached, squinting at him through her thick bifocals.

“Uh, no.”

“Well how do you think the light’s gonna change, magic? Well, push it for Christ’s sake.” She shook her head and adjusted her purse on her arm. Vito could knock her down, yank that purse free. The thing weighed more than she did, probably. He
wouldn’t feel too guilty because he was sure he wasn’t the first person she’d spoken to in that way today.

He pushed the button and when they crossed the street, she went left, he went right, and that was that.

***

Vito’s public high school was overcrowded, and he didn’t mind it at all. In a sea of 4,000 students, he was allowed to be lost, allowed to bounce off the shoulders of other students in the crowded halls with little notice, allowed to sit in the back of the room with a headphone plugged in one ear, listening to John Sterling yell, “See ya!” during broadcasts of classic games he wished he’d been alive to witness while his teachers went on about the plural *usted* and which genus aardvarks belonged to.

It was no surprise that when he went into the main office to get a late pass, the woman with tortoise-shell glasses behind the counter asked him his name three times and excused herself twice to answer a ringing telephone. He looked around while he waited. A sullen girl with a baggie of ice against her nose slumped in a chair near the vice principal’s office door. Another boy tacked a flyer on a bulletin board: “A Vote for Brendan Hub is a Vote for Better Cafeteria Grub.” Vito could appreciate the catchy rhyme, would probably vote for the kid because of it.

“Verrazano? Like the bridge?” The woman had returned and squinted at her computer screen.

“No, not like the bridge,” Vito recited reflexively. He spelled out his last name. “Ah here you are. Vito the third.” She peered at him suspiciously over her glasses. “Vito Verranzo the third?”
“Yes.”

“What was it you wanted?”

“I need a late pass.” Vito had told her this twice already.

“Hey what are you doing with that ice pack?” she said, looking past him with her sharp eyes. Vito turned to see the girl had opened the bag and was sliding cubes along the floor right in the path of the boy hanging flyers. “Pick those up! Mr. Totten will be with you in a minute, will you just wait!”

“I need a late pass!” Vito repeated.

With a small huff, the woman got her feet and shuffled over to a filing cabinet. Another form.

“Bureacracy sure has dug in its heels around here,” he muttered under his breath. A friend of his grandmother’s used to say that when she came over for painting night. Marcie lived in a retirement home now and had to sign her name in sixteen places and wear a tracking device in order to go out one night a week. At least that’s what she claimed.

While the woman flipped through folder after folder, Vito glanced over at the girl. She was nudging ice cubes into a line along the bottom of the vice principal’s office door with the toe of her sneaker.

“Reason for lateness?” The woman waited with pen poised.

Vito sighed. “Court date.”

She looked up sharply. “Funny.”

“What? It could be true.”

“Reason for lateness?” Her voice took on an impatient no-nonsense clip.
“Doctor’s appointment,” he said.

She scribbled out the form and signed it, then handed it to Vito. She eyed him suspiciously then squeezed some hand sanitizer from a bottle on the counter. “You’re not sick, are you?”

Behind him, Vito heard a door open then a shout and a thud. He turned around to see the girl in the chair laughing with the most evil grin he’d seen on a girl. He was a tiny bit in love with her.

“You know, I really don’t know,” he said. He coughed, leaving his mouth uncovered, then left the office.

***

October on Staten Island was when it usually started to feel like Fall. Leaves crunched underfoot on Vito’s tree-lined walk home. They were blocks away from Midland Beach and the boardwalk, so during the summer, people would often stroll by in bathing suits, draped in beach towels, carrying chairs or umbrellas over their shoulders. Their street, West Meadow, boasted modest one-story homes and mostly retired folks who were done with stairs. Gardens were always tended with care and the streets were lined with tank-sized Buicks and Chevys.

Vito didn’t mind living near so many older people. They knew his grandmother didn’t get around very well so they were always bringing over pies and casseroles and other treats. His grandmother’s friend, Marcie, made Thanksgiving and Christmas dinner with them every year.
When he arrived home, his grandmother was seated in her usual green recliner in the living room. At nearly three-hundred pounds, she just barely squeezed between the armrests. To Vito’s surprise, the television was on.

“What are you watching?”

“Some special weather report,” she said, not moving her eyes from the screen.

“They say a bad storm is coming.”

Vito sat down on the worn, stiff grey couch and watched as a meteorologist with golden hair gestured emphatically at a map of the East Coast. His grandmother coughed, and Vito tried not to look and see the wince of pain on her face.

Vito’s grandmother never touched a cigarette, but she worked in a school kitchen inhaling asbestos from the crumbling ceiling for nearly twenty years. Mesothelioma, a death sentence to someone her age with her finances.

Vito didn’t know his grandmother during her “Lunch Lady Years” as she called them after she retired. He saw a picture of her once, thinner back then but still soft, wearing a blue hairnet and matching rubber gloves. She was pouring a bag of corn into a pot and grinning like she was dumping gold coins into her purse. Apparently she had been the most popular of the lunch ladies at the elementary school—a line of fifth graders snaked around the basketball court on yearbook signing day, with Vito’s grandmother at the head, sitting in a plastic chair signing individual notes to each student.

Vito only knew the woman who didn’t smile much, even before she lost her daughter and her son-in-law before her 70th birthday. The woman he knew was conservative, reserved. When they watched game shows, she was the only one who urged the contestant to take the smaller prize, rather than risk losing everything.
“That’s what you get for being greedy!” she berated contestants on *Wheel of Fortune* who spun the wheel even when the puzzle was obvious and then landed on bankrupt.

He knew the woman who ate a grapefruit each morning for breakfast, fish every Friday, even outside of Lent, and sliced her own pepperoni onto their pizza because it was tastier.

He knew the woman who visited for holidays and birthdays and some Sundays just because. She brought cookies snowy with powdered sugar and cards with certain words underlined, which Vito thought for a long time was some kind of code. He held onto cards for years trying to string sentences together until he realized she was underlining words she meant to emphasize like “love” and “happy” and “wishes.”

One Christmas when Vito was five, their mother refused to put up the tree, even when his older sister Leslie cried and Vito felt embarrassed and angry when the other boys at school asked him how many presents he expected Santa to leave him. His grandmother appeared two days before Christmas with a small fresh evergreen strapped to the roof of her Camry.

“This isn’t about you,” she said when their mother protested as she lugged the tree into the house, leaving pine needles like green sprinkles along their front path. “This is for them.” Leslie cried again when she saw the tree. Vito was just relieved that Santa would know where to leave their presents. As the kids helped their grandmother set up the tree and brought down the boxes of ornaments from the attic, their mother sat in the brown leather armchair, hands clenched on the armrests like she was on a turbulent flight. Then Leslie did something none of them talked about but Vito remembered so clearly.
Leslie walked with her hands behind her back over to where her mother sat. Her mother looked up, round brown eyes wary, chin steady and set as always.

“You do the angel,” Leslie said, presenting the figurine to her mother. Gold wings extended beside the white porcelain face tilted just so with grace and forgiveness; she held a golden harp in her hands and her white skirts flowed down to the base, ending in a soft fur ruffle.

Their mother stared at the angel topper in Leslie’s hands for a long moment. Then Leslie huffed, rolled her eyes and threw the angel at her mother, with some force. The woman caught it, barely, as Leslie turned back to decorating the tree. Something seemed to snap in their mother and she stood up, barking at Leslie for throwing something so fragile. She reached up and set the angel in its place on the tallest branch then bickered with Leslie about taking care of fragile things as they all finished decorating together.

Vito knew the woman who saved Christmas, and the one who made Vito receive Confirmation, who told him he might regret not doing it if he decided to get married in a Catholic church one day. He knew the woman whose whispered prayers he overheard those first few nights after his mother’s death—*Dear Lord, harden my heart into a stone*—whose gold cross bounced against her age-spotted chest as she did aerobics in the living room with her friend Marcie. He knew the woman who gained a hundred and fifty pounds in two years when her daughter died and she was diagnosed, and it grew taxing to walk across the kitchen.
He didn’t know the funny lunch lady or the woman who taught his mother how to French braid her hair and tie a sailor’s knot or the mother who sometimes provoked her daughter’s moods because she was angry at her for who she was.

When he looked at her now in profile, sitting in her chair with the worn upholstery, chubby ankles poking out between her slippers and the cuffs of her velveteen pants, he thought that lady might be gone forever.

“They say we should prepare for power outages,” she said. “Stock up on the basics. I bet the supermarket’s already cleaned out.”

“You have all those soups, remember? From the can-can sale last week?” The supermarket had been in a frenzy and Vito nearly lost a shoe in his fight to get to a pallet of green beans. “Stick out your elbows!” his grandmother had urged him from her motorized scooter.

They decided Vito would go to the deli around the block to get bread and peanut butter and extra batteries. His grandmother gave him a twenty and reminded him to bring back the change as if he had ever stiffed her.

Rocco’s deli was busier than usual. Vito supposed the news of the pending storm had gotten around the neighborhood quickly.

“Hey Vito,” Rocco said as he rang up two loaves of bread, a jar of peanut butter, and a pack of batteries. “You sure yous don’t want more than this? Heard it’s gonna be a doozy.”

“I think we’ll be okay. We have a lot of soup.”

Rocco’s eyes narrowed. “Yous all boarded up? Yous need some help?”

“Boarded up?”
“Hundred mile-an-hour winds are comin’, kid. I know you and Sue are tough but…look I’ll come over tonight, all right? I got some pallets in the back. It won’t be til late though, after ten.”

Vito agreed to wait up for him and walked back home to tell his grandmother the news. Her fuzzy grey brows knitted together.

“He thinks it’ll be that bad? Bloomberg said some flooding maybe. The basement is full of crap we don’t need anyway. But all right. If Rock wants to come, let him come. He’s a good guy.”

Vito helped her bread chicken cutlets for dinner. He thought about asking for the name change fee while she handed him each egg-dipped cutlet to roll in the breading. Last time he’d asked about getting an allowance beyond the birthday and Christmas checks, she’d told him he ate four meals a day and that was allowance enough. It was true. Since he’d turned thirteen, he’d scarf down his dinner then have another sandwich before bed. Even then, his mind would sometimes drift to thoughts of another snack while he lay in bed.

He decided to wait it out until after the storm was through. If he was really helpful over the next few days, perhaps she would be more generous.

Rocco came over that night as planned with boards and his toolbox. Vito helped hold the boards steady as Rocco hammered them in. Looking around, Vito saw many of their neighbors had done the same over the course of the day. Lawn ornaments and potted plants had been dragged inside. The Milners had even boarded up the doghouse in their front yard.
When they were done, Vito offered Rocco the tin of cookies his grandmother had told him to give as a thank you. Rocco wiped his brow and took the tin. He opened the lid.

“Almond?” he asked. He took one out and bit in. “Tell your grams she’s still the best baker on the island.” He handed Vito a cookie, patted him on the shoulder and walked to his car. Despite the night chill Vito sat out on the front stoop eating the cookie. He looked up at the sky. No stars were visible because of the city’s light pollution, but the sky was still a lively swirl of shades of black. He tried to imagine hundred mile-an-hour winds whipping through the neighborhood but the air was too crisp, the night too still for any such thoughts.

The next morning everything changed. Vito woke up Saturday to the sound of the TV and his grandmother talking to someone on the phone.

“Yes, Marcie, but where do we go?”

Vito padded down the hall to the kitchen. His grandmother sat in her usual chair at the head of the table with the phone tucked between her ear and shoulder. The TV was on mute and the words “mandatory evacuation” hung beside the head of the announcer speaking earnestly into the camera.

His grandmother spent most of the morning on the phone. The relatives she’d called, mostly distant cousins of his father, didn’t seem too keen on helping. By the time she finished her calls, her cheeks were red and she was coughing almost non-stop.

“Let’s just go to a shelter,” Vito said, pointing at the scrolling list of local shelters on the television screen. “Fuck ‘em if they don’t want to take us in.”
Wheezing, his grandmother hauled herself up out of her chair to slap the back of his head. He waited where he was, and after she did it, told her he was going to pack.

As he opened a drawer, his cellphone buzzed. It was an old orange flip phone his grandmother presented him with pride on his fourteenth birthday. A text from his best friend, Duane, read: Mom told me to ask if you guys need anything. She said Midland Beach is on the news.

Vito texted him back: We’re fine. Headed to this shelter. Heard there’s free food.

When he finished packing, he went into the living room to find his grandmother sitting in her green recliner. The television was off this time and she just sat with her eyes closed, gnarled hand gripping the handle of her cane. Vito had entered soundlessly, and this was, he realized, what she looked like when he wasn’t watching. The corners of her lips drooped downwards. Her eyelids were slightly purple and the bags beneath them were heavy, full. He saw, suddenly, vividly, the toll the illness and the chemo and the seventy-six years of living had on her. She was tired, and she was sad. He was more afraid of that than of the hurricane bearing down on them.

His sneaker squeaked on the wooden floor. His grandmother’s eyes blinked open and she looked up at him. She smiled wanly.

“Ready to go?”

He picked up his duffel bag. In it:

• One red toothbrush

• Five pairs of underwear, none of the embarrassing ones with the holes along the waistband
• A golf pencil and pad, a free set his grandmother got from the bank

• His used copy of *Frankenstein*, dog-eared on the page when the monster asks Victor to make him a mate

• The iPod shuffle Leslie gave him when she got her iPhone

• His favorite jeans, the ones with the torn off left back pocket

• Some t-shirts, plain, from Kmart

• A grey knit cap

• His blue windbreaker

• A half-used bar of soap in a plastic baggie

• And a deck of cards, the cheat deck with the slits in the sides of the ace of spades that Vito’s grandmother used when she was mad at her friend Marcie

In his wallet:

• A torn, wrinkled five-dollar bill

• His high school ID; in his picture he’d worn a green turtleneck that matched the background so he looked like a floating head

• A Rita’s Italian Ice frequent customer card, two hole punches away from a free small ice (no toppings)

• A photo of his family at Disney World when he was two, his chubby arm reaching up to hold the hands of his sister who towered over
him and squinted bored pre-teen disdain at the camera, his parents faces in shadow due to the brims of the Goofy caps they wore.

Jammed in his pocket at the last minute:

• A strip of wallpaper that had peeled away by the door of his grandmother’s—his—house, blue with just a hint of the golden ribbon pattern that crisscrossed up the foyer to the ceiling, edges white and thin from where he tore it off right before they left.

He didn’t know why.
Chapter 2

In 6th grade, Vito was assigned an essay about Staten Island’s 1993 attempted secession from New York City. Sixty-five percent of the population voted yes, fed up with being ignored by the city government in favor of the more populous, more popular boroughs. The move was blocked by the state assembly. In his essay, Vito had to present an argument in favor of the secession.

Vito wrote about the relatively smaller population compared to Manhattan or the Bronx. (400,000. 34% of residents identified as Italian, he’d noted: far more homogenous than the rest of the city. Leslie told him once that much of the Mafia resides in Todt Hill on the island, the highest point in all of New York City, because it was the closest they’d ever get to heaven.)

The section on transportation noted how isolated the borough was: up until the 1920s, Staten Island was only accessible by ferry—it wasn’t until the four bridges were built in an effort to connect the Island to the rest of New York City, particularly the Verrazano Narrows between Staten Island and Brooklyn, that the population began to boom and old neighborhoods were chopped up by highways. A single rail line bisects the island straight down the middle like a double-bypass scar. It’s free to ride unless you get on or off at either end. (The poorer or stringier people get off at the stop before the ferry to hoof the last few miles and avoid the $2.50 fare. Vito’s grandmother made him do this the one time they went into Manhattan to meet the estate lawyer at his midtown office.)

*Everyone forgets about us,* Vito stated plainly at the end of his essay. *Some people don’t even know we’re part of the city. So I say forget it. Let’s secede and make everything easier on everyone.*
But if he had to write about why Staten Island should stay a part of New York, then he’d have written about the things that really mattered, the things that would make the other boroughs stand up and say, *Hey, fuggedabout that BS succession. We want those fuckers to stay.*

Here’s what Vito could have written about: Staten Island’s bakeries boast cannolis that Italians travel bridges to purchase. A slice of pizza from Denino’s on the North Shore is a rite of passage for New York City mayors taken more seriously than the swearing in ceremony. Once, a mayor ate their slice with a knife and fork and it dominated the front page of the New York Post. On the South Shore, kids can still set up street hockey nets and splash around in community swimming pools and play manhunt in the park at night. Neighbors know each other, they poke their noses through vertical blinds for new neighborhood gossip. Families can find their ancestors in graveyards, can drive their kids around and point out the house their great-grandmother grew up in. New families buy starter semi-attached homes in culs de sac and set up lawn chairs in their driveways where they sit and nurse and yell across the street at each other about the price of diapers these days. Stores serve as mafia fronts, but also become real neighborhood landmarks where families really do buy fresh tomatoes every week because they’re good and they’re cheap and the lady behind the counter asks how the kids are doing. Working class men make copies at the hardware store for a nickel and stop to shake hands and reminisce about how the island used to be. People don’t have porches; they have stoops and they sat on them during the big blackout of August 2003, sweating through their undershirts and complaining about all the prosciutto they’d have to throw out.
All those other reasons to secede were legitimate though too, and Vito sometimes thought he hated his reject forgotten hometown more than anyone else could. And there were other days too when he thought maybe it was worthy of being a part of the best city in the world.

But just like any other place in the world, Mother Nature can humble it, remind it who really owns the land—a mighty gust of wind, some rain, and like that, everything a place has worked to become is violently and suddenly undone.

***

Vito and his grandmother had been at the shelter for three days when Duane and his mom came to visit. They had staked out a small triad of cots in one corner of the big gymnasium they shared with a hundred other evacuees. A Red Cross worker tried to tell Vito’s grandmother that it was one cot per person but a few deep uncovered coughs sent the woman scurrying away.

“Nice digs,” Duane said as he approached, his mother directly behind him. He was tall, dark and skinny with a patchy pencil-thin mustache and thick glasses that made his eyes look tiny. Vito had only had the courage to go over to him in the cafeteria that day in sixth grade because he was the only kid around who was maybe as weird-looking as Vito.

“Hi Vito, hi Sue.” Duane’s mother held her small brown pocketbook close to her chest as she scooted around Vito’s open duffel bag.

“Hi, Marie,” Vito said back, blushing a bit. He’d recently been trying to decide whether Duane’s mother was a MILF. Tiny, her body bee-lined straight all the way down to the white tennis shoes she usually wore. She was a paralegal and smart as anyone
around, so Duane rarely won arguments against her—she had a quick answer for everything. Vito liked that about her, perhaps because it was so unlike his own mother with her quiet sullenness. Marie wore her black hair in a knot at the top of her head, and Vito sometimes found himself lost in staring at the curve of her long neck.

“Here,” Duane said, unceremoniously dropping a bag of chocolates into Vito’s lap. “Happy Halloween.”

“Oh I forgot. Thanks.” Vito tore the bag open.

“Well now this isn’t too bad,” Marie said, looking around the noisy, smelly gym. Other families sat in clusters on the bleachers and stretched out on cots. There was a small medical tent in one corner and a phone bank set up in another. At that time of morning, the line for the locker room showers stretched across half of one wall.

“Don’t be nice, Marie,” Vito’s grandmother said, shaking her head. She shifted and the cot squealed in protest. “This is a place for sinners and that’s why I shouldn’t have shoplifted that candy bar when I was seven.”

“I just wish we had more space in our house,” Marie said apologetically. “I mean, you can sleep in my bed—”

Vito’s grandmother waved a hand. “Don’t be ridiculous. Now just tell us, how bad is it out there?”

The storm had been loud, rattling the windows of the gym and pounding away at the roof. Vito stood with some others trying to see out the high windows but he could only make out the piercing white light of the full moon. He’d overheard someone say the moon would cause a twenty percent surge in the tides and wondered why these things always seemed to happen in the worst ways possible.
Since the storm, they’d been keeping up with the news through occasional radio programs and word of mouth from other evacuees. The damage was bad, and the death tolls were higher than expected, was what they knew. They heard reports about the destruction to Midland Beach but Vito refused to accept any information about their home until he saw it himself.

Marie glanced at Duane who looked at Vito.

“The whole neighborhood’s blocked off,” Duane said. “We tried to drive down your block but we couldn’t get close.”

“The other houses though?” Vito’s grandmother pressed.

“They’re in bad shape,” Marie said with a sigh. Her brown eyes reddened. “I’m sorry.”

No one said anything for a few seconds.

“Let’s go for a walk,” Duane said, tugging on Vito’s sleeve. “Come on. We’ll be back.”

“Yes, good idea,” Marie said. “Some fresh air would be good for you Vito.” She looked at him with deep sympathy in her eyes, the bottomless kind that seemed so common in other people’s mothers, Vito had found. He looked down at his lap and decided no, Marie wasn’t MILF material after all.

Vito and Duane walked out into the yard where a football field was encircled by a track. A brisk wind rustled the trees and cut through Vito’s sweatshirt. Some kids chased each other around the track. A group of men stood smoking near a goal post.

“No school all week,” Duane said as they walked. “Maybe next week too.”

“You think we’ll still have to take midterms?” Vito said.
“No way. Plus you have a pretty good chance of being excused if we do.”

“I saw Jessie Connor in there,” Vito said, jerking a thumb back towards the gymnasium. “With her folks. They already started some kind of online campaign. Rumor around the water fountain is they raised ten thousand bucks in less than twenty-four hours.” Jessie’s father was well-known in the area, having run for city council a few years prior and dropping out due to his wife’s breast cancer diagnosis. When she went into remission, their grinning faces were plastered on the front page of the local newspaper.

Duane approached one of the men smoking near the goalpost. “Excuse me, can I bum one of those?”

The man glared at him. “Whaddya kiddin’ me? Get outta here.”

Duane held up his hands. “Just joking man. Trying to make conversation.” He backed away and pulled Vito by his sleeve to stand underneath the bleachers. He pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket.

“Had my own anyway, just thought we could make some new friends.”

“Since when did you start smoking?” Vito asked, bewildered.

“Since right now.” Duane fumbled with a lighter. He spoke around the cigarette gripped in his front teeth. “Seemed like a good time to start.”

Vito took the cigarette Duane offered him. After three tries, Duane got the thing lit and Vito took his first drag. He coughed as his lungs burned and his chest felt like it was constricting into nothing.

Duane coughed too, then spat into the brown grass. “Good stuff.”
They smoked in silence for a few minutes, punctuated only by their coughs and throat clears.

“How’s Jeremy?” Vito said. Jeremy was Duane’s seven-year-old brother. Their parents were divorced. His father lived in New Orleans with a new wife and family and sent Duane and Jeremy $50 checks on their birthdays.

“He’s all right. He’s at our aunt’s place. Says hi.”

“How are the night terrors?” Jeremy had been having them for several weeks now and no solutions offered by the sleep doctors seemed to help any. Whenever Vito came to visit, the three of them would have deeper black circles around their eyes, and the house would be in more disarray.

“Eh. You know what would be cool?” Duane said, his voice strained. “If you could just buy your own house on the Island. We could live in it together. And your grandma and whoever else. I could get some sleep.”

“Yeah…” Vito drifted off in thoughts of a house like the one he’d grown up in, one with two floors and a big yard. He liked his grandmother’s small bungalow-style home too, though. He didn’t need much space, he’d found. Just something of his own.

“How much do those things go for? We could start a fundraising website.”

Duane laughed. “Come on man. They’re like two hundred thousand. Minimum.”

Vito remembered a show he’d watched with his grandmother about a guy who built tiny houses all over the world. They had beds that folded up and disappeared into walls, lofted reading nooks, drawers that slid out to become tables. The guy said they cost a fraction of the average home.
Vito explained the houses to Duane and they looked up average cost on Duane’s phone. It was around $35,000, including labor.

“What if we do this?” Vito said.

“Do what?” Skepticism marred Duane’s face.

“Build a tiny house. It’s not *that* much money to raise. We could do it.”

Duane rolled his eyes. “You’re outta your mind. Maybe the smoke is getting to you.”

Vito did feel a bit dizzy but also a rising excitement in his stomach. “We could start a fundraising page or maybe we could sell something…”

By the time they went back inside, after dousing themselves with the Axe body spray Duane had brought, Vito’s head was spinning from both the cigarettes and his idea. He’d have a lofted bed for himself and one below it for his grandmother. If Duane came around, they could put in another lofted one above a couch. And the kitchen table could fold down from the wall and they could have built-in bookshelves for all of his grandmother’s knickknacks and maybe even a television nook carved into a wall.

His grandmother and Marie were talking with their heads close, Marie sitting on Vito’s bunk. She had tears in her eyes again, but when she saw the boys approach, she sprang to her feet and forced a smile. It was like watching someone try to stretch an old rubber band. Vito almost winced, waiting for the snap.

“Oh, boys, you’re back! You smell like you rolled around in rubbing alcohol.”

Marie hugged Vito twice as she said goodbye, that rubber band smile growing more strained. Duane said he’d try to visit again later in the week. After they were gone, Vito sat down on his cot across from his grandmother.
“Are you trying to end up like me?” she said. “What are you doing smoking?”

Vito started to protest but she shook her head.

“I smell smoke on you again and no more birthday money or nothing, you hear me?”

Vito nodded. “Okay. Hey tomorrow’s Thursday. How are you going to get to your doctor appointment?” She went every week since she’d been diagnosed with Stage 4 as a compromise for not having the home care they strongly recommended.

“Guess I’ll have to skip this week.”

“But—”

“It’s just one week. In the grand scheme of things it’s nothing. I’ll see if they offer some kind of car service so I can make it to next week, okay? But right now I have to go make a quick phone call.”

Vito handed his grandmother her silver cane. As she braced herself to stand, he asked, “What if the house is gone? What then?”

She relaxed for a moment, planting herself back on the cot. A few rows over, a baby laughed. “Kiddo, what’d I tell you about those ‘what if’s’, huh?”

“Not to wonder about things that haven’t happened yet.”

She nodded. “Exactly.” She hauled herself up. Vito heard both of her knees pop as she straightened.

He lay back down on his cot as she ambled off towards the phone bank. Nothing had happened yet, he reminded himself. Their house might be fine. They might be just fine.

***
Four more days passed at the shelter. The restlessness of evacuees increased, though their numbers decreased too. Most of the people further inland were able to return home and assess damage. The ones who remained grew more and more frustrated with the lack of answers and updates. A few men tried walking back to their homes but were stopped blocks away by officers who told them it was still unsafe.

“It’s my fucking house,” Vito heard a woman say to another while he waited in line for dinner one evening. “And they’re telling me I can’t go look at how much of it is still standing.”

Vito kept to himself mostly because of things like this, because of how angry all of the other evacuees seemed to be getting. He played cards with his grandmother and sometimes they participated in the events the Red Cross volunteers put on. Most nights they just showed a movie in the auditorium but one night they had bingo and another night they had arts and crafts. Vito had half-heartedly painted a squid about to grab a diver which his grandmother took and taped to the wall near their cots.

Finally, on Sunday, it was announced that some of them would be taken on buses to their homes to assess their damage. Vito and his grandmother were among those who were on the first wave on Monday. Vito was supposed to return to school but he begged his grandmother to let him come with her to the house. She agreed once she saw the text message from Duane promising he would collect all of Vito’s work.

The next morning, it took Vito’s grandmother three tries to haul herself up onto the school bus stairs. A young mother ushered her two kids off one of the front seats so that Vito and his grandmother could sit.
“Are you together?” the woman asked Vito as he leaned his grandmother’s cane against the glass behind the driver’s seat.

“Yeah. She’s my grandma.”

“Oh, what a sweet grandson you are, taking care of her.”

“Well only because I sometimes steal her medical marijuana,” Vito said. He winked, but he supposed the woman didn’t see it because her smile flickered out and she turned to her kids who were fighting over who got to sit near the window.

“What did you say to that lady?” his grandmother said suspiciously.

“Just told her I’m the luckiest grandson in the world.”

“Mhmm.”

The bus pulled out of the school parking lot and meandered down a series of side streets. As they got closer, they kept having to turn down un-barricaded streets, sometimes making their way in the wrong direction for several blocks until they could turn again.

Vito heard someone gasp on the bus behind them. “That’s mine! That’s my house! Oh my God, it’s right there. It’s right there.”

National guardsmen and local firefighters met the bus at each of the designated stops. People scrambled off the bus like it was on fire. Vito watched out the window as the woman from the seat next to them gripped her children’s hands and walked towards a red brick house with a tree jutting out from the roof. It didn’t look so terrible, he thought. Fixable.

Their was the last stop. A handful of other people got off the bus ahead of them and met with the officials. Almost everyone was crying by then; even a set of twin boys
who looked no older than three were staring up at the adults around them with sobs heaving their small bodies. Vito thought he recognized an older woman in the group. Maybe he’d seen her at the convenience store before, or walking around the neighborhood. She clutched a red purse to her chest and looked tiny next to the burly firefighter she stood beside. On all the streets, manholes lay open, marked off by cones and yellow tape. It took Vito a while to realize that they had been opened to alleviate the flood waters. He’d seen one picture in the newspaper of a backyard filled with brown water up to the middle of the white picket fence but all the yards he saw now were empty.

They walked by a skeletal piano on someone’s lawn, the keys splintered and curled up at the edges like flower petals. Downed trees splayed across sidewalks and leaned against homes like they were taking a load off. Other yards were filled with belongings damaged beyond recognition. Cars were abandoned in the middle of the road or on lawns, deep ruts showing their path from the street.

An older man grimly carried an upholstered brown chair out his front door and dumped it on his lawn. He nodded at Vito as they passed and Vito nodded back.

When they approached their house behind one of the firemen, Vito felt his stomach flop over as the man explained that the houses on their street had all taken on ten to eleven feet of water. Anything in their basement was gone for sure and likely most of their belongings on the main floor as well. He rattled off some numbers—20-30k, and then said something about structural damage and an already weak foundation. They were on the sidewalk in front of the house by then and Vito stopped processing what the man was saying as he assessed his home.
The boards he and Rocco had put up just days earlier were still intact. A brown film coated the bottom half of the white aluminum siding. Their once-green lawn was brown and soggy, and half the shingles on the roof were missing. It didn’t look too bad to Vito but his grandmother was shaking her head as the fireman spoke to her, pressing her thin lips together in the way she did when she was trying not to react to something upsetting.

“I’ll leave you two some time to be alone,” the firefighter said finally and walked back up the street.

“Can we go inside?” Vito asked, his hand already on the front gate. His grandmother shook her head.

“I’m afraid not, honey. We’re not going back in there again.”

“But how will we see what’s left?”

“There’s nothing left in there for us. Ten to eleven feet? That’s almost to the ceiling in the living room. Even the wall photos are ruined. Oh, Vito, it is all ruined.” She reached out to grasp his arm with one hand, leaning heavily on the cane with the other. They stood like that for a long while, both looking at the house, thinking of the things they’d never see again, like the accordion picture frame on the side table and the refrigerator magnet in the shape of New York State and the pumpkin-scented candle on the toilet tank.

“Well, I guess that’s it then,” his grandmother said finally. “At least I know I did the right thing.”

“The right thing?” Vito craned his neck, trying to see around the side of the house to his
bedroom window. He wondered if he could sneak back later and go inside just to
make sure everything was gone. He noticed one of their neighbors had hung an American
flag across the front of their house, shiny and fresh among the wreckage, and he
wondered what good that did anyone.

“I called your sister.”

Vito’s head whipped around towards his grandmother. “What? Why?”

“To see if you could go live with her.”

“Why?”

“Because I think she’s ready for you. I think you’re ready for her. And I’m ready
to just lie down for a while and let someone else take care of the cooking and cleaning.”

“But…what did she say?” Vito looked down at his shoes as he waited for the
response. Overhead he heard a seagull cry out.

“She’s going to let me know what she can arrange. In the meantime, I found a
place for you to stay and I’ve found a nice place for me too.” She grimaced, shifting her
weight from foot to foot. “Maybe we should be getting back to the bus.”

Vito looked up at the remains of the house. “What if she says no?”

“She won’t say no.” His grandmother sounded confident, shaky as she was on her
feet.

“What if—” She silenced him with a look.

They trudged back to the bus and took their seats as they waited for the others.
Vito looked out the dirty window at the felled trees, the bright yellow caution tape across
open doorways, the fences made into kindling. It had all been so fragile. How did no one
realize this would happen eventually?
The bus driver climbed back behind the wheel with the others from their stop just behind him. Vito pulled his phone out of his pocket.

_We’re raising that money,_ he texted Duane as the bus rumbled to life. _We’re building that house. Get ready._
Leslie Verranzo cashed in her life insurance policy the day after she turned 21, six months before her mother’s car was found at the bottom of the ravine. The cash value was $1500, accumulated since her parents took out the policy on her second birthday. The woman on the phone attempted to convince her to keep the policy, that it would be worth eight times that amount if she kept it until the average age of death for an American woman, which was 78 years old.

“And how exactly would that money benefit me then?” Leslie asked, tossing her black hair over one shoulder. Even though the woman couldn’t see her, Leslie knew she would feel the hair toss in her tone.

“Well your dependents would benefit—”

“I don’t plan on ever having dependents.”

The check arrived in the mail seven business days later. Leslie cashed it at the student union bank and crunched quickly through autumn leaves back to her dorm room. She lived in a single in Roble Hall, a room procured for free with her role of Resident Assistant.

She sat alone on her extra-long twin bed, surrounded by cement walls and counted out the cash, spreading twenties and fifties across the blue bedspread in piles of one hundred. She pressed a finger to each pile, watching the fingernail fill with pink as she counted to fifteen twice.
There was a knock at the door. Leslie shuffled the money off the bed and back into her purse.

It was Shawna, one of her residents. A petite blonde freshman who had a driver drop her off the first day, Shawna was also one of Leslie’s least favorite residents.

“Aren’t you supposed to have your door open at least sometimes?” Shawna said.

Leslie sighed. She knew her residents had complained about her less-than-friendly attitude, her less-than-helpful advice, and her less-than-stellar overall effort creating a sense of community within her hall. She didn’t care much. The effort to replace her was more than the complaints warranted. She went to all the meetings she was supposed to, passed along information via flyers slipped under doors (Times New Roman, plain black letters), and had already held one of the three events per semester she was supposed to (even if it consisted of limp crepe streamers and a few bags of snacks in the common room, and no one showed up). As long as she kept the free room and board for the rest of the year, the next year she would be abroad, and it wouldn’t matter if they replaced her with some perky sophomore who minored in door decorations.

“Is that what you came here to tell me?” Leslie said.

“Of course not. I wanted to sign out the common room. The girls want to have something fun to do for Halloween so I thought I’d set up a little party.”

Leslie knew the implication was that she should have organized something.

“Okay.” She rummaged around her cluttered desk for the right folder, then flipped through the stack of papers until she found the form. “Here. Turn this back in to me.”

Shawna held up a completed form. “I already filled one out.”

Leslie took the form, her mind on the cash in her purse. “Okay. I’ll turn this in.”
Shawn’s eyes shifted from the cluttered desk back to Leslie. “Can you turn it in now? I’ll come with you.”

Leslie sighed again.

“Or I can just talk to Patty again. Her family and mine are actually pretty close.” Patty was the residential director for the building, Leslie’s boss essentially, and what Shawna might be in five years if she couldn’t get one of the Epsilon boys to marry her and her interior decorating degree was no substitute for having zero natural talent.

“Fine. Gimme a minute, okay?” Leslie managed to resist slamming the door, though she did shut it rather firmly.

She picked up her purse and pulled out the wads of cash, twenties and fifties all mixed together now. She looked around the room for a minute before placing the cash carefully inside a large manila envelope which she then taped to the wall behind her desk.

The phone rang as she headed to the door. She knew who it was. What she didn’t know was how her mother had found out about the cancelled policy so quickly. She’d been counting on at least a few more weeks when she would be able to put down her deposit on the study-abroad year and then the money would already be spent.

The answering machine clicked on as Leslie opened the door again. Shawna was leaning against the wall, tapping a long purple fingernail against the plaster.

“Come on,” Leslie said gruffly. She shut the door just as her mother’s voice filled the room.

***

Leslie didn’t realize just how many Asians there were in the bay area, particularly at Stanford. Beyond the students, even most of the tourists who crowded the main quad
and the Rodin sculpture garden wearing visors and sunhats and comfortable walking shoes were from Japan or Korea or China. Their chatter, foreign to her ears, occasionally drifted in open classroom windows to the annoyance of Leslie’s professors. A tourist once stuck her camera into the window of Leslie’s Spanish class and Senora Juarez nearly took the woman’s fingers off when she slammed the window shut.

Leslie thought of this as she sat at her gate at the San Francisco airport on December 12th, waiting for her flight to New York. Two other Asian girls sat across from her, one flipping through a magazine, the other on her cellphone.

Once, when she was nine, Leslie’s dentist asked her all kinds of questions about how much she knew of her Korean background. Even then, she’d sensed his growing disappointment in her lack of knowledge. He’d asked her if she could tell where other Asians were from just by looking at them. She’d gargled around the suction device, “Uh-uh.” A frown had appeared over the top of the white mask.

“But you can tell if they’re Korean at least, right?” he’d asked.

Just like when he’d asked her if she flossed daily, she lied, wanting to please him. “Uh-huh.”

Satisfied, he’d leaned back in his chair. “Rinse.”

She returned to the waiting room where her mother sat watching the cartoons on TV. She stood up when Leslie approached.

“Cavities?”

“None.”

“Good.”
Still embarrassed about the exchange, and unsure of why she’d lied, Leslie didn’t mention anything and followed her mother to the car, squeezing the silly putty she’d gotten from the toy box in her right hand.

Staring at the girls across from her, Leslie assessed their eye shape, their slim jawlines. Japanese maybe. There seemed to be more Japanese on the West Coast, she’d determined. She tried to decide whether either girl was prettier than she was. The one on the left had fuller lips, but her hairline was too far back. The one on the right had the double lids Leslie coveted but her bangs were greasy and her two front teeth bucked out when she smiled down at her phone.

Satisfied, Leslie tossed her hair over her shoulder. She made this assessment of the other Asian women she encountered almost obsessively each day, studying the barista at the campus Starbucks, the other girls on treadmills beside her at the recreational center, even the older women she encountered, to evaluate whether she might look like them in ten or fifteen years.

During the flight, Leslie’s mind tossed with wondering what her mother would say about avoiding her phone calls for the last month, or if Vito would be mad she hadn’t called home recently. She’d sent him an email of A Hundred of the World’s Best Jokes to which he’d replied, HAHAHAHAHAHA R U Coming for Christmas?

When they landed, Leslie thought for a moment of buying a ticket to anywhere else in the world.

Vito and their mother waited by the baggage claim even though Leslie had only packed a small carry-on. Leslie was surprised to see how much Vito’s face had matured
in the months since she’d seen him over the summer. Her mother looked thinner, the bones in her neck and chest protruding like the ridges on a topographic map.

Her mother waited to bring up the life insurance money until they were in the car.

“What are you going to use the money for?” she asked after they’d gotten on the highway and the general niceties had passed. Leslie sat in the backseat behind Vito. The remnants of rush hour traffic zipped by all around them. Her mother had always been a slow driver, especially after their father’s accident. Leslie felt embarrassed sometimes by how slow her mother drove, knowing how frustrated the tailgaiters must be with her. Now, though, she had the strange desire to thrust her head out the window and tell all of them to fuck off and quit bullying her mom.

“Does it matter?”

“Yes it matters. We invested that money for you. We deserve to know what you’re doing with it.”

Leslie chose to ignore her mother’s use of “we” for Vito’s sake. She could see his face in the sideview mirror, the clench of his jaw obvious even in the small reflection.

“I want to study abroad next year in Madrid.” She braced herself, tried to see her mother in the rearview mirror, but she was at the wrong angle.

They were at the Outerbridge Crossing, a two-lane white steel bridge that took on a blue tint at dusk. As they drove over it, Leslie looked out the window as the industrial part of Staten Island came into view. Cranes and power plants were spotlighted by the setting sun. Years earlier, one of the power plant generators had exploded. Even though it was miles away, the blast rattled the windows of the Verranzo house hard enough to wake everyone up. Leslie had thought about that for a long while afterwards, the force of
energy that must have burst from that plant. She walked around for days looking at flowers and ants on the sidewalk for signs that they’d mutated in some way.

“Why Madrid?” her mother finally asked as they finished crossing the bridge and entered Staten Island.

“Because I’ve been taking Spanish for like nine years now. And because it’s supposed to be beautiful.”

“I suppose that’s reason enough.”

Leslie waited for more, for a repeat of what happened when she’d announced she was going to Stanford – refusal to accept Leslie’s decision, and, what was the worst for Leslie, the begging for her to stay. But her mother didn’t say anything. Later, Leslie would wonder if her mother had already given up on her when she moved across the country—miles of ocean or miles of land between them was all the same.

Instead, Vito was the one who piped up. “Madrid is so far.”

“The flight’s only an hour longer than here to San Fran,” Leslie said.

“Yeah but…will you still come home for Christmas?”

Leslie hesitated. She hadn’t planned on returning to the states at all during her year abroad, not wanting to waste a moment of her time there. “Well, I’m not sure. Tickets are really expensive.”

“Oh.”

“I’ll send you lots of postcards,” Leslie said, lamely, reaching over the seat to squeeze Vito’s shoulder. She felt him stiffen under her grip and she let go.

Over dinner, Vito brought up Madrid again, asking if she would live with another family there. He dripped spaghetti sauce on the table as he served himself a second
helping. Leslie waited for their mother to squawk about cleaning up the mess but she stared firmly, almost vacantly into her own plate.

“Yeah, I think so. Like a host family.”

“Who are they?”

“I don’t know yet. I won’t meet them until I go.”

Vito nodded then stuffed a forkful of spaghetti in his mouth and didn’t say much the rest of dinner, even when Leslie asked him question after question about school and his friends.

After dinner, Leslie claimed fatigue and went into her bedroom. She lay in her twin bed, her arm tucked up under her head. In the corner a stuffed pink parrot on a perch hung from the ceiling. Mickey Mouse’s hands pointed to the time on the clock, eight-thirty. Leslie wondered how they had never redecorated, how she’d lived in the pink walls and under the floral bedsheets into adulthood. It all felt cloyingly childish now.

There was a knock at the door. Leslie thought about feigning sleep but thought it might be Vito feeling guilty for his reticence during dinner.

“Come in,” Leslie said. Her mother entered wearing one of her old threadbare housecoats with the big square pockets. The sleeves hung long over her wrists, held in place by the tips of her fingers, a habit Leslie knew was leftover from days of hiding scars that were once dark purple, now faint, barely-visible etchings of her mother’s teenage years.

“Hi Les. Figured you’d be awake with the jetlag and all.” She edged into the room as if she wasn’t sure the floor would hold.

“What’s up?”
“I wanted to ask you…do you have a boyfriend?”

Leslie couldn’t remember ever once talking with her mother about her love life. Even when she did date in high school, she never brought the boys home and her mother never asked about them. Her father had been the one who’d wanted their names and contact info, who reminded Leslie of curfew and to say no to any situation that made her feel uncomfortable.

“I don’t,” Leslie said slowly. It was true. She had dated a handful of men since she’d been at Stanford, but none of them had been serious.

“I read an article that said it takes women four times longer to meet a life partner if they don’t meet one in college. See?” She held out a folded-up magazine page.

“I’m not too worried, Mom. I can take care of myself for a while after I graduate.”

“Oh, I know. I’ve never worried about that.”

Leslie half-smiled to herself at the subtle compliment. She reached out to take the magazine article. When she unfolded it, her smile faded. The title read, Biological Clock or Ticking Time Bomb? Finding Love in Your Thirties and featured a photo of a woman on a park bench staring wistfully at a young couple pushing a baby stroller by.

Leslie knew her parents had married older than most of her friends’ parents. She’d never asked why, feeling it was an insulting question.

“Mom, I’m really not thinking about kids any time soon,” she said, folding the article back up. “I’m twenty-one.”

“But now’s the time to start looking into it. There’s all kinds of information in there about the havoc that birth control wreaks on your body. How small the fertility window really is. You spend years learning how to not get pregnant and then all of a
sudden, you’re running out of time and you don’t know how. Are you on birth control now?”

Leslie shook her head.

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not having sex.”

“But you’re in college,” her mother pressed. “I know what goes on. I know these things can happen…spontaneously.”

“It’s not like a chemistry explosion.”

“You know what I mean. You never even told me about your first time.” She put on a fake pout but Leslie knew she was really hurt.

“I haven’t had a first time,” Leslie said, finally, wanting her mother to feel better.

Her mother’s eyebrows raised. “You haven’t?”

“I haven’t.”

“Oh. Why haven’t you had sex yet?” The question was filled with suspicion as if Leslie was lying.

Leslie knew her hesitation was in part fear of pregnancy, but that was something relatively avoidable. She’d read on the internet about how small the window for ovulation actually was, and coupled with the birth control options nowadays, despite what TV and movies might have her think, she knew it was actually fairly difficult to become pregnant by accident. She wasn’t sure what else was holding her back but she was starting to think that maybe she should just push past it and get it over with.

“I just wasn’t ready. Jeez, Ma, are you trying to make me feel like a prude or something?”
“No, of course not. It’s perfectly fine. Whatever you want to do.”

“Good. So take your stupid article from Nutso Right-Wing Daily.” Leslie crumpled the article and tossed it to her mother.

“Oh good, the liberal college righteousness has sunk in, finally.”

“Not every woman wants to be a mother. There are already enough mothers in the world anyway.” The weight of the words was heavier than Leslie’s intended. Her mother immediately looked down at her bare feet, shamed, or angry, Leslie couldn’t tell. She tensed as she waited for the reaction.

Her mother let out a rattling sigh. “Why can’t we ever just…oh I’m just tired, Les.”

“Then go to bed. I’m tired too.”

Her mother extended her hand with the article, and Leslie swiped it from her. She bent over her suitcase pretending to fumble with the zipper.

“It hurts, you know,” her mother said behind her. “Sex. It hurts the first time. You’ll bleed.”

Leslie didn’t say anything. Her mother left, and Leslie eventually crawled into bed and stayed wide awake until dawn.

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The weeks of winter break went by excruciatingly slow for Leslie. She found temporary work at the Christmas shop in the mall which gave her an excuse to leave the house thirty to forty hours a week. She came home with little gifts for Vito occasionally, making him hide them so their mother didn’t see. They were mostly tchotchkes from the baskets by the register—a tiny felt dog wearing a Santa hat, a tinkly silver bell on a
string. Vito smiled each time she came into his room at the end of her shift and handed him one.

“Are we Jewish now?” he joked one night when she gave him a magnet in the shape of a snowflake. She was surprised at his ability to make such a sophisticated joke and reminded herself that he was almost eleven. She couldn’t remember what that had been like for her anymore, whether she had been truly funny or just kid funny. Or not funny at all.

She and her mother were politely distant with each other, saying please and thank you during dinner, laughing too loudly at each other’s feeble jokes.

Christmas morning, the all sat around the fake tree their mother had put up in recent years and exchanged gifts. Vito was the only one who tore through wrapping paper and exclaimed after each gift that it was just what he wanted. Leslie and her mother thanked each other, exchanged hugs, and then piled up their presents in a neat stack on the bed in their respective rooms to be sorted later.

New Year’s was fun, to Leslie’s surprise. Their mother had bought silly hats and noise blowers from the dollar store and Vito’s excitement at watching the ball drop was infectious. Their mother even drank a glass of the champagne Leslie ran out to buy at 10pm. They all cheered and kissed each other on the cheek at midnight, and Vito danced around the living room until he fell asleep on the couch while Leslie and her mother talked about how foolish it was to stand in the middle of Times Square for twelve hours and whether those people wore diapers or dehydrated themselves for all that time. That was how it was between the two of them; their relationship followed the moods of her mother, and Leslie had learned to take the nice moments when they came.
Leslie’s flight back to Stanford was January 4th. Vito stalled going to the bus stop that morning as long as possible in order to say goodbye.

“You’ll be back before you go to Spain, right?” he said, for the third time, as he hugged her for the fourth time.

“Yes, I told you, I’ll be back in the summer. I don’t go until August.”

When he left, their mother said she’d be ready to take Leslie to the airport in fifteen minutes. Leslie crammed the last of her belongings into her suitcase and wheeled it into the living room. She waited for a while and stood up just as her mother emerged from the hallway stuffing something into her purse.

“Ready?” Leslie said, already starting for the door.

The traffic on the expressway was heavy and Leslie’s mother swore under her breath while Leslie kept saying they should have left earlier. By the time they reached the passenger drop off curb at the airport, both women were sweating and digging fingernails into palms. Leslie climbed out as soon as the car stopped and hurried around to retrieve her suitcase from the trunk. To her surprise, her mother also climbed out of the car and came around the back.

“Okay, bye,” Leslie said, wrapping one arm around her mother’s bony shoulders. “I’ll call when I get back to the dorm.”

“Wait,” her mother said as she turned to go. It was this next gesture that Leslie would look back on later as evidence that her mother had planned to drive her car off the road on purpose.

Her mother extended a large padded envelope. Leslie took it warily.
“What is it?” Leslie glanced at the airport door. Her flight was departing in less than an hour.

“Open it.”

Leslie pulled a thick sheet of paper from the envelope. It was familiar instantly, though it also seemed strange in her hands instead of in the wooden frame on the top of her parents’ armoire where it had sat since she could remember. Her certificate of naturalization. On the left was a small square photo of her as a two-year-old girl just weeks after arriving in the US. The plain white background and her solemn expression made it look to Leslie like a mugshot. She wore a pink bow in her hair. The opening lines described her complexion as olive and her hair black. There was another photo, somewhere in an album in a box in a closet, where she was holding up the framed certificate just after it had arrived in the mail, also solemn in front of an American flag her parents had hung on a blank wall in the house.

“Why are you giving this to me?” Leslie asked, looking back up at her mother.

“I thought you should be the one to have it now.”

“But this is one of your shopping binges? Only you’re giving things away?”

When she was younger, before her mother went on medication and sometimes after, she’d return home from school to find the hall lined with brightly-colored shopping bags and her mother on the phone with the Home Shopping Network ordering another snakeskin purse.

“No it’s not,” her mother snapped. She took a step towards Leslie and raised her hand. Leslie couldn’t help but flinch. Her mother’s face changed and she reached out to cup her daughter’s cheek. The lines at the corners of her eyes reminded Leslie of sand
wrinkles. Her eyes themselves were unreadable, but the wrinkles told Leslie of years of sadness and anguish and boredom and love, love, love. It was this moment that Leslie would look back upon as proof that her mother would never intentionally leave her.

Leslie kissed her mother on the cheek, a gesture that was usually automatic in her Italian upbringing. But this time, she felt the softness of her mother’s skin, the press of bone against bone. She turned away from her mother for the last time. When the automatic doors closed behind her, she tucked the envelope into her carry-on and, like she’d done for years, set her mind away from her mother and onto her next journey away from home.
When Leslie was eleven, she got her first pair of glasses. She chose purple plastic frames with rhinestones on the arms. Her mother stared at her at the eyeglass store while they waited to pay, then told the doctor that her daughter’s eyes looked wrong. “Different,” she’d amended. The doctor told her they would maybe look a bit strange through the lenses but they’d all get used to them. That night, Leslie had stared at herself in the bathroom mirror, trying to assess the difference. The same short straight lashes and monolid she hated stared back at her. Somehow, they were different to her mother, wrong.

She thought of this when she received the phone call that her mother was dead. She’d been applying mascara and cradled the phone between her ear and her shoulder while her grandmother said those words: *Your mother is dead.* As her grandmother spoke some more, she continued to coat the lashes of her left eye. By the time they hung up, and Leslie finally blinked, her top lashes stuck to her bottom ones and she had to put some effort in to pry her eye open again. She wondered about eye muscles and how weak they must be because all they had to do each day was blink. Then again they had to do that several thousand times a day, so maybe they were strong after all.

She thought about nonsense like this while she emailed all her professors to tell them she had an emergency, while she searched fruitlessly for a flight home that day then decided to wait on standby at the airport, while she packed a duffel bag with the word
BLACK blinking through her head like a neon sign so that she only packed black items down to her underwear and socks. She thought about how a plane lands, how the wings open up to let the air through, and about how birds are so light with their hollow bones. She thought of how people were the bones of an airplane and how hollow they were too. She thought about everything but her mother and the accident—accident was what her grandmother had called it on the phone.

As she rushed out of her dorm room and down the hall, she nearly crashed into Shawna coming out of her room. Leslie’s duffel bag slipped off her shoulder onto the carpet.

“Hey!” Shawna said. “Where’s the fire?”

“Sorry, I have to get to him,” Leslie said.

“What?” Shawna’s brow knitted. “Are you okay?”

“I have to get home. To my brother.”

“Why? What happened to him?”

“It’s not him it’s…” Leslie wanted to punch Shawna and cling to her like a life raft at the same time. When she’d first gotten her glasses the world had tilted away from her, all sidewalks seeming to curve downward until her eyes adjusted. That was how the world looked to her now, like everything was leaning away. “Our mom died.” The words fell out of her as if she’d birthed them, screaming into the world. Leslie clenched her whole body, willing the words to crawl back inside.

Shawna’s eyes widened, twin pink spots blossoming on her pale cheeks. “Oh! Oh, I’m so sorry. Can I…I mean…here.” She picked up Leslie’s duffel bag. “Are you flying home?” Within minutes she had her phone to her ear and was asking someone at
her father’s company to send a car. She carried Leslie’s bag down in the elevator and waited with her by the curb.

“I lost my mother too,” Shawna said finally.

Leslie didn’t look up at Shawna but tilted her head to show she was listening.

“She died when I was six. Cancer. It felt like she was sick forever and then she was gone and it was like all that time I had with her was nothing. A second.” Up ahead, a sleek black car waited at the traffic light to pull into the driveway in front of the dorm.

“I’ll never forget that feeling when she passed. It’s like your umbilical cord is being ripped out of your stomach. I swear, something biological happens to you when your mother dies.” Shawna took a deep breath as the car pulled up. “I don’t mean to be morbid, I’m just trying to tell you, I know how it feels.” She put a hand on Leslie’s shoulder. “You’ll make it through.”

Shawna talked quietly with the driver for a moment, put Leslie’s bag in the trunk then gave Leslie an awkward hug. Leslie didn’t thank her. She didn’t look at her because Shawna being kind to her meant something very terrible had happened.

When she climbed into the car, the interior was cool, almost chilly. The driver took off the instant the door clicked shut. He took the 101 to get there, which was the more scenic of the routes. It was dusk, after rush hour, and the moon was visible in the sky above the mountains even though the sun still lingered above the horizon too. She was between worlds, she thought, between night and day. Purgatory.

The world was speeding past her now and rotating in multiple directions and the mountains were shrinking incrementally and the sun was so so still and the moon seemed transparent and her mother was dead. Her mother was dead.
“Pull over!” Leslie slapped the cold leather seat. “I need to puke.”

The driver did so immediately, seamlessly crossing four lanes of traffic to the side of the highway. Leslie shouldered the door open before the car even stopped and threw up, the bile streaming out and splashing up onto the side of the car near the gas tank as they slowed to a stop.

She sat panting, head hanging out of the car, waiting for her stomach to settle. The grassy shoulder loomed toward her, inviting. She wanted to tumble out of the car and down the soft incline into the shadows below.

“Are you all right, Miss?” The driver had gotten out of the car and stood over her now in his black dress pants and blue button down. He held a wad of napkins in his hand which he extended toward her like a bouquet of flowers.

“I think so,” Leslie said. She took the napkins and swiped her mouth then her brow.

“I’m very sorry for your loss,” the driver said, then lit a cigarette and stepped away to give her some privacy. Leslie would start counting, she decided, the number of times she heard that phrase in the next few days.

The agent at the ticketing counter said it to her twice, once when Leslie told her why she wanted to be placed on standby, and again when she gave her the boarding pass.

While she waited, perched at the edge of a cushioned black chair as if she’d need to spring into action when she was paged, she thought of what Shawna had said. She pressed her fingers to her belly button, trying to imagine the umbilical cord that had once been there. It had been connected to someone else, though, not her mother. Her birth mother had become by that point an almost mystical being like the Loch Ness Monster.
Leslie knew she existed of course, or at least had existed, but she was so unreachable, so unknowable, that the line between reality and fantasy blurred. She always wore white in Leslie’s head when she pictured the birth, and her hair was like billowing black smoke. She was sweaty and pained, but still beautiful. Leslie had been two when she was adopted, but she swore she remembered a beauty mark below her birth mother’s right eye.

Her name was suddenly being called over the loudspeaker. She looked at her watch. Three hours had passed. Gate 42. She ran but when she got there, they hadn’t even started boarding yet. She perched again on a seat across from a pretzel stand that wafted buttery smells, reminding her she hadn’t eaten dinner yet.

She ordered a cheese plate on the plane, thought about some wine and decided against it. She would need to rent a car at the airport to drive herself home because her grandmother didn’t want to leave Vito.

She sat in the aisle seat next to a man whose snoozing head bobbed dangerously close to her shoulder the entire flight. Across the aisle, a nervous woman with white hair kept glancing at the back of the plane.

“My dog is in the cargo hold,” she said. “Her first flight. She’s probably so angry at me.” The woman laughed, a shuddering, terrified laugh. Leslie closed her eyes after the drink cart came around, feigning sleep so the woman would go back to fretting on her own. She must have truly dozed off because the announcement that they were beginning their descent was the next thing she heard. The man next to her was awake now and craning his neck to see out the window. Leslie stared straight ahead. She didn’t need to see land any sooner than she had to.
The car rental, Leslie’s first, went smoothly, another few hundred dollars gone, even when she got the cheapest car, a tiny two-door Yaris. By that point, she’d already blown through most of what she’d had saved up for Spain.

Leslie sped through late evening traffic, and when she arrived at her grandmother’s house, it was just like when they’d paged her at the airport. She’d rushed all the way there and no one was home. She knocked several times then walked around to the side of the house to see if any lights were on.

“Leslie!”

She whirled around to see her grandmother’s next-door neighbor, Marcie, waving at her from her kitchen window. “We’re all over here.”

When Leslie entered Marcie’s kitchen and saw Vito sitting at the table playing cards with their grandmother, she thought for a moment that maybe it was a normal Sunday and she was just here to pick up Vito and bring him home. When Vito looked up with puffed-up eyes and he threw down his cards face-up so that anyone could see, despite being the most competitive seven-card Rummy player she knew, Leslie knew it was all real. The road to recovery, to normalcy, stretched thousands of miles ahead of them. She wanted more than anything to skip them all ahead to the finish line.

“You came,” Vito said. The relief and surprise in his voice was apparent and her grandmother watched her with approving satisfaction.

“You came,” her grandmother echoed.

Marcie set out a tin of cookies and they all sat around the table and played rummy while Leslie and her grandmother discussed going down to the funeral parlor the next morning. Leslie liked having something concrete to talk about that was connected to her
mother’s death but not directly about it. She hadn’t asked for the details yet about the
accident. Those came out later that night when Leslie and Vito went to bed. They slept in
the TV room in their grandmother’s house, Leslie on a pullout couch and Vito curled up
on the loveseat like a cat.

“It was the same spot,” Vito said as he aimlessly flipped through channels, the
volume turned down almost to zero.

“The same spot as what?” Leslie grimaced as a hard coil poked at her lower back.

“As where Dad’s car went off the road.”

Leslie felt a sharp pain in her chest, the way she always felt when someone
mentioned their father unexpectedly. “What are you talking about?”

“Mom drove off the road at the same spot Dad did.”

“That’s impossible.”

“I’m telling you that’s what I heard Gram say to Marcie.”

“You must have heard wrong. What would Mom even be doing driving over
there?”

Vito was silent for a moment. On the screen, a woman demonstrated how
powerful a vacuum was by sucking up pennies from a square of carpet. “She drove over
there sometimes. She took me once. On his birthday last year. She showed me the curve.
She said she liked to go out there better than going to the mausoleum because he was
alive at the curve for the last time but he was always dead in the cemetery.”

Leslie propped herself up on one elbow. “Are you kidding? She went to the place
where he died all the time?”

Vito shrugged. “Is that any weirder than going to the cemetery?”
“Yes! And she took you there. Wait a minute, so what was Gram saying when she was talking to Marcie? Did she say that Mom…drove off the road on purpose?” Her voice trembled on the last word as if resisting the heft of it.

“She said ‘It’s too big of a coincidence,’” Vito said. “She said—”

The door to the room swung open. Their grandmother stood in the doorway in her lavender flannel nightgown and green slippers. The light from the hallway cast her face in shadow.

“I don’t think this is the proper conversation to be having the night your mother has passed.” Her voice was brittle, like a dry leaf cracking. “She’s gone and that’s enough for all of us to worry about right now.” Her voice wasn’t scolding exactly, but it was the end of the conversation, even after she left and shut the door behind herself.

Leslie lay awake for a long time, listening to Vito tossing and turning. She thought she heard him crying at one point but when she whispered his name into the darkness, he didn’t respond. She wondered if she should feel more grief than Vito because she knew their mother longer. She wondered if she felt less grief than girls like Shawna who were made of the same DNA as their dead mothers. She wondered if seeing her mother shatter glasses on the kitchen floor and shop herself into debt chipped away at her sadness at all. She wondered late into the night if her grief was enough. When she woke the next morning from a dreamless sleep, no haunting image of her mother as a ghost, no vivid nightmares of a car soaring off a cliff, of a fiery crash, she thought, perhaps it wasn’t.

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Leslie knew what was coming before the funeral, before she lost count of the I’m sorry for your losses, before they sat down with the lawyer to talk about assets and the will. She knew what her grandmother would tell her she had to do and maybe a part of her also knew what her answer would be.

Her mother had asked her the same question before she left for summer camp after her father died. She’d been packing up her things in her knapsack, eager to go away to a place where the other kids didn’t know about her dad, where her four-year-old brother didn’t toddle around after her because their mother had shut herself in her bedroom yet again. Her mother had stood against the doorway watching her pack when she asked, “Will you stay?”

Leslie had brushed off her mother’s request then and continued packing. When the bus came the next morning she’d given her mother a rushed squeeze around the waist and then dashed off, forgetting the snacks her mother had packed for her—animal crackers and seedless green grapes—sitting on the kitchen counter.

Her grandmother asked the question two days after the funeral, a few hours after they’d returned from the lawyer’s office and picked up Vito from Marcie’s. He was drawing at the kitchen table when their grandmother asked Leslie to come into her bedroom. He looked up curiously. Leslie felt for him, remembering what it had been like when their father had died, watching all the grown-ups run around and wondering if it was all going to be okay. She wanted to tell him this, that she’d been through it and survived, but she wasn’t sure it was ever okay after he’d died.

Leslie sat down on the edge of the bed while her grandmother stood over her. She was a small, stout woman; she had some heft, as Leslie’s mother would say to describe
heavier but not obese women they encountered. She still wore a smear of pink lipstick from the day, her green slacks somehow wrinkle-free.

“Now, I’ll work with the lawyer on getting some of that money freed up for you. I know you spent a lot to come here and moving isn’t cheap. And I know the local schools aren’t Stanford. Columbia is pretty good, I know that much. Maybe you could transfer there. I’m sure they’d be happy to have you. I know Vito would be. We could have guardianship transferred over to you, or I can have it, whatever’s easiest.”

Leslie wondered if her grandmother knew what was coming, the way she was talking to Leslie’s feet, and how rushed the words were, so unlike her normal controlled way of speaking.

“So,” her grandmother said, finally looking up into her granddaughter’s eyes. “Will you? Will you stay?”

“It’s not fair,” Leslie said, her voice barely audible and pleading. “I’m 21.”

“And I’m 72.”

“I—I need to think about it.”

“Leslie—”

“Please. I just need some time.” Leslie stood up. She didn’t look up to see the disappointment she knew was all over her grandmother’s face. She walked to the TV room. The door was closed but she could hear the muffled sound of the TV. She gently placed her fingertips against the wood then turned away from her brother and stepped outside.

Spring on Staten Island had once meant the promise of summer, of freedom, to Leslie. That another school year was over, another step towards her inevitable departure
had been completed. As she drove, some of those familiar feelings washed over her as the
cool night air filled the car and she caught the smell of flowers and rain.

The code to open the garage door was the same—the months of each family
member’s birthday. 3469.

The house was stuffy and dark. When she walked into her mother’s bedroom, her
eyes roved the room. The bed was neatly made, the shoes lined up on the floor by the
closet, the dog-eared copy of her book of crossword puzzles on the nightstand. The
wedding photo in the oval frame on the vanity. What had her mother’s face looked like
when the car went off the road? Calm, at peace with her decision? Or surprised as the
wheel jerked from her grasp and the car began to tumble?

Leslie’s eyes moved up to the top of the armoire. There sat a dark wooden frame
with Vito’s naturalization certificate inside. He was ten months old when he came,
chubby-cheeked in his photo. And next to that, where Leslie’s certificate had once been,
an empty frame.

Leslie had bought stationary and envelopes a few weeks earlier, an old yellowed
color, so she could write her mother letters from Spain. Her mother had said once that she
missed correspondence, that it was a lost art.

She was going to take the train all over Europe and find the perfect gift for
everyone. Jewelry for her mother, maybe. And she was going to make a photo collage
from her trip to hang on the wall of her future apartment wherever that was. And she was
going to have stories to tell Vito and maybe he’d want to travel too.

She pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes, her wrong, burning eyes. She
would need to get her passport soon for Madrid, she reminded herself.
When she lowered her hands, her reflection appeared in the glass of the frame, her features distorted, unfamiliar, muted. The only parts of herself she could make out: Black hair. Olive skin.
Chapter 5

When Vito was seven and Leslie was a senior in high school, she’d starred in the school’s production of *The Wizard of Oz*. Sitting in the audience on opening night, Vito found his eyes stinging with tears when she told the Scarecrow she’d miss him most of all. He heard several nose blows behind him in the crowd too. Something about the cup of her hand on the Scarecrow’s cheek or the way her voice caught on the word *goodbye* moved an entire room of four hundred sweaty high school students and tired parents.

When Leslie left them to go abroad, for Vito, it was worse than when Dorothy left the Scarecrow. It was more like if the Wicked Witch had burned off all of Dorothy’s red hair, or when the flying monkeys pulled the straw out of the Scarecrow’s body, or when Auntie Em screeched Dorothy’s name into the wind before she was pulled into the cellar.

He waited for her to return, to appear one night on the front stoop with a suitcase and an apology. She sent things instead. Cards, letters, gifts. She sent a doll once with a hollowed out coconut for a head glued onto a small burlap sack stuffed with straw. Someone carved a big mouth, half the size of the face, and eyes that squinted in pure coconut-y joy. The letter said the doll reminded her of Vito and he’d kept it pushed onto the back of the shelf in his closet. When it came time to pack for Sandy, he’d considered the doll for a while. He imagined its big grin dipping below the waterline, its burlap body filling with salty seawater. He left it where it was.

She stayed after her year was up, for another several months. She’d met a man, she said when she called. They’d come back to the states that next Christmas and the next
year and a half they lived together in Mountain View, California. Vito knew his sister flitted from job to job and that she was “still figuring it all out.” He wasn’t sure when he gave up on her coming home. He wasn’t sure when he stopped wanting her to.

The temporary place to live Vito’s grandmother had found him was with a cousin of his father’s that Vito had only met once or twice. Barbara styled hair for a living. The first night Vito stayed with her he’d joined her on the living couch to watch a reality show about house decorating. She’d asked him if he’d ever thought about a perm.

“Not like some Richard Simmons shit,” she said, “But something to add some…movement to your hair.” Her own hair was streaked with red and looked to Vito like someone had wrapped sections of it around hot Cheetos.

“I like my hair to stay still, thanks,” Vito had replied. This initial conversation set the tone for their relationship and Vito went straight to his room after dinner, only emerging to brush his teeth. He complained to his grandmother when he went to see her at the assisted living home every afternoon after school.

“It’s better than the shelter, isn’t it?” she said each time. When Vito came home one night to Barbara laughing drunkenly on the couch with a graying man, he wasn’t so sure it was.

Three days passed with no word from Leslie. His grandmother still seemed confident she would come for him. She decorated her room with tiny embroidered throw pillows she’d purchased on a group trip to Home Goods. She’d bought Vito a new comforter for his futon in Barbara’s craft room, a blue one with a white stripe down the center and a small art kit—a brown case that came with a pad of paper, water colors and an assortment of brushes.
In the meantime, Vito worked on his backup plan. After school that Thursday, he and Duane sat on the concrete edge of the Kmart parking lot near Barbara’s apartment building.

“You painted these?” Duane squinted at a pixelated photo on Vito’s phone screen. “These look pretty good. Where’d you learn how to paint like that?”

“My grandma.” Vito clicked through to another painting of a seascape. “She and her friend Marcie used to have painting nights. Sometimes I painted with them. If I was bored.” He leaned his head against the iron fence. A teenager pushing a line of wagons paused to wipe sweat from his brow and looked over at them. Vito instinctually furrowed his brow and curled his lip, and the boy looked away and began pushing the carts towards the store entrance.

“But you don’t have these anymore, right? They…they’re gone?” Duane never mentioned the words hurricane or Sandy to Vito. Many others did the same, stopped short and skirted around the words like they were dog shit on the sidewalk.

“They’re all gone. But I can paint more.” Vito watched a woman place a screaming toddler into a shopping cart. The boy’s face was red. Her husband leaned against the car door, texting. She seemed like she could use a calming seascape painting in her bedroom. Or maybe one of those angry paint-splattered ones that made you want to scream into a pillow and dye your hair blue.
“Send me those pictures. And paint something new. I’ll talk to my cousin.”

Duane’s cousin, Marlon, owned an antique shop in Port Richmond and knew how much anything could sell for. When Vito decided to sell his bike for some concert tickets (which he got in trouble for before the deal went through), Marlon was the one who advised him to raise the asking price twenty bucks, and he’d gotten four buyers on Craigslist within an hour.

“You think they could really sell?” Vito asked.

“Well, you’re obviously good but your phone’s a piece of shit so it’s hard to really tell.”

“Hey, we can’t all be ballers like you with those fresh kicks.” He kicked Duane’s plain red tennis shoes.

Duane dug his elbow into Vito’s side. “You just shut your mouth and paint something worth more than either of our shoes, all right?”

They looked up at the big red K that hung above the store entrance, sunlight glinting off the letter, making it shine like it was worth something.

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Vito found the youtube tutorial by accident. After meeting Duane, he headed to the library to find some inspiration. Sometimes his grandmother would play old video tapes of a man named Bob Ross who painted landscapes and spoke in the calmest voice Vito had ever heard, like what he imagined a grandpa sounded like, or the Pope.

After watching bits of Bob Ross videos he found online, and feeling quite serene, he saw another tutorial for portraits of famous athletes and thought if he could learn to paint those, they might sell. Then he found a video of a woman who painted mural-sized
portraits by bouncing a paint-dipped basketball on the canvas. He watched her for a while, equally entranced by the pointillist-style artwork and the young artist’s cheerful smile. When that one ended, a video called Minhwa-Korean Folk Art in the sidebar caught his eye. He clicked. A series of images faded in and out: simplistic, flat, almost child-like paintings of animals, mostly jungle cats. The video that auto-played next showed more plain images of children lounging on human-sized flowers with petals painted vibrant reds and purples.

“I could do that,” he said under his breath. An image of an owl on a branch with big round eyes and jagged lines suggestive of feathers—“Oh, hell yeah, I can do that.”

“Shh!” The librarian at the information desk glared at Vito from behind his thick bi-focals.

“Sorry,” he said, “just realized I’m gonna be a millionaire. But I’ll try to keep it down.” He watched the videos until his 60-minute session was up. After the red “END SESSION” screen appeared, he sat in the chair for a few moments longer, mulling over the idea, rolling it around and savoring it like a hard candy—the strawberry ones with the soft center that his grandmother used to keep in a dish on the coffee table.

“Young man.” Vito looked up at the librarian who had not bothered to get up but rather berated him from his chair behind the desk. “There are other people waiting to use the computer. If you’d like another session, please sign up at the desk and wait your turn.”

Vito threw up his hands and slid his chair away from the computer. “I am all set.” He grinned, eyes disappearing into unreadable slits as his cheeks drew up and up.

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“Fuck, that’s not half bad.” Duane’s cousin, Marlon, tipped his cigarette over the ashtray on his desk. His long fingers moved gracefully, like ballet dancer’s legs flicking once, twice.

“My painting?” Vito asked.

“No your fat face. Yes, the painting.” Marlon picked up the paper from his desk, holding it up against the light that streamed in from the tiny window in his tiny office, as if looking for watermarks on a hundred-dollar bill. His gray-green eyes glowed in the sunlight. Marlon was good-looking, at least according to the rotating girlfriends working the register at the pawn shop every time Vito came by. His line-up was always sharp, and he wore crisp button-downs with the sleeves carefully folded up to his elbow.

“You think he can make some money?” Duane asked. He had reluctantly cut school with Vito to go see his cousin who claimed to be too busy to see them any other time.

“We can try.”

“We?” Vito said. He didn’t particularly like the idea of going into business with Marlon, especially after the fat face comment.

Marlon set the painting down on his desk. He folded his hands on top of it. “Do you know what the word ‘overhead’ means?” He asked this question with exaggerated patience, as if teaching a class of small children.

“Do you know what the word ‘douchewad’ means?” Vito said.

Duane waved his hands at both of them. “Let’s keep it civil, please. Marlon, explain, in a normal way how you want to help Vito.”
“I don’t want to help him. Look, this painting’s a gem, real nice stuff. People will walk by you at an art fair and they’ll stop and they’ll smile. They’ll be impressed that someone as young as you actually painted this. Hard to say if they’ll open their wallets though.”

“Well, how do we make them open their wallets?”

“Look, if I had the magic answer to that, I would be on a yacht in the South of France eating foie gras with saffron. I don’t even know what those words mean. But instead I’m here. With you.”

“Look,” Vito said, leaning his forearms on the desk. “I know we can make money off these. People love shit like this. Slap the words ethnic and one-of-a-kind on these and they’ll go for bank. We just need help getting the word out.”

Marlon stared at him for a moment, then laughed. “Man, you really believe what you say, huh? All right, check this out.” He showed them a website on his computer for an upcoming arts and crafts show at the Staten Island Mall. They could sign up for a booth for $100.

“I’ll loan you the money for a booth,” Marlon said. “You pay me back with your first big profits. Or your allowance, whichever happens first.”

“And if we sell big?”

“Then we’ll talk. You’re gonna have to work hard. The fair is Sunday and one little painting isn’t gonna impress people enough to stop at your booth.”

“How many should I make?”

“Ten? A dozen, maybe, to be safe.”

“A dozen? How am I supposed to paint twelve of these in two days?”
Marlon folded his hands with exaggerated patience. “Look if you’re gonna make enough money for our cabin in the woods or whatever it is you homos wanna build, you’re gonna have to put in work, Vito.” He wrinkled his nose. “Vito. Yeah, you’re gonna have to come up with a penname. Something…authentic.”

Vito smiled for the first time the whole meeting. “That I can do.” He picked up the painting. Looking back at him was the grinning face of Duane’s brother Jeremy. His torso melted into the center of a bright red flower like a pistil. Jeremy’s face was drawn in a sparse simplistic style but it exuded peace, contentment. Beside that was another image of a tabby cat, drawn in a similarly simple style, thick and thin black lines making the geometric shapes of the animal like the Minhwa-Korean folk art he’d viewed at the library. Those had been drawings of gods, but this was a simple pet cat he’d found a photo of online. A tag dangled from its neck that read “Frank.”

His idea was this: he would draw these paintings on commission, depicting people’s children and beloved pets in these otherwise traditional Korean folk paintings. He knew people loved to fill their homes and social media with images of their children and pets. And he knew things could go viral nowadays, so he just needed to make the right clients happy and word would spread.

On the bus ride after the meeting, Vito sat in the window seat while Duane looked up Korean names on his phone and read them out loud.

“Chul?”

“What’s that one mean?”

“Iron. Kind of badass.”
“Yeah, but do you want a painter who’s badass? Painters are supposed to be sensitive and shit.”

Duane kept scrolling, calling off names. Vito rejected Hoon, Hwan, Ki, hesitated at Joon, which meant talented, but decided it was too on the nose.

“We’ll find a good one,” Duane said. “I’ll send you a screenshot of these names.”

He looked out the window as the bus slid to a stop. “Oh, this is me. You need a hand?”

“Nah, I got it. See you tomorrow.”

“You can do it,” Duane called back from near the back door. “Just drink some Mountain Dew.”

Vito gave him a thumbs up until he disappeared from sight then dropped his head in his hands. He had a long night ahead of him.

It grew longer when he arrived at the apartment. Barbara was there waiting for him, solemn at the kitchen table in her electric green warm-up jacket and matching leggings.

“The school called. Said you skipped today.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“Sorry is all you have to say for yourself young man?”

Vito wondered if she’d learned how to parent from watching episodes of *Who’s the Boss?* (oddly his mother’s favorite show. “Did you know Alyssa Milano is from Staten Island?” she’d say nearly every time they watched reruns together on Nick at Nite).

“I was with a friend.”
Barbara raised an eyebrow which was several shades darker than her hair. Her eyes were set close together and the lids drooped down so that she always looked a bit confused and sleepy. “What friend?”

“You don’t know him. How would you know him? None of my friends are allowed to come over.”

“Don’t take that tone with me.” Another sitcom mother line. Vito could sense what was coming, that he’d be banished to his room and he desperately wanted to go there, so he thought of what one of the kids on *Who’s the Boss?* would say.

“You can’t tell me what to do. You’re not my mom.”

Barbara’s set face faltered, and Vito heard his own words echo in the recesses of his mind—first in Leslie’s voice, muttering under her breath after their mother told her to do something she didn’t want to do. Vito didn’t remember what, but he did remember the stricken look on his mother’s face, frozen, like she’d just been electrocuted. Then in his own voice, shouting at his grandmother when she refused to sign a permission slip allowing him to try out for football because she didn’t want him getting hurt.

“Well, thank God for that,” Barbara snapped in return. “Now go to your room.”

Even though he’d gotten what he wanted, Vito felt a swirling fury course through his blood as he stomped down the hall. His room was a tiny space that had previously been a craft and storage room. A black Singer sewing machine sat on a table that doubled as his nightstand just beneath the window. A futon opened up into his bed, hard metal bars digging into his hips every time he rolled over. His belongings occupied one corner of the room while plastic drawers filled with craft supplies lined nearly an entire wall.
He shut the door and pressed the button on the knob to lock it. The first time Vito remembered his mother locking herself in her bedroom and refusing to come out was after he graduated pre-school. There was supposed to be a party with some of the other families in his class who lived nearby, but his mother didn’t want to go. His father pleaded with her through the door for the better part of an hour before making Leslie take Vito to the party. When they returned, the house was quiet and the bedroom door was open only a crack. After the second time, nearly a year later, during which a scary ten minutes of silence from behind the door prompted his father to get the fire extinguisher and knock off the handle, Vito discovered a few days later that the lock on his own door no longer worked. He spun the little knob around and around but it didn’t catch. He tested all the doors – the bathroom, his sisters’ room, his parents’ room and they were all the same.

Thank God for that. Vito turned the words over in his mind as he set up his makeshift paint station. He knew his father’s family hadn’t cared much for his mother, at worst thought she was a drain on her husband and even unfit to be a mother, at best she was a poor thing who needed greeting cards with inspirational sayings sent to her once a month.

He set up a small tabletop easel he’d found in the closet on top of the craft drawers and placed the brushes, paint kit and some plastic mixing cups next to it. After nestling the first paper onto the easel, he picked up a paintbrush. He set it back down. He picked up a smaller one. He set that one down too.

Vito paced the length of his bedroom several times before sitting on the bed, rubbing his face with his hands—hands too clumsy, too fat-fingered for such a task as
painting. He tugged at each finger in turn as if he could stretch them out and mold them into the tools he needed to get the job done.

His cellphone on the nightstand buzzed. Duane had sent him several images of the Korean name meanings website. It took Vito a long time to read through all of them, zooming in with the keypad and scrolling down each image. He stopped searching when he reached the fifth screenshot.

_Seong – Finished_

When he painted the name on the wall in black cursive, Vito felt a thrill bigger than what came with the rebellious act. He signed the name like it was his, the curve of each letter flowing into the next as if some other version of himself in another world, another life, had written this name a hundred times over.

He stepped back to look at the finished product. The g with its wider longer lower loop and its small round top reminded him for some reason of a swaddled baby.

He turned to the canvas.

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The Staten Island Mall was the choice hangout spot for moms pushing strollers, for older people to stride briskly around the upper level balconies in the morning before the stores opened. The evenings belonged to the teenagers who swarmed in groups of boys and girls, occasionally intermingling then parting again.

Sundays were also big for the post-church crowd. Those were the ones who mostly swarmed the tables at the arts and crafts fair that Sunday. Black folding tables were arranged in a large rectangle in the atrium of the first floor where all the wings of the mall met in the middle. Mostly older men and women manned the tables, selling
items ranging from quilts to handmade knives to mink dog coats. Next to Vito’s booth was a woman selling copper jewelry on one side and on the other a man who could burn any image onto a piece of wood. He demonstrated this for Vito as they were setting up, burning a small leafy branch onto a scrap with a tool that plugged in and had a sharp metal tip at the end.

Vito wished he’d brought something more than just his paintings with him. He’d managed to make six more but did not think to bring stands or tape to hang them in a more aesthetically pleasing way. He simply spread them out on the table, the edges slightly curled. He had a small sign he’d painted with black script lettering which read, “Seong’s Minhwa Folk Art,” which he placed on the front corner of the table.

Throughout the morning, people stopped by the table. A group of white-haired ladies who reeked of perfume stopped for a while and murmured to each other in admiration but did not seem inclined to purchase or commission anything when Vito asked. He tried his best to smile at everyone but his cheeks quickly grew sore and he was realized by late morning that he was just baring his teeth. He saw another table was donating the funds to hurricane victims and thought of how he could tell people he was a victim. He decided not to bring it up, though, because he kept picturing the quiet, hollowed-out house and a lump in his throat grew that took several swallows to push down.

One older couple stopped and talked with him for a little while about where he went to school and how long he’d been painting. They nodded politely as Vito stumbled his way through an explanation of the style of painting. He asked them if they had any
grandkids or pets they’d want a painting of, and they both shook their heads and moved on to the next table.

Duane came by at noon like he’d promised with turkey sandwiches packed by Marie. He plopped into the empty folding chair next to Vito.

“So how much have you made so far?”

Vito wrapped his fingers into the shape of a zero and looked at Duane through the hole. Duane’s eyebrows shot up.

“Nothing? You haven’t sold any of these? No one even wants to commission anything?”

“Why don’t you say it louder so the whole mall knows I’m a failure? I don’t think they heard you in the food court.”

“Shit, man. How are you gonna pay Marlon back?” Duane ran his fingertips along the arm of his glasses, a nervous habit.

“You think I know?” Vito had forgotten about paying Marlon back. He had been thinking about the name change fee and how he’d filled out the form over the weekend, scrawling his new name Seong with certainty in the appropriate box.

They were silent for a while as a few more people walked by tossing careless glances at the paintings before moving on. Lots of people were impressed with the wood burning table it seemed, and Vito turned the scrap with the leaf on it over in his hands, wishing he’d thought of that instead.

“Any word from Leslie?” Duane finally asked. He looked down at his phone when he asked, opening and closing apps at random.
“No.” Vito’s grandmother updated him every afternoon when he went to visit her. Yesterday, she’d pressed her lips together when she shook her head, her frustration clearly mounting. Yet she still insisted he was going, even bought him a new black suitcase with wheels and a bottle of sunscreen on the last group trip to Target.

“Oh.” Duane fumbled with his phone some more. “You think she’s gonna come?”

Vito shrugged. “Fuck if I know.”

An Asian woman approached their table. She wore glasses with thick black frames that took up nearly half her face. Her hair was wrapped in a bun on the top of her head. Vito noticed her face light up when she saw the paintings, and he leaned forward in his chair.

“Did you paint these?” she asked, smiling at Vito.


She looked over all the paintings carefully. Her eyes roved over the sign at the corner of the table then back to the paintings.

“You’re Korean, right?” she said, looking back at Vito with sharp black eyes.

“Yeah,” Vito said, suddenly feeling cautious.

“How long have you been painting in this style?”

“Not very long.”

“A few years?”

“Something like that.”

“How did you decide which of the longevity symbols to use in this one?” The woman pointed to an image of a bulldog that Vito had found in a magazine. Behind the
dog, Vito had painted a scene from one of the images in the art book he’d taken out from the library. The sun was a bright orange against a pink sky. Two blue and white cranes flew overhead while the dog perched on a rock. In the original painting, a deer had stood on the rock, its neck angled unnaturally towards the sun.

“Um,” Vito said.

“And the color choices?”

“Well, I just kind of chose them at random,” Vito said lamely. A man came up behind the woman and put his hand on her waist. He wore a houndstooth scarf around his neck and a navy blazer, and he was Asian too. Vito could feel sweat building up under his arms.

The woman nodded. “I see.” She turned to the man and said something in another language. The man grinned then they both looked at Vito as if expecting him to reply.

“I told you. The language is getting lost,” the woman said as they turned away.

“It’s a shame.”

“Hey it’s rude to talk about something right in front of them!” Duane called after them. Vito grabbed his friend’s arm but Duane shook him off. “And it’s rude to talk in a language they don’t understand.”

The couple turned back around. The woman’s eyes narrowed behind her glasses.

“Well he should understand it. It’s Korean. Aren’t you Korean?”

“Yeah but he’s adopted,” Duane said.

The woman’s eyebrows raised. “So you’re painting images you know nothing about and it’s not even your own culture?”
“It is his culture!” Duane said. Other people’s heads turned.

Vito wished he would shut up. He wished the woman would shut up too. He wished he could take the man’s houndstooth scarf and wrap it around his head and curl up under the table until everyone was gone.

“No it’s not,” the woman said firmly in a voice that made Vito think she was a teacher or a mother, someone who had a specific voice for letting someone know that they were wrong and she was right.

Duane sat back in his chair, perhaps put in his place by the woman’s tone, or maybe waiting for Vito to say something in his own defense. Instead, Vito, feeling his cheeks burning, willed the couple to leave them alone. When they were far enough down the line, Vito finally turned to Duane who was watching him with wary disbelief.

“What the hell, man? You just let her disrespect you like that?”

“Maybe she’s right,” Vito said in a small voice. He watched his friend’s face grow more confused.

“What are you talking about man? You’re Korean! You have every right to paint those things. Who cares if you don’t speak the language? My mom’s Haitian and I don’t know a word of French!”

“You listen to your friend,” the man at the wood-burning table chimed in. He bumped his cowboy hat up so that Vito could see his blue eyes under two patchy grey eyebrows. “You got a talent and some people say all kinds of things because they’re jealous. My ex-wife told me burning wood is only good for fire-starting, and look at me now.” He gestured at the folding table, which Vito didn’t think was the best evidence of how well he was doing for himself.
“Come on, man, don’t let that bitch get to you,” Duane said. “You’re talented as shit. Marlon doesn’t loan money to just anyone.”

Vito agreed to stick out the rest of the craft fair. Duane was like a carnival owner, calling out to people who walked by, waving them over, complimenting their sweater vests and pearls. By the time the fair began shutting down, Duane hadn’t sold any paintings but had gotten a phone number from a woman with green studs on the back of her neck and had startled one baby from his nap. Vito half-watched his friend make a fool of himself, and thought about what the woman had said. She had seemed so sure of herself, of her position in the argument and of her place in her culture. Vito had never known what that was like. He was always floating like a leaf that kept getting caught in the wind. There was no place for him to land.

“Bummer man,” Duane said, punching Vito lightly on the arm as he came to stand next to him behind the table. “What’s our next move?”

Vito gathered up his paintings into a stack, lining up the edges carefully.

He tore the sign with his new name in half right between the “e” and the “o.”
Lake Lagunita had been empty for more than a decade. Tufts of wheat-colored grass rose amidst occasional green or rust-colored patches. Dark green trees lined the rocky path around its edge. A single rotted rowboat nestled in the center of the lake.

Leslie went out to the boat once while she attended Stanford, sat in the stern in the middle of the night and pretended she was drifting in a lake elsewhere.

Now, she jogged around the path with some other twilight runners, cooling down after her argument with Phoenix.

She’d heard the messages from her grandmother about the storm and the evacuation the day before. The first one had been when they’d evacuated. Leslie’s heart pounded as she listened to the second one which told her they were safe at the shelter.

They’d been away when the storm hit, Leslie and Phoenix. Phoenix’s parents had offered them the cabin out in Tahoe, and they’d taken it, gladly after the week they’d had. Two investors had backed out all at once from Phoenix’s start-up after a leaked financial report. And Leslie’s boss left her two cats with her while she attended a yoga retreat, both of which, it turned out, Leslie was allergic to.

They spent four days at the cabin, skiing each day and taking naps whenever they wanted. Their cellphones had limited reception though Phoenix did bring his laptop and spent some late nights tapping away on it much to Leslie’s annoyance. Leslie’s eyes finally stopped itching on Sunday, and when they returned to their apartment on Tuesday,
she was suddenly glad he had a cleaning service to vacuum up any remains of Jujube and Polly despite her previous concerns that it was a waste of money.

She listened to the voicemails after they’d unpacked and showered and Phoenix decided to pop into the office to see what he’d missed. She was glad he wasn’t there when she listened to them. He’d ask what was wrong and try to throw money at the problem while rubbing her back in irritating circles.

Later that night in bed, Leslie told him about what happened. He’d offered to fly her home, to pay for a hotel for all of them a few nights. Leslie smiled her thanks to him and told him she’d sleep on it. When she went into the living room the next morning, she found him hanging orange and black streamers along the front window. That was how the fight started.

Leslie caught her breath near the path down to a fire pit where Stanford undergrads often threw parties. She hadn’t gone to a single one. It wasn’t until she’d met Phoenix while abroad that she’d learned there was some kind of solace in parties. He loved to host people at their apartment, buying wine by the case and spending a half hour in front of the cheese display at the grocery store trying to decide whether brie or gruyere would set the mood he wanted. Leslie didn’t care as much for the planning as she did for playing hostess once the guests arrived. At first she’d been awkward, not thinking to take coats or offer a tour. Growing up, they’d almost never had company, save for a few small birthday or graduation parties. Leslie took etiquette books out from the library, and read novels where the characters hosted elaborate parties for strangers. She taught herself how to make conversation, how to pull wallflowers away from the snack table, how to
strategically set up spaces so that people felt welcomed. Their parties became events that even the locals looked forward to.

It was their Halloween party that had sparked the fight. Leslie had assumed they would cancel the party while she figured out what she wanted to do for her grandmother and Vito. Phoenix argued that it seemed pointless to cancel it when she wasn’t even sure she was going to head east. All of their friends were counting on this party, and were they just supposed to ruin everyone’s Halloween? Plus they couldn’t let all the food go bad.

“You just don’t care because it wasn’t your money we spent,” Phoenix had said when Leslie suggested they donate the food or give it to someone else to host. That was when she’d left. She had tried giving him money for the dinner bills and the supplies for the parties they’d hosted, but she gave up after he refused every time for months. She’d settled into allowing him to pay for everything, which helped her focus on paying off the loan she’d taken out for her study abroad trip and to quit her job when she was bored or tired of it.

Her cellphone rang in her pocket, an ugly reminder that he had bought that for her too. She slowed and caught her breath before slipping the phone out to see who was calling.

_Grandma._ Her stomach plummeted and she leaned against a tree for support as she answered breathlessly.

“Les? Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine, I was just running. Are you okay?”

“We’re both fine.”
Leslie wondered when they might not open a phone conversation with concern that something was wrong. “That’s good.”

There was a long silence. Leslie pulled the phone away from her ear to see if the call had disconnected. When she put it back to her ear, her grandmother was already talking.

“—and even if we could get through all the red tape, I think it’s time.”

“Time for what?”

“Time for you! To take responsibility for once.”

“What do you mean?”

“Leslie, it’s gone.”

“What—”

“The house! Are you even listening?”

“The house is gone?” Leslie’s head swam as she thought of her childhood home, the split-level ranch with the slate gray siding. But it had been sold when her mother died—Leslie had helped with cleaning out what she could before she left for Madrid, but it had been uncomfortable with Vito and her grandmother barely speaking to her, silent dinners, and the painful trek through old photos and the stockpiles of purses and shoes and jewelry their mother bought during her more difficult days.

“Yes, it’s gone.”

Leslie realized her grandmother was talking about her own house, the house she and Vito lived in the last four years.

“Are you sure it’s really—”
“It’s all over the news. The blocks by the beach are a total loss. I don’t think Vito knows yet.”

Leslie bowed her head. “Sorry—”

“It’s not the time for sorry. It’s too late for any of us to be sorry.” Leslie heard the anger in her grandmother’s voice, and tried to tell herself it was anger at the hurricane and its destruction.

“It’s time for you to come home. You can stay here if you want, or take Vito wherever you’d like.”

“You’re not going to rebuild?”

“I told you, it’s too much. The paperwork and the time it’ll take…I’ll be gone before then. I’m sending Vito to Barbara’s. You remember your father’s cousin? The one who knocked over the cake at your communion party? Vito will be there until you come.”

“But—”

“You can call us when you’ve decided when you’re coming.”

“But I can’t just leave.”

“Why not?”

“I have Phoenix and my job…”

“Oh yes.” Leslie could imagine her grandmother waving a wrinkled hand dismissively. “You can talk with him about what he wants to do. I’ll buy you a few days here.”

“I can’t just make this decision all of a sudden, Grandma!” She looked out at the rowboat and wished she could jump inside and paddle away to a place where no one wanted anything from her.
“All of a sudden?” The anger was silent, simmering like her grandmother’s
tomato sauce. Growing up, Leslie had never been the target of that anger; it had always
been her mother, occasionally her father. Now she felt its heat and felt sorry for her
mother.

“Leslie. You’ve had four years to decide. It’s time.”

The apartment was fully decorated by the time Leslie returned home. Phoenix
was stirring a pot of brandy cider on the stove, blasting one of their party playlists. He
clearly hadn’t heard her come in so she stood in the doorway for a while watching his
back, the bony blades poking through his thin undershirt, his long dark ponytail curling
up between them like a comma. When they’d met he’d been in Madrid nearly two years
by then, working remotely managing the website for his father’s consulting firm and
traveling for month-long stints in eastern Europe, Africa, and India. He was tanned, wild-
haired, and during their first dinner date, Leslie forgot about her mother, about Vito,
about everyone and everything back home, truly, for the first time during her year abroad.
Leslie had sex with him that evening, drunk, on his living room couch. When he asked
about her parents, she told him they’d died in a car crash, and she let him think it was one
single accident. When he took her to Bordeaux for her birthday, she told him she loved
him, and she was sure that she meant it because she knew she wanted to stay in Madrid
throwing parties and taking weekend trips across borders with him for as long as she
possibly could. She wanted to live in Phoenix’s fourth-floor apartment in Malasana and
press red pushpins into the map in the living room for all they places they’ve traveled and
blue ones into the places they wanted to go to next. And when they’d returned to the
states for a tech start-up opportunity Phoenix couldn’t pass up, she’d hung the map up before unpacking anything else and pushed blue pins until her thumb was sore.

Watching Phoenix grate fresh cinnamon into the pot, Leslie realized the lifestyle he gave her was what she loved. The nice, new furniture, purchased at stores that delivered. The cabinets always stocked with organic this-or-that. A safe apartment in a neighborhood of young professionals and families. His arm tight around her at night, the warmth of a body that asked nothing of her but to be beside him—that was what she loved too. Phoenix, with his tattoos and winning smile, his blissful, privileged assumption that openness to joy brings joy, was a vessel containing freedom, and that was all he was to her.

She felt a wave of sadness so strong it propelled her forward, and she wrapped her arms around Phoenix’s waist from behind. Startled, he dropped the cinnamon into the pot. When he realized it was her, he laughed and turned to pull her in for a long embrace.

He took her hug as an apology and he apologized as well, and they had the party that evening. Leslie dressed up as Saturn, bumping into people with her rings throughout the evening, eliciting much laughter and a few uncomfortable jokes about engagement. At one point, while she passed by him on her way to get more pretzels from the kitchen, Phoenix grabbed her hand and squeezed it. He looked at her as if to say, Aren’t you glad we had the party after all? She just smiled.

A friend from work, Jenny, who was dressed as a sunflower, was filling a cup with water at the sink. She turned and grinned at Leslie, her cheeks rosy.

“Hydrating!” she said.

“Yeah it looks like that may be a good idea,” Leslie said, laughing.
Jenny pressed her hand to her cheek and groaned. “Ugh, Asian flush? You’re lucky you don’t get it.”

“I do actually. Just laying off the alcohol tonight.”

“Why?”

Leslie smiled at Jenny’s pure perplexity. “Just kinda tired. Long week. Booze makes me more tired.” She caught a whiff of weed drifting from the closed bedroom door off the kitchen. She’d overheard two friends of Phoenix whispering to him about the weed earlier, asking if it’d be cool with Leslie. She wondered what vibe she gave off that made them feel the need to ask, and to whisper about it. She thought she was cool with everyone.

“You’re lucky you have Phoenix.” Jenny blew a strand of hair out of her face and took a drag of water. “Someone to take care of you. When I come home from that hellhole, I mean the office, my cat won’t even cuddle with me. Sometimes I just want to quit and travel the world and have a whirlwind European romance.”

“Why don’t you?”

“Well, for starters, I’ve got loans on top of loans. Plus, my parents are on my case about settling down with a rich techie. Must be Korean. You’re lucky you can date whoever you want.”

“Mmm.” Leslie had always wondered what would it would be like to date a Korean guy, if her parents who had made occasional remarks about thugs and fruitcakes would have wanted her to be with someone who looked like her or someone who looked like them.
“What about you? Not the man part, you already have a perfect one. I mean, the job. You aren’t going to be an assistant forever. Are you talking to Polly about a promotion? Moving into a different department?”

Leslie had a talk recently with her boss, Polly, about her future at the company. She still wasn’t a hundred percent clear on what the company did exactly—some sort of financial consultation—and Polly had made it clear that Leslie would need more than a bachelor’s degree to move up.

“I mean, what’s your dream job?” Jenny took a second cup from the drying rack and opened up a bottle of whiskey on the counter. “Like, for example, I would kill to become a professional equestrian.”

“I’m not sure,” Leslie said, pretending to think. She had already thought about this question dozens of times in her lifetime. When she was younger she got excited by too many careers—ballerina, president, actress, FBI agent—and when she was older and it was time to declare her major, she found she was excited by none of them.

“Oh come on, didn’t you go to Stanford? People who go to schools like that have ambition! They have dreams! What’s your dream, girl?” Liquid sloshed over the edge of Jenny’s cup as she playfully punched Leslie on the arm.

“I guess I’ve thought about med school,” Leslie said finally, grasping at an answer that might get Jenny to shut up and leave her alone. She had wanted to be better friends with Jenny which was why she’d invited her to the party. She seemed pulled together at work, on track in the development department and sure of herself in a way that seemed genuine. Once, she’d made a joke to Leslie during an all-staff meeting about how all the female senior executives were blonde with blow-job lips and wasn’t that just
a strange coincidence. Leslie had felt an immediate kinship with her. Jenny had taken her out to her first Korean barbeque restaurant for lunch one day, instructing her how to lay the fish on the grill and laughing at her fumbling attempts to use chopsticks. Now, though, Leslie just wanted to get out of the conversation and talk to someone about current events or what was in the dip.

“Fuck, my parents would shit themselves if I went to med school.” Jenny laughed. “Living precariously—I mean vicariously—is what all parents do best, isn’t it?” She walked to stand very close to Leslie and put an arm across her shoulders. “You do what you think is best for you. I see only good things in your future.” She wandered off into the bathroom and Leslie breathed a sigh of relief.

Later that evening after the last guest had left, and Phoenix and Leslie decided to leave clean-up for the morning, Leslie stepped out of her costume, leaving the heap of rings and leotard on the floor near their bed. Phoenix, who’d gone as Steve Jobs, had already freed himself of the black turtleneck and jeans and lay on their bed in his boxers talking about how great the party had been.

Leslie climbed on top of Phoenix that night, something she hadn’t done often during their relationship. Phoenix was pleased, smiling up at her with something like pride. After, he asked her what she was thinking about, something he had rarely done as well.

“Nothing,” she said at first.

“Come on,” he urged.

“Rain,” she said finally.

“Rain?”
“I ran by the lake before. Dry as ever, of course. And then I was thinking about the floods back home and how it’s just…”

“Unfair? I know, babe.” Phoenix pulled her onto his chest and she let her sweaty cheek rest there. She didn’t say anything more, even though that wasn’t what she was going to say. She had been thinking about how when they were younger, she and Vito had begged their parents for a pool. Every year it was at the top of their Christmas lists and every year their parents told them maybe next time. Now, Leslie ran around dry lakes and Vito’s home had been washed away in the waters. Too much and not enough of what they wanted, always.

In her dreams that night, Leslie drove to the road where her parents had died. She sailed off the edge, floating like a paper bag, and when she landed, she lay in a pile of papers. They were letters, the ones her mother had written to her when she was away at the mental health clinic in upstate New York for three weeks when Leslie was eleven. She sifted through them but the ink had faded or the words were jibberish or cigarette burns blackened key words.

When she awoke the next morning, she remembered every detail of the dream. The letters were real. And they existed somewhere. She was sure she’d kept them in a binder in her closet. Her stuff had gone into storage after her mother died and they must be in there. Unless they had ended up at her grandmother’s house. Then they were gone, destroyed.

She’d forgotten what they said, having hastily read them when she’d received them and put them away. But they could hold answers as to what happened on that curve four years earlier.
The Lettters, the Letters, she mouthed to herself as she lay in bed, to make sure she wouldn’t forget them again.

***

Over a breakfast of avocado toast and coffee, Leslie asked Phoenix if Vito could come stay with them, even though she thought she knew what answer he’d give. She just wanted to confirm it so she could move on.

He took a deep breath and ran his hands through his hair. A few static-y strands stuck out just above his ears, making him look frazzled even though his voice was calm when he spoke.

“That’s a big thing you’re asking of me, Les,” he said. He spoke carefully, as if a word was a trigger for a bomb but he didn’t know which one it was.

“I know,” Leslie said, looking down into her coffee. “I—”

“We’d have to buy a lot of stuff. A bed. A desk, and probably some clothes and stuff, right? And find a good school.”

It took Leslie a few moments to process what he was saying. She just stared at him as he went on, listing off what they would need to do.

“Maybe we could find a two-bedroom further out, you know? Near my folks. Just in case we want to go out and stuff.”

“He’s not an infant,” Leslie managed finally. “He doesn’t need a baby sitter.”

“Still, though they could be on call or something. You’re right though, he’s fourteen, of course he doesn’t need a baby sitter.” Phoenix laughed nervously. “I’ve never really thought about this stuff before, I guess.” An only child, Phoenix had held a baby at his cousin’s wedding and confessed later to Leslie that had been his first time.
“You mean, you want him to move in with us?” Leslie said, peering at Phoenix like she could see his deepest truth if she looked in the right place.

“I mean, I want you to stay here with me. And if that means taking in a kid for a few years…well, maybe that’ll get my folks off my back about settling down.” Phoenix smiled. “He’s a good kid you said, right? Not getting into fights or on drugs or getting chicks pregnant or anything?”

Leslie couldn’t help but laugh at the thought of Vito doing any of those things. “Vito is great.” She realized, though, that maybe he wasn’t. Maybe he’d changed since she’d left. The reports she got from her grandmother and the few emails she’d exchanged with him could be masking something darker.

Phoenix looked at his watch. “I gotta go to the office. We can talk more about this when I’m home but…” He stood up and kissed her on the cheek. “I want to help.”

She mustered a smile up at him and kept it frozen on her face as she heard him walk down the hall and into the bathroom. She kept the smile pasted on as he got dressed, waved goodbye to her from the doorway and left. Even as she heard his car start and back out of the driveway. She smiled until her cheeks ached and her eyes watered. Morning light streamed in through the kitchen window highlighting her half-empty mug of coffee. A few loose grounds floated like black pebbles. By the time she got to her feet to go about her day, the coffee was cold. She threw it down the drain.

***

Leslie found the RV by accident. She was walking to work later that morning, thinking about what life with Phoenix and Vito would be like, having trouble imagining the
two of them in the same room even, when she noticed the red markered letters in the passenger-side window of the RV parked near the curb: FOR SALE.

She paused, thought of just walking on to work, but something compelled her to walk around to the front of the vehicle just to see if there was a price listed. The front bumper was dented and a filmy layer covered the windshield so that she wondered how long it had been just sitting there. She started to walk around to the other side when a door near the back tire opened with a loud creak. A dark-haired man stepped out, wearing a flannel shirt and khakis. He was clean shaven and seemed well-kempt.

“You interested?” he said, squinting at her against the sun.

“Maybe,” she said, surprising herself again. “How much are you asking?”

He shrugged. “It’s negotiable.” He explained to her that he was a former Silicon Valley tech worker but he was fed up with the high rent prices and having to live in the RV in order to survive. He was moving to Colorado where he could afford a two-bedroom house with his skillset.

“This place is a lie,” he said bitterly. “Don’t get me wrong, I’d rather live in this thing than a twelve-bedroom co-op where I can’t keep meat in the freezer, but when those are your two choices…I’m out.”

Leslie had heard about people like him, men and women who worked in the tech industry but couldn’t afford rent within driving distance of where they worked. They lived transient lifestyles, drifting from couch to couch, sharing rooms with strangers, or, as this man had done, finding an alternative to an apartment entirely.

He invited her inside to take a tour. Leslie hesitated for a moment, wondering if it was some kind of trap. He held up his hands.
“I’ll let you hold my gun if you want. Yes, I’m living alone in a box, I own a gun.”

“I’ll maybe come back later with my boyfriend. Who knows exactly where I am right now.”

“Look, why don’t you just have a look around from outside the doorway? You can see most of it from there.”

Leslie agreed and he stood beside her in front of the open doorway.

“She’s a 1997 Lazy Daze. Engine runs fine, needs new brakes sometime in the next couple months. As you can see I keep her clean. In the back there’s the ‘master’ bedroom—queen sized bed and some storage. Then that door right there next to it is the bathroom. Barely big enough to turn around in but its got a shower, sink and toilet. All you need, right? And then this here’s the living space—plenty of dining room for two, sink, stove, and more storage all along the top. Used to get water and electric hook ups at this campsite a few miles that way, but they tore it up to build some new office building. So I got this battery that’ll last you a nice long while and then you gotta keep filling up the water tank whenever you run low.

“What else? Got a nice little hatch to get some more light inside. Oh and there’s another bed up above the cab. I use it to keep my snowboard, but you can obviously keep it clear in case you and the boyfriend get into a little fight or something.” He winked at her, and Leslie was glad she hadn’t gone inside.

It was more spacious inside than the claustrophobic space Leslie had expected. The windows let in plenty of natural right. A curtain separated the cab from the rest of the space. She imagined herself living there, her framed prints from Madrid hanging on the
wall above the dining table, a fluffy white comforter over the bed, the counter stacked with coffee tins and mason jars. When she looked up at the bed over the cab, she thought of Vito and how he’d always wanted a lofted bed.

A car honked nearby and Leslie shook her head, as if to clear it.

“I know what you’re thinking. How can I live like some hobo? Where will I put all my shit—”

“I actually don’t have that much shit,” Leslie said.

“Well…then it’s perfect.”

“Yeah…” Leslie took a step back to look at the outside. It seemed to have been white at some point but the sun had turned it into a faded yellow. There was a blue swish along the side, the Lazy Daze logo, she assumed, and two more blue stripes just above the tires that ran the length of the RV. She walked around to the back, pretending like she knew what she was looking for. A ladder led to the roof and she could see herself climbing it, sitting on the roof, eating a turkey sandwich and watching the sunset. Idyllic, perhaps, but she would still do it, just to say she had fulfilled the vision.

“You can take her for a test drive if you want,” he offered.

Leslie found herself nodding and taking the keys he offered up to her. She was going to be late to work but she had a feeling it didn’t really matter.

When she eased the vehicle out onto the street, it was smoother than she’d thought it would be. She’d expected the back to rattle around or for it to feel sluggish, but it felt just like driving Phoenix’s SUV. She was higher off the ground than in his car, but she liked that.
When they returned to the space after a quick trip around the block, Leslie told the man, who’d introduced himself as Jack during their short drive, that she wanted to think it over for the rest of the day.

“I’ll give you a good deal,” Jack said, “if you come back by Friday.” He looked up at the sky, as if disgusted with the sun. “I’m ready to move on.”

Leslie wasn’t quite ready to say “me too” but she smiled, pressed her hand to the hot metal siding and promised him she’d be back.

***

In the end, Phoenix was generous as ever. She emptied her savings account to pay for the RV and Phoenix gave her enough money for gas and expenses along the way along with two big cardboard boxes of kitchenware and linens.

“Thank you,” she said when he transferred the money into her account. “For everything you’ve given me. I don’t want you to think—”

“You can’t control what I think,” Phoenix said with a sad smile. “And unfortunately neither can I. It’s all even.”

Still, Leslie promised to pay him back once she got a job wherever they landed.

“How long do you think it’ll be before you’re settled?” he asked.

“A couple of weeks?” Leslie had spent the last several evenings studying the map in the living room and researching the best cross-country routes. She could make it over there in four or five days, and then she’d imagined she and Vito would take their time, maybe map out some sights to see and line up some job interviews in the places they liked. She was in no rush.
That Saturday, once the RV was parked in their building’s lot, Leslie called her grandmother.

“I’ll be there by the end of next week,” she said after she explained about the RV.

“And you and Vito are just going to drive around like a couple of beatniks?” She coughed, deep vibrating sounds that made Leslie pull the phone away from her ear.

“We’ll settle down somewhere. Even if we have to live in the RV for Vito to finish out the school year. We’ll figure it out.”

Her grandmother sighed. “Your brother needs stability. That’s why I asked you to come.”

“He’ll get what he needs, okay?” Leslie softened her tone. “I promise, Grandma.”

“Well I’m telling Vito you’re coming then, so he can prepare. So you better do as you say.”

“I’ll see you soon, Grandma.”

Leslie only had Phoenix to say goodbye to. She’d sent the rest of her colleagues copy-and-pasted emails and figured Phoenix could pass the message on to everyone else. Her boss, Polly, acted disappointed and supportive, but Leslie also knew she wasn’t the best assistant and sensed a bit of relief too.

“I hope you find what you’re looking for,” Phoenix said as they stood outside the RV. He’d sweated through his red t-shirt helping her move her things into the vehicle. His long hair hung loose, the way it had when she’d first met him, and she felt regret, hard and sharp in the pit of her stomach.
“I’m not looking for anything,” Leslie said. “Just doing what I have to.”

He nodded. “Right.”

His hands were large and warm on her back as he hugged her for a long time.

“I’ll call you on the way,” she offered.

“Please don’t.” His eyes glinted with the hurt and anger she had been waiting for, had almost hoped for. Now that it was there, she still needed to turn away from it quickly.

Leslie sat in the driver’s seat for a while after Phoenix went back into the building. The sun beat down through the windshield and soon her underarms and temples were damp. She reached up to lower the visor. It came off in her hand.

“All right then.” She tossed the visor onto the passenger seat and started the engine.
Chapter 7

Vito pressed his face into his pillow, blocking out the daylight that blasted cheerfully through his bare bedroom window. He’d asked Barbara days before about putting up curtains, and she told him she’d do it but hadn’t gotten around to it yet.

Not that it would matter soon because Leslie was coming to get him and take him...somewhere. When his grandmother told him the evening before that Leslie would arrive in a few days, he’d just nodded.

“You’re not happy?” she’d asked suspiciously over her cup of tea. They’d sat in the dining room of the nursing home with some other visiting families. “She wants the two of you to go on some sort of a road trip.”

Vito had mustered a small smile. “Cool. Sounds like fun.”

“I know you don’t want to leave home. But you’ll have two homes now.”

“I think I’d rather stay here with you. Even if we’re not living together.”

It was then that she told him she’d stopped responding to the chemo treatments. They’d discussed this before, how the chemo treatments would only extend her life expectancy, not cure anything at this stage. The doctors would do some palliative treatments to relieve pain and pressure in her chest, but her time was now tangibly finite, both suddenly and not suddenly.

“All of this, the storm, everything, it’s all coming together,” she said confidently, even as her tea cup rattled against the saucer as she put it down. “It’s all pushing you towards the place you belong. Don’t fight it.”
Vito wasn’t so sure, especially since Leslie didn’t seem to have an exact plan of where they were going. He wondered how they would know they’d found home, and if that would be the same for both of them. Maybe he could convince her to stay on Staten Island once she got there.

This thought cheered him slightly and he sat up in bed. It was Monday and he was supposed to go to school, though he didn’t see much of a point since he was leaving. Still, he climbed out of bed and stretched, grunting with exaggerated exertion. He heard Barbara in the bathroom and waited until she was rattling around in the kitchen before taking a shower.

His morning classes dragged on until lunch which he and Duane took on the bleachers outside, despite the late autumn chill. Vito put his hood up against the wind and hunched over his tray of pizza and French fries. Duane gobbled down his peanut butter sandwich before peeling open the ice cream sandwich he’d bought from the vending machine.

“How are you eating that?” Vito said. He could barely pick up his pizza, his fingers were so stiff with cold.

“Ice cream is always in season,” Duane said smiling, showing chocolate caught in his teeth. “So what’s the deal with the paintings, man? The website is live. It’s got some hits. I emailed it to my cousin Kylie, the one in Brooklyn, and she sent it out to all her artsy friends.”

“You might as well take it down. We need to come up with a new plan.” Vito hadn’t told him yet that Leslie was coming. There was still the small chance she wouldn’t and besides, Duane had enough going on in his own life.
“Why? You can’t let one small failure get you down.”

Vito grunted in reply, his mouth stuffed with fries. He had stayed up late thinking about what the woman at the mall had said, whether he had any right to those paintings. Duane seemed to think he did, but what did he know, really? He’d had the urge to call Leslie and see what she thought, but he hadn’t called her in years. To start with such a complicated question seemed the wrong thing to do.

“You might as well keep the website up,” Duane said. “I put all that work into it after all. Here, look.” Duane pulled up the website on his cell phone. It was hard to see on the screen but the bouncing animated letters that read “Seong’s Minhwa Folk Art!” made Vito slightly nauseated. His paintings did look good though, he had to admit, presented in a simply grid. If he ignored the flashing “PRICES SO LOW WE’RE PRACTICALLY GIVING THEM AWAY,” he thought they even looked professional.

“All right,” Vito said. “But if anyone commissions something, I can’t promise I’ll do it.”

“Whatever, dude.” Duane licked a dribble of ice cream from his hand. “Any word from the sis?”

Vito drained the last of his milk carton before answering. “Yeah, actually. I guess she called yesterday while we were at the fair. Grandma says she’s coming in a few days. She’s got some kind of RV or camper? I dunno. It’s crazy.” He watched Duane carefully.

“She’s coming, huh? So I guess it really don’t matter about the paintings then.”
“I still wanna do it,” Vito said quickly. “I’d rather live in a tiny house here with you and my Grandma than with her. Look, I was just being a pain before. I’ll commission any order that comes through. We can still do this.”

Duane was staring off across the field where a few runners stretched on the starting line of the track.

“Tell you what,” Vito said, grabbing Duane’s shoulder. “Let’s set up something on a street corner. You help me, okay? This week. Before she comes, if she even does.”

Duane mustered a half-smile. “Okay. Sounds like a plan.”

The bell rang but neither of them moved. Duane’s ice cream dripped onto the metal bleacher with a steady pinging sound like rain.

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Vito and Duane spent that afternoon and the next scouting locations to set up. Vito hadn’t realized how many cops patrolled the busiest intersections or how many restrictions there were on street artists. Legally, they were supposed to stick to specific vending sites, which were few and far between on Staten Island. The ones they could get to without a car were already occupied by other types of vendors, mostly of the hotdog variety. There were height, width, and length requirements, distance from the nearest door, restrictions against leaning art against walls or fences, and if the sidewalk became “unusually crowded” they could be subject to penalties.

“So we can get in trouble if our shit is too good,” Duane grumbled as they read through the restrictions at his house Wednesday evening. “And Marlon said most of the good spots are already claimed.”
“I thought you couldn’t reserve art vending spots,” Vito said, squinting at the screen.

“You can’t officially, but there are unspoken rules. Unless we want to mess with the status quo, we gotta follow seniority.”

That was what sparked Vito’s idea to set up outside his grandmother’s retirement home. There would be foot traffic from visitors and the residents themselves might be interested. His grandmother promised to do her best to keep him from getting kicked off the premises, and to talk up his artwork to the other residents.

Vito lugged his supplies to school Thursday morning in order to head straight to Silverlake after school. A security guard in the hall between sixth and seventh period stopped him and made him dump everything out onto the floor, but other than that, the day was uneventful. Vito wondered if he should tell someone else at school he was leaving. Duane was the only friend who he really cared to tell, but he decided to mention it to his eighth period PE class sit-up partner, James Horowitz, just to see the reaction.

“So you don’t know where you’re going to live? Or where you’re gonna go to school?” James grunted the words out between sit-ups.

Vito shook his head. “No clue, man.”

“Are you still counting?”

“Uh-huh.” Vito had lost count but figured James was somewhere about fifteen.

“Sixteen. Seventeen. So yeah, I’m just heading out on that open road.”

“That sounds dumb. No offense. If you take too long to go back to school they’re gonna hold you back. Plus what if she decides she wants to live somewhere like Ohio or
Idaho or something?” Gasping, James flopped onto his back when the buzzer rang. “How many was that?”

“Uh, like twenty.”

“Like?”

As they headed to the showers, James didn’t tell Vito he’d miss him.

Vito thought about what James said about the states they could end up in, and spent the rest of the day making a list of all the states and cities and types of places he would tell Leslie were off the table. He read the list to Duane on the bus ride over to Silverlake.

“And definitely no places with the word Hill in the name. And nothing too swampy. None of the states in that middle column, except maybe Kansas because I have a feeling the Royals are gonna win the series in a year or two.”

“Kansas City is in Missouri,” Duane said.

“Right. Fuck Kansas then. Sorry Toto.” He scribbled it off his list.

They set up on one of the benches on the path that led up to the main entrance. Vito hung a newly painted sign up on the back of the bench then spread the photos beneath. Duane had made another sign of his own that offered a buy one get one fifty percent off deal.

Vito went inside to get his grandmother. She was sitting in the lounge area watching daytime television with two other residents. The other women smiled at Vito, but he avoided eye contact. Whenever he came, they always questioned him about school and his friends and whether he had a girlfriend—always the same questions even if he answered them the exact same way every time.
“Say hi to the girls,” his grandmother instructed him as she got to her feet. “Come on, you know them by now.” She muttered out of the corner of her mouth, “Their pockets go deep if you know what I’m saying.”

Vito reluctantly smiled at the women. “Hi Dora, hi Ruth.” The women wiggled their fingers at him. “We’re having an art sale outside, did my grandma tell you? Buy one get one fifty percent off, too.”

“Oh, yes, she told us all about it,” Ruth said. “We’ll definitely check out your little paintings. Our rooms could use some new artwork, couldn’t they, Dora?”

Vito ushered his grandmother away from the space before they could start their line of questioning.

Something occurred to him as they headed towards the entrance.

“Hey, Grandma? How come you didn’t go into the same home as Marcie?”

“What do you mean?” She nodded at the front desk attendant as she left. “Just going on a walk with my grandson. Promise I’m not a runner.”

“Well she’s your best friend isn’t she? Wouldn’t you want to live with her?” The automatic doors slid open letting the cold chill and rustle of leaves fill the lobby.

“Sometimes it’s more complicated than what we want, kiddo. And it just gets more complicated the older and uglier you get.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Think, Vito.” She gestured to Duane who waved from the bench several yards away. “Would you want him to watch you fall apart?”

Vito visibly bristled. “Fall apart? It’s not like you’re a leper, Grandma.”

“You know what I mean.”
“So is this why you’re shipping me off with Leslie?”

“I’m not ‘shipping you off.’ I’m giving you the best home I can, even if it’s not with me.”

“ Heard that one before.”

They’d reached Duane by then, who watched them approach with an increasingly wary expression. Vito looked at his grandmother whose face was a stone like always, and figured he must be the one who was worrying Duane. He forced a smile and waved a hand at his paintings like he was Vanna White.

“So this is our inventory.”

His grandmother looked over the paintings carefully, nodding. “Very nice. Now these are folk paintings you said?”

Vito nodded. He had done some more research on the paintings since Sunday in order to field any questions that customers might have. He pointed to the sun in one painting and explained, almost verbatim from the book he’d borrowed from the library, how it was the warming energy of heaven that gives nourishment and life.

“And the water,” he said, pointing to a picture of a dog lying near a stream, “is a Daoist symbol of, um, infinite strength and flexibility that can even overcome stone or earth.”

“Interesting. And—”

“And those cranes, they’re messengers from Heaven. Isn’t that neat? And also marital fidelity.”

“That is neat. Marital fidelity is always a good thing.” Vito could tell she was hiding a smile but he didn’t care. He wouldn’t be made a fool again. He was ready to
show anyone that he had the right to paint these paintings, even if he still wasn’t so sure himself.

A young couple came walking up the path pushing a stroller. The man smiled at Vito and the others as they approached.

“Good afternoon! What have you got here?” He reminded Vito of a sitcom dad with a deep hearty voice and a green polo shirt.

“Oh how nice,” his wife said, stopping the stroller to look. “Look, honey.” A little boy poked his head out from beneath the stroller’s shade. He had round brown eyes and a tiny pouf of brown hair. His lips parted as he surveyed the paintings.

“Jordy likes the kitty,” the woman said, as the boy pointed and cooed at one of the paintings.

“Did you paint these?” the man asked Vito’s grandmother.

She shook her head. “He did.” She said it proudly and Vito felt his face redden.

“Wow! You’re amazing.”

“Thanks,” Vito mumbled.

“Are you raising money for a sports team or something?” the man asked.

“I, well, we’re—”

“They lost their home in Sandy,” Duane said. “So we’re trying to raise money to build something new.”

“Oh! I’m so sorry,” the man said. “Hon, what do you think?

“The pine trees in that one are a sign of vitality,” Vito said quietly.

“Well our home could always use some more vitality.”

“They’re buy one get one half off,” Duane said.
“We could give one to your mom,” the woman said. “Liza could use some cheery décor.”

“Liza?” Vito’s grandmother piped up. “Short woman with the most lovely curly hair? Oh, she would adore one of these.”

“How much?” the man asked with a smile.

They’d discussed twenty-five per painting but on a whim, Vito said fifty. The man pulled a wad of bills from his wallet. His wife considered the painting of Jeremy before choosing one of a husky running with two deer.

“Check out the website if you want something commissioned.” Duane handed the woman a slip of paper with the URL printed on it. “This little cutie would look adorable in one of these paintings.” He grinned at Jordy who grinned back. Vito was certain he had never met a friendlier family.

Duane had brought along big padded manila envelopes to put the purchased paintings in. Vito was immensely grateful for his friend’s foresight. He hadn’t thought of the actual transaction at all. But there was money in his hand, rough, green, and real.

The family waved as they continued up the path, the paintings resting on the hood of the stroller. Vito kept rubbing his thumb across the money.

“Our first sale!” Duane did a small dance that involved too much hip gyration in Vito’s opinion. Vito sat down on the bench and fanned out the bills. He didn’t even realize he was smiling until he looked up at his grandmother and saw she was smiling back down at him.

“Do you really think that Liza lady will like the painting?” he asked her. She shrugged then winked. “No idea. I haven’t a clue who that lady is.”
And they all laughed.

***

Vito sold one more painting that day, to one of the nurses who took care of his grandmother. She was a syrupy sweet younger woman, pretty with short brown hair and thick-framed glasses. She told Vito she thought his paintings were little pieces of God, which Vito smiled at, but then stuck his tongue out at Duane when the nurse dug through her purse for money. She only had thirty dollars to offer which Duane agreed to, as long as she promised to hand out some of the flyers to her neighbors.

They packed up the remaining paintings at six when dinner was being served inside. Vito’s grandmother had guest passes and invited the boys in. The smell of cabbage drifted from the dining room.

“Why don’t we celebrate?” Vito said, waving one of the twenties.

“We’re supposed to be saving that money for the house,” Duane said.

“We can splurge a little. We’ll make more soon.”

“Cocky all of a sudden?”

“We’ll come back here tomorrow and make it all over again.”

“I don’t know…”

“Life is short, boys. Go to dinner.”

Neither one of them could argue with that. Vito’s grandmother insisted they go alone because she was actually looking forward to cabbage for dinner.

Vito and Duane took the bus to the Unicorn Diner. Vito felt like he was drifting along in a dream. Everything on the bus was shiny, from the scratched up windows to the Stop Requested neon sign up front. He and Duane laughed at everything too. When
Duane dropped his metro card on the way to the back, they could barely catch their breath.

The Unicorn Diner was quiet, filled mostly with older couples seeking the 55+ special. Vito and Duane stifled their giggles, but when the hostess asked them if they wanted a booth or table and Vito said “boot” by accident, they were off again. The waitress seemed unamused by their giddiness and took a while to return for their orders. While she was gone, Vito and Duane began throwing their straw wrappers back and forth at each other.

“So, what’s next?” Duane said, slouching low in the booth. “Hit up the retirement home again tomorrow?”

“Of course,” Vito said. “And the next day too. We’ll get everyone in there to buy something.” His phone vibrated in his pocket. He pulled it out and flipped it open to find a text message from Leslie. He paused for a moment before opening it.

*Hey, kid! Looking forward to seein u soon. In Yellowstone Park! SOOOO BEAUTIFUUUL!! We’ll visit herre in the way bak. See ya soon!*

Vito looked at the message for a while until Duane asked him what it was.

“Just a text.”

“From who?”

“Leslie.”

“Oh.”

The waitress returned then and took their orders. Vito had been planning on getting something extravagant but just ordered a cheeseburger. Duane got the popcorn shrimp.
“What’d she want?” Duane asked when she left.

Vito shrugged. “Just saying hi. From the road.”

“So she really left? She’s really on her way?” Duane crushed the straw wrapper between his thumb and forefinger.

“Looks like it.”

When their food came out, Duane kept flipping the pickle over and over along the edge of his plate. Finally, he said, “We can still do the business together. I can handle the web stuff and you can paint and mail them out to people. Or something.”

“Yeah.” Vito swallowed a hunk of burger that felt like glue going down. He wondered if Leslie was drunk or high when she’d sent the message. It had been riddled with spelling errors and too many exclamation points, unlike her careful emails of the past. He was reminded of one spring day during Leslie’s senior year of high school. He was eight at the time. That day, he threw up after gym class, having caught some kind of stomach bug. His mother picked him up and dropped him off at home before leaving again to pick up some Pepto Bismal. When he walked into the house, which was supposed to be empty, he found Leslie sitting at the kitchen counter, high (though he didn’t realize this at the time) and staring at nothing. When she noticed him, she slipped off the stool and told him she was had come home early because she wasn’t feeling well either. She looked okay, Vito remembered thinking, even smiling far more often than she normally did.

“Do you ever wonder about your birth parents?” she’d said suddenly while Vito filled a glass at the sink. “Like what they’re doing right now?”
Vito and Leslie hadn’t talked much about their adoption at that point, and Vito had been too young to recognize Leslie’s need to do so with someone who understood.

“Not really,” he’d replied, willing his stomach to settle as he sipped the water. Leslie was looking at her own hands like they were foreign. He went into the living room and crawled onto the couch, knees tucked up to his chest. When he heard his mother pull up outside, he heard the back door shut. Even without Leslie asking, Vito knew not to tell their mother she’d been there.

Vito didn’t want to respond to the text message if she was under the influence, and he didn’t know what to say even if she wasn’t. That he was looking forward to it too—but was he? And why was she expecting them to get all the way to Yellowstone? Did she think it would take them that long to find a home?

The waitress returned with the bill.

“Maybe you were right,” Vito said, opening the check holder and scanning the bill. “Maybe we should have saved all the money.”

“Oh, we still gotta pay back Marlon. That’s another hundred.”

Vito stuffed a twenty and a ten in the check holder. “All right, that’s it. No more spending.”

They left the diner quieter than they entered. Vito shivered as the November evening air cut through his sweatshirt. They walked to the bus stop, discussing when they would meet tomorrow and how many paintings they should try to sell. Vito gave Duane fifty dollars and told him to give to Marlon and tell him the rest was coming.

“Maybe he’ll invest some more if he finds out we’re doing well,” Duane said.
“Maybe.” Vito didn’t like being in debt to someone, he’d learned. He didn’t want to borrow more money from Marlon unless it was a sure thing they’d be able to pay it all back quickly.

A sign in a nearby storefront caught Vito’s eye: Romney/Ryan 2012. He’d forgotten it was an election year. His grandmother had commented on the campaign a few weeks earlier, suggesting that Obama ignore all the calls for his birth certificate. Vito had been angry when she explained the controversy to him, when he normally didn’t pay much attention to her political commentary. He couldn’t imagine having the confrontations with other kids at school about his ancestry and whether he was really an American being broadcast to the entire country; his face flamed at just the thought of it.

“Hope Obama wins,” Vito said to Duane as they reached the bus stop. Duane had stuffed his hands in his pocket and tucked his chin into his collar against the wind.

“He will,” Duane said. “The good guys always win in the end.”

Vito wasn’t sure whether to laugh or punch Duane for being so stupid.
Chapter 8

Leslie quickly shifted from loving to hating driving the RV. Too many blind spots, and cars were always passing her on the freeway no matter how hard she tried to keep up. After Yellowstone, she drove down to I-80 and vowed to follow it straight across the rest of the way. As she drove across Iowa, nothing but corn stalks waving in either direction, she wondered how on earth anyone could ever be starving in the entire world. She stopped over outside of Des Moines in a campground that smelled like stale beer and charcoal but was only ten dollars a night. When she reached Chicago, she forced herself to push onward though she’d always wanted to go. She added it to the mental list of places she and Vito should check out for settling down.

Her last stop before Staten Island was in Cleveland. Desperately tired of the wood-paneled inside of the RV, she decided to splurge and stay the night in a real hotel. She found a Best Western with vacancies and managed to negotiate a discount for the last-minute booking. Feeling pleased with herself for the first time all trip, she asked at the front desk where she might find some good food. He told her she had to try Happy Dog and called a cab for her just after she barely nodded.

The cab driver told her she was in for a real treat.

“A local gem,” he said, grinning at her in the rearview mirror. “I always take my brother here when he visits. Ninety-seven beers on tap too.”

He dropped Leslie off outside what looked like a dive bar. Inside, a half circle bar ran along the back wall with a small stage off to the right and animal heads up above
the taps. Retro Formica tables were scattered around the rest of the area along with a line of red booths, most of which were full. Leslie chose a seat at the bar. The bartender, a man around her age wearing an Indians baseball cap smiled and handed her a long skinny menu.

“How could you tell?” Leslie said.

“No one comes to Happy Dog alone unless they’re just passing through town.”

He took a marker out of a nearby cup and handed it to her. “Check off as many as you want.”

Leslie realized the menu in her hand was a very long list of hot dog toppings. She laughed in delight as she read down the list of fifty toppings from Chorizo chili to Spaghetti Os to vodka sauerkraut.

The bartender grinned, tapping the brim of his hat back so she could see more of his face. His eyes were long-lashed, with deep crow’s feet she assumed was from how much he smiled. She ordered a beer while she took her time carefully choosing her toppings. She lingered with her marker over the box next to the fried egg and finally decided to tick it off.

The bartender smiled at the list as he scanned it before handing it off to a server. “You’re certainly brave. You didn’t even ask what the ‘alien’ is in the alien relish.”

He helped another couple at the other end of the bar before returning to Leslie. “So where you been? Where you going?”
She hesitated. The thought of telling him the whole sordid story was almost enough to dim her good mood. “Just traveling around. Trying to see all the sights this great country has to offer.”

He laughed. “You sounded more excited about the toppings. Pretty lucky you get to just travel around. Haven’t spent much time outside of Cleveland myself. Tried OU but it wasn’t for me.”

“I guess I’m lucky.”

“Unless you’re running away from something,” he said, leaning his elbows on the bar. “Not having a place to land is tough…even if you can fly.”

Her hotdog was delivered then by one of the servers. It sat in a black basket with red and white checked paper, the hotdog itself nearly invisible beneath the mountain of toppings. The bartender smiled as Leslie hovered her hands over the basket, unsure of where to start.

“You just gotta dive into it.” He nodded over Leslie’s shoulder. She turned to see a kid in a booth with brown sauce smeared across the lower half of his face take another huge bite of the half a hotdog left in his hands.

Leslie swung back around to face her hotdog.

“I’m David, by the way,” the bartender said as she picked up the thing in her hands, ketchup and onions dripping with loud plops onto the checkered paper. She took a deep breath as if she was preparing to dive underwater. David laughed loudly as a squirt of ketchup burst from the other end of the hotdog when she bit in.

They talked between bites and other customers. He touched her hand a few times as he told her about his crazy college road trips and the band he used to play in.
The thought of what she would do if she started dating someone while she and Vito were living together drifted through her mind. The RV back bedroom had just a thin accordion door. Even in a real apartment, would she feel comfortable bringing someone home?

After her father died, she’d waited with dread for her mother to start dating again. Once, the meter reader guy stood in the kitchen drinking a glass of ice water on a hot day, and she’d thought that was it, a new boyfriend, a new father. She’d stood in the doorway watching him silently, judging his round belly so unlike her father’s flat one, the streaks of gray in his hair, until her mother appeared at the basement stairs a few moments later and asked Leslie what she was doing. To Leslie’s knowledge, her mother didn’t date anyone in the years after the death. She was old fashioned in that way, Leslie came to realize; she perhaps saw remarriage as a betrayal, something tainted that would taint the old marriage too. Or maybe she’d been too tired to try.

“So you’re from the Big Apple,” David said as he restacked glasses fresh from the dishwasher. “Born and raised?”

“Raised. Not born.”

“Where were you born then?”

“Korea.” Leslie sometimes wished she had a tape recording of the questions and responses that usually came after this. *When did you come over?* When she was two, so she doesn’t remember anything about Korea. *Do you speak Korean?* No, she’s actually adopted by American parents. *Do you have any siblings?* Yes, a brother. *Is he adopted too?* Yes. *But you’re not related?* No.

David threw a curveball at her after the usual questions. “I’m adopted too.”
Leslie looked up from her happy dog. “You are?”

“Well, half-adopted, I guess. I never knew my dad. My mom remarried when I was five, and her husband—my dad—adopted me and my brothers. I really barely remember life before him being my dad.”

Leslie had never dated anyone who’d been adopted before. She’d never even met very man men who’d been adopted. She’d looked it up once—five million American adoptees. Out of those five million, she didn’t know how many were men, how many were transracial, how many had been to their homelands, how many knew their own language, ate their own foods, placed themselves firmly and wholly within one ethnicity and race. Her existence wasn’t unique, but it was rare in a way that worried her. Lots of people marry interracially, she knew, but lots of people don’t for reasons that she could understand. Would any non-adopted white man ever fully understand her? Would she ever fully understand any minority man?

“I mean it’s not really the same,” David said. “But, you know, I kind of know what it’s like to have a parent who…isn’t.”

Leslie smiled and hoped she didn’t have any topping bits in her teeth. “It’s a weird dual reality isn’t it? The knowing they are and knowing they aren’t.”

“And you’re reminded of it so randomly in these surprising ways. Like when the guy at the fast food place doesn’t realize we’re together because we look nothing alike. Or when they ask for my family history at the doctor’s office.”

“Exactly.” Leslie laughed and raised her glass even though David didn’t have one. He hurriedly pulled out two shot glasses from under the counter.

“Your choice,” he said with a wink.
Later that night, after David got off work, after he’d driven them to Leslie’s hotel, after she’d told him about Yosemite and how the view of the swirling aquamarine hot pots from the summit of a hike made her dizzy, after she’d stripped naked and slid in-between the chilly sheets, feeling self-conscious of the hot dog and all those toppings sitting heavily in her stomach, she looked over David’s tattooed shoulder and thought of Phoenix.

Phoenix hadn’t been the love of her life but he’d been the first almost-love and that was important too. She had imagined things for them, a future with white lace and traditions like caroling and fireworks on the marina. She’d never imagined ten tiny toes; the extra room in their cozy two-bedroom in the city was an office and bedroom for their dog. There had been other boys before Phoenix whom she’d inserted into this fantasy but their future life together had been the most vivid. When she met his parents, she’d almost said it—when we get married—but managed to rephrase at the last minute—when we…in the future, maybe we’ll travel some more. She’d been nervous when she met them, more so than for anything before in her life. Kirk and Natalie were their names; Natalie wore loose button downs tucked into cropped slacks, and the part in Kyle’s hair cut across the right side of his scalp with laser-like precision. They’d been friendly enough to Leslie, and Natalie asked Leslie what kind of shampoo she used, but she wasn’t sure if they completely approved. She’d been too embarrassed to ask Phoenix to elaborate beyond his casual report of, They thought you were great, not wanting to seem insecure or over-eager. She had seen a picture of one of Phoenix’s ex-girlfriends—a brown-haired beauty with bright white teeth and even brighter blue eyes. She didn’t ask what his parents thought of her, either.
David’s body felt strange, hair where Phoenix was smooth, hands rough and gripping parts of her Phoenix never did. His hair was matted flat against his head, sweaty from his ball cap, and she had little desire to run her hands through it like she used to with Phoenix. His upper body was more muscular, his lower body less so. It was all wrong but she didn’t want to stop because he was warm and kept telling her she was beautiful.

Afterwards, she rested her head on his sweaty chest and thought of the precise place she would place her cheek on Phoenix’s chest, near the shoulder so that her forehead pressed against his chin.

The thought of building something with someone new, a stranger, as she had with Phoenix was exhausting to Leslie. But, as she ran a hand over her own smooth skin, she felt mournful of what the next four years would be like; she would never be this beautiful again.

She looked up at David. He smiled down at her with drooping lids. Her own felt heavy too, as if when she closed them their undersides would be laden with secrets and traumas and other weighty things. She forced them wide.

“If you could have had a biological parent who was just as good of a dad as your dad, or the one you have now, which would you choose?”

David’s eyebrows raised, but he considered the question. “The one I have.” The dull bassline of uncertainty behind his voice made Leslie tilt her head up to kiss him then pull him on top of her and whisper “again” into his ear.

***
The next morning was awkward, the vulnerability brought on by night and whiskey gone. Leslie waited until David went into the bathroom to slip out from under the covers and get dressed. She pulled her hair into a low ponytail just as he stepped back into the room.

“Hey,” he said with a lopsided grin. His baseball cap was pushed up and in the daylight that streamed through the sheer curtains, she could see the bags under his eyes, and the creases between his eyebrows like parenthesis. 

“Hey.” Leslie didn’t know what to do next.

“So you taking off this morning then?”

“Yeah, soon.” She thought of the long drive ahead with dread. Her head ached and her mouth was dry. “You?”

David nodded. “Yeah, I’ll be making the long five block trek.”

Leslie laughed, her eyes downcast. “So, thanks. Uh, I had a good time last night.”

“Me too. Good luck with the trip.” He stepped forward and kissed her on the cheek. His stale breath tickled her nostrils as he pulled away.

As he turned towards the door, Leslie spoke. “Do you want to, you know, exchange numbers or something?”

David swiveled back on his heel. “Oh. Um, you don’t have to do that.”

“What?”

“You know. Be nice or whatever. It’s cool. It was what it was. Wasn’t it?” His eyes searched hers, worried suddenly.

“Oh, yeah. I just…liked talking about stuff.”
“You’re gonna forget all about the little Ohio man when you get to the big city.”

He edged towards the door. “Take care, Leslie.”

“Okay. Bye.” She lifted her hand to wave but he was already gone.

A part of her wanted to stay in bed longer, to order room service and nurse her hangover and pity herself that her first sexual encounter with an adopted man was a one night stand, but she was expected by Vito and her Grandmother. She hadn’t been expected in so long. Even Phoenix never seemed too concerned with her comings and goings, smiling up at her when she came in after midnight, having wandered around the Mission until the last Caltrain. Now people were waiting, and it was stifling. And warming in a way, she supposed.

A large coffee and a greasy egg sandwich later, Leslie pulled onto the highway and checked the GPS. A little over seven hours and she’d be back on Staten Island for the first time in more than four years. It was windy; the windows in the back rattled as she merged onto I-80. She turned the radio up high, a golden oldies station she’d found the day before. Carole King crooned crosswind.

There was an accident just as she crossed into Pennsylvania (State of Independence). She slowed the RV to a crawl behind a black pick-up truck and leaned back in her seat. The man who’d sold her the vehicle had thrown in a lavender scented vent air-freshener. She leaned in close to it and inhaled then exhaled, trying to calm herself to match the speed of traffic. There was a sense of relief that came with the slow-down, how the arrival time on her GPS kept moving further and further away.

She stopped at a Roy Rogers rest stop in New Jersey and sat on the curb eating a box of fried chicken, watching the sky shift to blue-grey twilight. A bus pulled up and a
handful of people ambled off, stiffly shuffling down the steps. A few huddled around the cigarette receptacle a few feet away, digging into pockets and b umming lights off each other. An older woman with silver hair and small oval glasses wandered close to Leslie, sucking deeply on her cigarette.

“This bothering you?” she asked Leslie.

“No.”

“Want one?”

“Nah.” Leslie yanked a tough bit of chicken off.

The woman narrowed her eyes at Leslie. “You heading home or leaving home?”

“Good question.”

She laughed. “It feels that way sometimes, don’t it?” She nodded to the bus which had a sign in the window that read New York City – Buffalo. “My daughter’s in Buffalo with my grandkid. Going to meet him for the first time.”

“Congratulations.”

“Trying to convince her to come back home with me. If she don’t wanna come, guess I might try to move up there. So yeah, guess I’m in the same boat as you.”

They remained silent for a while, watching cars pull in and out of the gas station. Leslie felt comforted by the presence of this woman who was also in transition. It seemed some part of the universe had crossed their paths on purpose and she was grateful.

“What’s your grandson’s name?” she asked, tossing the last bone into the box.

The woman took a long drag of her cigarette and let the smoke out in a heavy puff. “Buzz.”

Leslie tried to keep her face neutral. “That’s a cool name. After the astronaut?”
“After that stupid space man from Toy Story.”

Leslie couldn’t help but laugh at that. The woman’s lips twitched then she burst out laughing too.

“Her ex was a huge Disney fan,” she explained, still grinning.

“And Buzz was the character he looked up to? Wasn’t he the one who thought he was a real spaceman?”

“Yeah, well turns out this guy didn’t understand reality too well either.” The woman sobered. People were filing out of the restaurant, brown bags in hand, and heading back to the bus.

“Guess that’s my cue,” the woman said, then took one last drag of her cigarette.

“They’ll see you and wait. Why don’t you finish?”

“Nah,” she said. “I’m the type to get left behind.” The woman waved and headed to the bus.

Leslie waited until the bus pulled out before she stood up. She was chilled through and the sun was almost gone. *The Letters, the Letters.*

She went back inside and bought a small cup of coffee. They were out of sleeves, so she held the cup gingerly between her forefinger and thumb as she hurried back to the RV.

The rest of the ride to the Outerbridge Crossing was uneventful. Traffic increased slightly as she approached the bridge. She slowed to an embarrassing crawl as she drove over the bridge, hugging the left lane, thinking it was impossible that her vehicle was only taking up one lane. Other cars passed her though, too fast for comfort. She exhaled a
breath she hadn’t realized she was holding as she left the bridge onto the wider lanes that led to the tolls.

The GPS put her arriving close to nine. She quickly convinced herself that was too late and that she’d keep Vito up when he had school the next day.

The woman at the toll booth barely looked at Leslie as she took the money.

“Thanks,” Leslie said, aware that her annoyance was in part exhaustion and anxiety. The woman just nodded and looked beyond Leslie’s car for who was next.

“Have a lovely night,” Leslie added, coating her voice in sarcasm. The woman looked at Leslie with a curled lip and a car honked behind her as she drove off.

She still felt irrationally angry about the toll booth worker as she drove out to the old Conference House. It was too late to check in to the campground she’d looked up so she decided to head to the isolated side road where she used to get high with her old best friend, Kim.

Kim. She hadn’t thought about Kim in years. Kim who had lived in one of the big houses that dotted the otherwise middle-class neighborhood where Leslie grew up. Kim whose parents wore suits to work and had family parties where the older women’s eyes would drift down to Leslie’s unpainted fingernails or scuffed shoes then dart back up to meet hers with a painted smile. Kim who squirmed uncomfortably when Leslie told her about her mother’s difficult transition to a new therapist, who, senior year, carefully extricated herself from the friendship like a master escape artist so that when they saw each other on graduation day, both girls had nothing more to say to each other than “Congratulations.”
That’s how people were on the island, Leslie had learned. Heartless like Kim. Rude like the toll booth worker. Impatient like the car who’d honked behind her. People didn’t signal, didn’t park between the lines, but rather took up two spaces to keep their BMW from being scratched. They went to church on Sunday and then berated the waitress at brunch for not bringing the olives quickly enough. Women painted their faces and curled their hair to put on coordinated tracksuits and go grocery shopping or to the bank. Teenage boys went for joyrides at night and harassed groups of their female classmates from their windows, and the girls thought it meant they looked cute. The wealthy complained about traffic and parking, and the poor complained about the unreliable buses and uncovered bus stops. Everywhere, men sat out on stoops, bellies resting on knees, and complained about how the island had changed, how the [Jews] [Russians] [Mexicans] were taking over. Public school classrooms didn’t have enough seats; private school girls rolled the waistbands of their skirts and celebrated their sixteenth birthdays with parties more expensive than most people’s weddings. Half the island pretended the other half didn’t exist. Friends became strangers. She supposed that happened anywhere, but there was something so Staten Island about what happened with Kim.

As she approached Richmond Hill Road, her heart began to pound. She hadn’t driven by there since her mother’s accident. She’d heard about the addition to the guardrail that had been added there and saw the newspaper article with its sensationalized headline: “Woman, husband, die at same spot, nearly a decade apart.” Not too catchy, she’d thought.
Almost as if she’d lost control of her arms, she found herself turning down the road. It was poorly lit with dense trees and steep embankments on either side. Leslie wasn’t sure another car could pass in the opposite direction with the space the RV took up. The guardrail glinted up ahead. The turn up there was sharp. She remembered this from when she made Kim bike there with her after her father died, when she thought their friendship would grow stronger because her father was dead. Kim had stopped a few yards back and let Leslie go ahead. Leslie had knelt at the spot, just beyond the reach of the guardrail then, and pressed her palm into the mud. She’d thought of the clay handprints that she made in Kindergarten that still hung on the wall of the garage. She’d thought of a tiny hand in a palm so large it looked like a desert.

Now, as she approached the curve, yellow reflectors blinking back at her like stars, she knew that if she got out of the car and searched everywhere on the brightest day, she wouldn’t find any answers as to what had really happened that night her mother died. That evidence, whatever the detectives had combed through and found nothing in, was long gone. The answer lay elsewhere.

She took the curve carefully then turned right at the next opportunity and headed back to the Conference House.

Leslie went through her night routine, which had become second nature even after just a few days: Clean the kitchen (any dishes left in the sink stank up the rest of the place quickly), wash up in the bathroom (banging elbows constantly in the tight space), fill a water bottle at the sink to place on the nightstand. All this, while sipping on a whiskey ginger. Finally, just before crawling under the covers: get the gun from the hidden storage nook behind the couch.
The man who’d sold her the RV had offered her the gun too. She didn’t have a license, she told him, and he’d winked and said it could be their secret. He didn’t feel good about letting a young woman travel in the RV by herself without some kind of protection. She had to admit she didn’t feel too good about it either. It was a .22 Remington, brown with a black scope on top. He said it couldn’t take down a deer or anything, but would certainly scare anyone who found themselves with the barrel in their face.

She placed the gun in its spot beside her bed and crawled under the covers. Her eyes kept drifting open, so she got up to make herself another drink. She pulled up the shade behind the couch and peered up at the sky. No visible stars, as usual, but a bright half-moon. Head beginning to spin from the second strong drink, she wondered if the stars debated on nights like this whether the moon was half empty or half full. She wondered if the optimistic stars were the ones whose wishes came true. Or maybe the pessimistic ones did because those stars put their heads down and worked harder.

The Conference House, a historical landmark that overlooked the Staten Island Sound was visible across the street. It was said to be haunted by an American Revolution-era British loyalist who’d killed a servant girl who he claimed was spying on him for the colonists. Moonlight glinted off the rows of many-paned windows like candles had been lit behind the panes. The trees out front had mostly shaken off their leaves. Leslie raised her glass towards the house, bumping it against the window. She toasted the servant girl ghost.

“May you do as you please,” she said. “Now that you’re free.”
END PART ONE
They were in the midst of planning a family vacation just before Vito’s father died. Leslie picked him up from the bus stop after kindergarten. She chattered about the trip non-stop on the walk home. The sun beat down on the top of Vito’s head as he trailed behind, trying to walk in her shadow.

“Mom says we can each suggest one place to go,” Leslie said. “She was so happy when she was talking about it. I think she’s actually excited. Oh, I don’t know where I’d pick…maybe Vegas.” She shook a strand of long black hair from her face. “Or maybe Austin. What about you, Vito?” Leslie turned towards her brother. “Where would you go?”

He thought for a moment. “Alaska.”

She chuckled. “I don’t think Mom’s gonna want to go all the way to Alaska.”

“Dad went to Alaska when he was in college. He showed me pictures once. He saw a polar bear.”

“Well I don’t need to see any polar bears on this trip, thank you very much.” Leslie turned away from him. They’d reached their front porch by then.

“Who wants to see some polar bears anyway?” Leslie said, unlocking the front door. “You can see them at the zoo anytime you want.”

“What if the ones at the zoo die?”

Leslie turned around to look at him.
“Why would you say something like that?” Leslie shook her head then entered the house, letting the door shut behind her, leaving Vito out on the porch.

In the days after the car accident, before their father was declared brain dead, Vito brought the pictures of the polar bear to the hospital. He thought his father might be reminded of how good life had once been, that once when he was adventurous and freezing and alive, he’d seen a wild polar bear. But his father never woke up, and when his class went to the zoo for a field trip the following fall, he feigned a stomach ache and stayed home.

While they were vacation planning, Vito’s father had suggested a road trip. Leslie and their mother had grumbled about not having a real shower for that long, and their mother said road trips were for people too poor to fly anywhere.

“Road trips are the best way to get to know anyone and any place,” their father had responded but the family had already moved on to discussing the Mount Rushmore idea. Those words floated back into Vito’s mind when his sister pulled up outside his school that afternoon in the RV. The vehicle took up two metered spaces on the side of the building just outside Vito’s biology classroom window, and obliterated the branches of a young tree in a planter box on the sidewalk.

When the door opened and Leslie stepped out, Vito felt a hitch in his chest. Her dark hair was shorter than it had ever been, the blunt ends brushing the tops of her shoulders. She fumbled through a fringed purse then shoved change into the parking meter.

“Fuck if they expect me to pay for both meters.” Her voice drifted over and through the open window, the word “fuck,” effortless yet sharp, familiar to Vito’s ears as
spring bird song. The boy in front of Vito, Peter, who had been nodding off, jerked awake and looked out the window.

“You know her?” Peter twisted around in his chair.

“She’s my sister.”

“She’s hot.”

“Shut up.” Vito remembered how to handle comments like that even though it had been a while since he’d had to. Even as young as eight, when Vito’s friends came over, they’d blush and stammer around Leslie and then try to run into her on their way to the bathroom or happen to bring extra Warheads the next time they came over. He’d shut it all down rather quickly, almost instinctually. Usually laughing in their face and telling them they were embarrassing themselves did the trick.

“Just saying. Maybe I have yellow fever.” Peter grinned. He was popular, starred in the winter production of Bye Bye Birdie, made witty comments about logarithms or the Louisiana Purchase that even made their teachers laugh. Leslie might have even dated him if they’d gone to school at the same time. Vito liked him mostly, but the comment, combined with his imminent departure from the school forever, made him curl his lip and push back his chair. Peter’s perfectly thick eyebrows raised as Vito got to his feet.

“Vito what are you--?” Mrs. Stein was cut off when the door to the classroom opened.

“Vito Verranzo is wanted in the office,” an aide said, clutching a sheet of paper.

“Oh!” Mrs. Stein turned back to Vito, clearly confused by the order of events. “Well, Vito, I guess you’d better go. Take your things, the bell is going to ring shortly.”
Vito pulled his backpack off his chair and slung it over his left shoulder as he walked by, knocking Peter in the head. He imagined himself doing something more, like pissing on Peter’s face while telling him, “Yeah, it does seem like you have a very serious case of yellow fever.” Maybe after, when he had his tiny house and all the money and was back on the Island, he’d run into Peter on the street somewhere and he’d do it then. Peter would never see it coming.

As he walked down the hall behind the aide and her click-clacking heels, his anger at Peter faded into nerves. He couldn’t be nervous about seeing his own sister he told himself as they rounded the corner and the main office came into sight. Still, his chest continued to tighten with each step, until he was panting as they entered the office.

The woman with tortoise shell glasses stood behind the counter arguing with Leslie.

“I don’t see how you don’t have an ID if you’ve been driving the last four days,” the woman said, her tone exasperated.

“I told you, I lost it somewhere at my last stop.”

“Well it doesn’t really matter. I’m only supposed to release students to their guardian listed in the computer.” She turned the screen around for Leslie to see. “It says Susan Pollacci and Barbara Witt. No one else.

“So I’m just supposed to forget about him and drive on back to California?” Leslie asked, crossing her arms across his chest. Her hip cocked out and Vito knew the look she must be giving the woman even though her back was to him. Eyebrow up, lips pursed, waiting for a response to an impossible question. She pulled this with their mother nearly daily during her senior year of high school—“So I’m just supposed to miss
my one and only senior class trip?” “You want me to wear a burlap sack to prom?” “So
Stanford is just supposed to build an extension campus on Staten Island just for me?”

The woman sighed, also similar to their mother’s reaction to Leslie’s pseudo-
questions. “You can just wait until school is dismissed for the day at 2:30.”

Leslie looked up at the clock on the wall. Vito did the same. It was just before
noon.

“You want me to wait—”

“Ahem.” The aide cut off Leslie’s outburst. “I have Vito Verranzo here.”

Leslie spun to face Vito, hair swirling, purse swinging, like some kind of graceful
greeting dance. They both stood still facing each other, armies about to clash—Vito
wished for a photo of that moment; it would have made a spectacular painting, he was
certain.

“Vito!” Leslie stepped towards him first. She was still taller than him, but only by
an inch or two. She stopped and stood awkwardly in front of him for a moment before
pulling him in for a hug. He could smell her faint body odor. Strange, as she had always
been fastidious about hygiene. He hoped the RV had a shower.

“I didn’t know you were already here,” Vito said when they pulled away.

“Grandma didn’t say anything to me.”

“I got in late last night. Thought I’d surprise you.”

“Well, you did.”

“So,” Leslie said, turning back to the office worker, “it would be wonderful if
you would make an exception since Vito clearly knows me and is happy to see me. Isn’t
he?”
The woman waved a red-manicured hand. “You know how many deadbeat dads we get in here trying to kidnap their own kids? Those kids are plenty happy to see their father they haven’t seen in years, meanwhile the dad’s just trying to get revenge on the wife. Uh-uh.”

Leslie sighed. She whispered out of the corner of her mouth so only Vito could hear. “Time to play the dead parents card.” She pressed her lips together. “Look, ma’am, I know you’re just trying to do your job. And I’ll listen to you okay? I’ll wait until Vito is dismissed. It’s just…we’re orphans, okay? We’re all we’ve got. And we’re finally back together again and don’t want to waste one minute of whatever time we have left here on this earth being apart.”

The woman, perhaps used to sob stories from students, hardened her brow and told Leslie that Vito needed to go back to class and she could come back at 2:30.

“Fine,” Leslie said, throwing her hands up. She turned to Vito. “I’ll come back for you then okay, kid?”

Vito felt his stomach sag at the thought of returning to class, even though it would only be a few hours longer.

The bell rang and the hallway burst with movement and noise as students erupted from classrooms into the chaotic ten minutes of transition time. Vito and his sister moved out into the hall to join the stream of students headed to their next class.

“Well I gotta go up to the third floor,” Vito said when they reached the stairwell.

“No, this way.” Leslie grabbed his arm and pulled him past the stairs to the E-wing. The E-wing was an older part of the building on the first floor where the technical classes were held, like shop and dental. It was also notorious among students as a sex and
drug spot. Vito had never spent much time there but Leslie seemed to know her way around. She hauled Vito through the crowd and out a back door that led into the faculty parking lot. Two guys from the cleaning crew sat on a parking curb smoking and they glanced up when Vito and Leslie emerged.

“Time to get you to that dentist appointment,” she declared. “Gotta stop eating so many sweets, you.”

They walked around the back of the building to the RV without incident.

“You’re not coming back here anyway,” Leslie said as she unlocked the doors. “So fuck it.”

Vito paused before climbing in and rested his hand on the hot white paint. Another new home. It was old—perhaps many other families had called this home before him—so what did that make it then? All of theirs or none of theirs? If it came down to it, did the family who stayed in it longest own claim to calling it theirs? Or the family who were the most “family” in it, whatever that meant—played board games, teased each other about stupid shit, hugged their mom while she cooked dinner just because—basically whoever really familiated the best. If that was the case, he couldn’t imagine he and Leslie would ever call it home.

Inside was filled with more than Vito had imagined. There were a few glasses in the sink and he could see a crumpled pile of clothes on the bed in the back, but otherwise things seemed neat and organized.

“So you can sleep on this couch if you want,” Leslie said. “It’s not too comfy.” She plopped down and bounced a bit as if to demonstrate. “Or there’s a little sleeping nook up here.” She pointed to a crawl space above the cab. Vito could see the edge of a
mattress with little space between it and the ceiling, and he thought of what many-legged creatures he might be sharing that space with.

“And I left you plenty of room in the overhead storage.” Leslie added.

“I don’t have that much stuff.” Vito let the words hang there, and Leslie glanced down, the subtext not lost on her.

“Well we can buy you some clothes and stuff along the way,” Leslie said with a hearty smile. Vito couldn’t muster up a smile back.

“Well, I guess we should go pick up your stuff. You want to ride up front with me?”

“Okay.” Vito followed her through the small opening to the cab. The passenger seat was leather and hot. He gingerly fastened the burning seatbelt then looked out the window as Leslie started the engine. The school looked peaceful from the outside, like the ocean on a calm day. Despite what Leslie had said, Vito hoped he might be back one day. If he was able to pull off the tiny house plan he could be.

Still, as they pulled away, Vito rolled down the window. He stuck his hand out, giving the middle finger and hoping that Peter, wherever he was, knew it was for him.

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Trying to find a parking space near Barbara’s apartment was a nightmare. Finally, Leslie dropped him off at the curb, and through the honking horns behind them, said she’d circle and he’d better pack fast.

Vito darted up the stairs and burst into the apartment for what he hoped was the last time. Barbara sat at the kitchen table eating a bowl of cereal. She dropped her spoon when Vito entered, splashing her t-shirt and face with milk.
“What are you doing home? You have school.”

“Leslie’s here,” Vito said. “So I’m getting my things.”

“She is? Well, you didn’t need to burst in here like a wild animal.” Barbara blotted at her shirt with a napkin.

“Sorry. I didn’t know you’d be home.”

“I don’t have any appointments til the evening. Wedding party. Five heads, one dye job for the Mom.”

“Cool.” Vito looked towards his room down the hall. He didn’t know why Barbara was telling him all this. “Well, she’s circling the block so…”

“You didn’t invite her up? I haven’t seen her in…I don’t even know!” Barbara had abandoned the napkin and cereal and stared up at Vito. A drop of milk clung to her temple. “Since she was a little girl.”

“Yeah we couldn’t find a spot. She told me to pack in a hurry.” Vito started down the hall. He heard the chair scrape the floor in the kitchen and Barbara appeared in the doorway as he pulled his new suitcase out of the closet. He ignored her and began pulling clothes free from hangers.

“You know, I didn’t know what to expect when I agreed to take you in,” she said, crossing her arms and leaning against the door frame. “I did it because your father was someone I admired. Taking on all he did. And then to lose his life in that way…talk about tragedy!”

Vito sighed. “What’s your point?”

“My point is that I’m sorry you’re leaving so soon.”

“What?” He dropped a pile of t-shirts into his suitcase.
“We didn’t get along well, and yes I did notice that you graffitied my wall, but it’s been nice to have someone else here. A kid. It’s like I got to try out being a mom and I think I liked it.”

Vito’s mouth dropped open. “What? Being a mom? We barely spoke to each other except when you scolded me. I ate microwave meals almost every night. You brought strange men home. How is that being a mom?”

Barbara straightened up. “I didn’t know what I was doing. I’ve never done this before. I did my best to give you a home.” She looked upset as she turned and disappeared down the hall. He heard the bathroom door shut.

“Fuck.” Vito finished throwing everything in the suitcase. The bathroom door remained shut and he was sure Leslie was growing more impatient by the second. They could buy a new toothbrush on the way.

Before leaving, he opened his paint kit. He dipped the brush into the black and added to his name on the wall in his room:

*Thanks for the roof,*

*Seong (Vito)*

***

Leslie didn’t want to go the nursing home right away. She said she wasn’t sure what time check-in at the campsite stopped so they should go there first, relax a little while, then head over to the nursing home.

Vito had expected she would be reluctant to see their grandmother. After she’d left, his grandmother had put on a smile and said they’d be just fine together, and they had been, but Vito had overheard a conversation just before the following Thanksgiving
between her and Leslie. Vito sat in his room with the door open, listening to his grandmother’s side of the phone conversation from where she sat in the kitchen. He bounced a handball off the wall while he listened. With each thud, it seemed Leslie piled on another excuse.

\textit{Thud.}

“But it’s the first...yes I know you’ve got a lot on your plate.”

\textit{Thud.}

“Well it’s not a much longer flight than from San Francisco, is it?”

\textit{Thud.}

“I told you I’d pay for the plane ticket.”

\textit{Thud.}

“You’re being selfish.”

Vito held the ball, waiting.

“You think you’re the only one who wants to escape this life?” A few more moments then a soft click as she hung the phone back in its cradle. Vito didn’t realize the ball had left his hand until the mirror was already shattered and his grandmother hurried down the hall to see what had happened. When she saw the puddle of broken glass on the dresser, she shook her head.

“This is not how we deal with things here.” She made him clean it all up then sat him down in the living room. “You use your words and you use them calmly,” she said. “You speak to me with respect, you treat my things with respect, and if you can’t then you wait and be still until you can. Got it?”
Vito quickly learned that this was a give and take, this stillness in the face of rage. When he tried it, it worked, for a while. Like when Leslie didn’t come home for Christmas either, and he held himself so still that, painted white, he could blend in with the wall. After, he was able to sit down at dinner and eat his meal and tell his grandmother he was sad Leslie wasn’t coming. Later, though, when he saw a spider on his carpet, he smashed it and ground it into nothing with his snow boot, furious it had dared enter his space. He wondered, when he watched his grandmother argue about the sales at the grocery store or let a swear slip out when wrestling with a stubborn glass jar, if she was experiencing that same release he did. He never asked her.

Vito didn’t think Leslie and his grandmother had kept in close contact over the last four years, though he supposed he couldn’t be sure. After all, she had called Leslie to come get him without him knowing. Who knew what other phone calls had been kept secret?

Leslie had booked a spot at Camp Gateway, campgrounds with the Verrazano Bridge poking up beyond the tree line like a friendly neighbor. A small handful of tents dotted the grassier area while the rutted dirt strip was lined with five campers both smaller and much, much larger than theirs.

“How did I never know this was here?” Vito said, looking around as he climbed out of the cab, stretching. Leslie stayed in the cab for a moment, fixing her hair in the rearview mirror. They hadn’t spoken much on the drive. She switched on the radio to the classic rock station and their one discussion was a brief back and forth trying to remember Freddie Mercury’s name when Don’t Stop Me Now came on.
“You never get a chance to go to the cool stuff in your own hometown,” Leslie replied. “I had no idea either until I looked it up so I’d have somewhere to park this thing.”

Another family sat under an awning outside of the trailer next to theirs. Two blonde girls, maybe twins, sipped from big plastic cups while their parents fiddled with a grill. The girls watched Vito with big round eyes over the rims of their cups then simultaneously switched to staring at Leslie as she came around the front of the camper.

She stretched, arching her back and reaching her arms out towards the gathering clouds. “Looks like rain.”

“Mmm. Been humid.” Vito wouldn’t have been able to believe siblings who’d been apart for this long, whose lives were turned upside down, the remnants twisted together into something neither of them could recognize or knew what to do with, could stand around talking about the weather, if he and Leslie weren’t doing it right now.

“When are we leaving?” Vito asked.

“Soon. Right?”

“How soon?”

“Couple of days?”

“Couple of days?” Vito wasn’t sure when exactly he’d expected them to head out but the thought of only a few more days there on the island made his stomach sink.

“When did you think we would leave?” Leslie asked.

Vito shrugged and kicked at a rock on the ground. It tumbled over to where the blonde girls sat, still watching the two of them. Pay attention to your own perfect blonde
lives! he wanted to shout at them. Instead their mother called to them to help set the table. The girls immediately abandoned their cups and Vito and Leslie and ran over.

“Don’t you…I mean, don’t you want to get out of here already?” Leslie asked in a quiet voice. “What good has this place done for you?”

Vito didn’t have a good answer, and simultaneously had too many answers to choose just one. “What good will this place do for me?” he replied, gesturing towards the RV.

Leslie tucked her lips together, looking down at Vito’s sneakers. “It’s time for a change,” she said. “Change is good. It’s been good for me to get out and experience new places, new people.”

“You sound like an airline commercial.”

“I don’t mean to sound clichéd but some clichés are true. Sometimes it’s better to just start over, replace everything, and move on.”

Vito looked up towards the bridge. The sun glinted through the gap in one of the huge steel towers. Then the sizzle of burgers on the grill of the family next to them caught Vito’s attention and his stomach rumbled.

“Can we go to Grandma’s now?” Vito said, starting towards the cab.

“You don’t want to talk first? Like, plan our trip? I brought some maps.”

“I’m hungry,” Vito said. “Did you tell her you were here?”

“Of course I did,” Leslie said, though her voice lowered slightly.

“So then she’s probably really looking forward to seeing you.”

Leslie’s brows knitted together and her eyes were wary as she stared at her brother. “Right.”
“Shaking out the old welcome mat right now.”

“Yeah.”

“Baking one of those cakes with your face on it.”

“Enough. Okay?”

Vito fell silent even though he didn’t think it was enough. He didn’t pursue the argument though for two reasons: one, he was hungry. And two, he knew his grandmother could take Leslie on and do it much better than he ever could.

Vito directed Leslie to the nursing home, gripping the door handle as they had multiple near misses with other cars and once, a pedestrian who leaped back from the curb when the RV’s back wheel jumped it.

“Sorry,” Leslie muttered again and again, seemingly more of a reflex than an actual attempt to apologize.

“I think you can just park around the back near the loading dock,” Vito said when they arrived to a nearly full, tiny visitor’s lot. She managed to pull in next to one of the maroon vans that took residents on trips to the grocery store and Target. After putting the RV in park, Leslie leaned her forehead against the top of the steering wheel.

“I forgot how much I hate driving around here.”

“It was fun.” Vito pried his hand from the door handle and wiped it on his jeans.

The woman at the front desk called up to their grandmother’s room. The smells of dinner wafted from the dining room and Vito found himself peering around the doorway to see what was being served: a roast with peas and carrots. A woman at a nearby table was already sliding a spoon into a dish of vanilla ice cream.
“Where is she?” Vito said, bouncing slightly on the balls of his feet. They waited several minutes more then asked the receptionist to call again.

“She says she’d like for you to come to her room,” the woman said after she hung up. “You know, sometimes they need help but they don’t want to admit it. They’re afraid to do things on their own but too proud to ask for help.”

Vito and Leslie exchanged a glance. Their grandmother was proud, for certain, but not afraid to ask for help. Or demand it.

“This is some kind of trap,” Leslie said as they followed the receptionist’s directions to the elevator. Inside the elevator was lined with wallpaper covered in tiny yellow and red rosebuds. Up and down they would go, with no hope to ever gain enough sunlight to blossom.

“It’s not a trap,” Vito said, even though he felt uneasy too. Maybe it was a trap for Leslie. Maybe it was a nice surprise for the both of them. A mix CD for the road. A paper bag of sunscreen and snacks.

They got off on the third floor and rounded a corner following the signs that pointed them to Room 3890.

“Why does it need to be four numbers?” Vito muttered. “There aren’t three thousand rooms on this floor.”

“It’s an illusion. Makes it seem fancier than it is. What do you think she wants? Why not just meet us downstairs?”

“Maybe she has presents,” Vito said. Leslie rolled her eyes.

They found the room near the stairwell at the far end of one hall. Vito knocked and twisted open the knob when his grandmother called them in. “We’re here!” His
grandmother sat in the armchair near the window, eyebrows pushing her brow wrinkles deeper.

“We?” she said. “Where’s your sister?”

Vito turned around to an empty doorway. He stepped back into the hall and found Leslie hovering near the door to the stairwell. The neon exit sign cast a green glow on the top of her head.

“What are you doing?” he asked. Then he shook his head. “You know what? Never mind. I’m going in. You can join if you want to.” He went into the room and shut the door, making it extra work for Leslie to join them.

“What is she doing, futzing around out there?”

“Yeah, what else is new?” Vito flopped down on the bed. The tile in the drop ceiling directly above him was slightly askew. He itched to fix it. He wondered if it bothered his grandmother. If she lay in bed much of the time, staring up at the ceiling.

“Too bad. I wanted to show her something.”

Vito sat up.

“I found this shirt for her on the last shopping trip.” She held up a large white t-shirt. In green block letters it read: “World’s Greatest Granddaughter.”

Vito fell back on the bed laughing and his grandmother threw her head back and laughed too. He was sure their laughter shook the whole building as loud and hearty and full as it was. He was sure their laughter could shake everything and anything right back where it was supposed to be.
Chapter 10

Leslie pressed her forehead against the cool steel door that led to the stairwell. Soft music drifted from the door nearest to her, a saxophone whose notes were shiny and sweet then faded into a woman’s deep voice. Leslie couldn’t make out the lyrics but she could hear the longing in the low rounded notes.

Her mother listened to jazz too, until she stopped listening to music at all. Sarah Vaughn and Ella Fitzgerald crooned while her mother cooked or in the car on the ride home from school. She’d hum or sing along, her voice harmonizing seamlessly with the singer.

“Why didn’t you become a singer?” Leslie had asked once, back when she thought you just became what you wanted to become.

“Oh I have terrible stage fright,” she’d said. “I get so self-conscious.” That year, Leslie tried out for her fifth grade Christmas production and won the part of the Sugarplum Fairy in The Nutcracker. In the weeks before, Leslie watched over her mother’s careful sewing of tulle to a leotard for the costume, instructing her where more sequins were needed. The night of the performance, she basked in the applause that followed the Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy, which she’d practiced every day for hours in the basement. Afterwards, they stood near the refreshments, nibbling on sugar cookies and sipping hot chocolate, and family after family came up to congratulate Leslie on her performance. She noticed with satisfaction that Laurel Peterson who’d played
Clara did not have nearly the receiving line. In the car on the way home, Leslie held back what she wanted to say: *See, Mommy, we’re different. See how different we are?*

Leslie found herself jerked back to the present by the sound of a door opening and shutting down the hall. She lifted her head from the door to see a tall thin man wearing a newsboy cap peering at her through small square glasses.

“Are you all right?” he asked. His voice was deeper than she’d expected, steady despite his apparent age.

Leslie nodded.

“Lost? Who you visiting?”

She pointed at her grandmother’s closed door.

“Sue!” His eyes reflected delight. “You’re here to see Sue? You must be the granddaughter.” He frowned, apparently thinking hard.

“Leslie,” she supplied.

“Oh, no, that’s not the one I’m thinking of. Now her name was…let’s see…”

“Josephine?” Leslie asked, her heart sinking.

He beamed. “Yes! That’s her. You’re not Josephine?”

“Josephine was my mother,” Leslie said. She began edging her way towards her grandmother’s closed door.

“Oh! So you’re Vito’s sister.” He was eying her now like he was sizing her up. “The new guardian.”

“That’s me.” Leslie pushed her mouth into a smile. “Maybe I should get that printed up on some business cards.” She winced inwardly as the words came out more sarcastic than she’d intended.
The man didn’t look pleasant at all anymore. “You’re a lucky young lady,” he said. “With family like those two.”

“I know,” Leslie said, even though she’d never considered herself lucky before.

He tipped his hat at her before turning and striding down the hall, shoes silent against the carpet. He turned back suddenly.

“Your brother is a talented artist. But you already knew that. Help him nurture it.” He turned back and strode down the hall to the elevator. When he disappeared inside, Leslie let out a long breath.

Who was this guy? she wondered, but then realized what mattered was that he was a stranger to her but he knew things about her and her family. She wondered what else her grandmother had said about her mother, how much he knew. Half of her had always wanted to talk to her grandmother about what her mother had been like growing up, what she’d been like before the diagnosis. How she knew her daughter was different. The other half, the half that made most of Leslie’s decisions, never wanted to have that conversation and never asked those questions.

She pressed her ear to her grandmother’s door. She could hear muffled talking and laughter. She tried to look through the peephole but everything was blurred. Finally, she knocked softly and pushed open the door. Vito was sitting on the bed and her grandmother stood at the dresser, fastening a necklace. She wore a green cable-knit sweater and matching slacks. A pair of white orthopedic shoes sat on the floor at the foot of the bed.

“Oh good, our ride is here,” she said, winking at Vito in the mirror.
Leslie had thought of this reunion on her way there, perhaps even more so than reuniting with Vito. Every scenario went through her mind—a shouting match, a warm hug of forgiveness, a dismissive coldness. She’s expected a pale, frail woman, ravaged by cancer, worn down by life. What she hadn’t expected was this rouge-cheeked jolly woman, looking ready to take on the town.

“Hi,” Leslie said cautiously.

“Hi, dear,” her grandmother said. “Glad you’re here.” She did seem glad, and even though she was still focused on getting ready and didn’t move to embrace or kiss her granddaughter, Leslie relaxed a tiny bit.

“Is there a dress code for the dining room?” she asked.

“Oh, we’re not eating in the dining room. We’re all going out for dinner. I’m in the mood for pizza. Don’t you miss New York pizza?” Leslie nodded.

“So let’s go get some good pizza.” She finished in front of the mirror then sat down heavily on the bed and fumbled for her shoes.

“I can help.” Leslie bent to pick up one of the shoes.

“Oh, I can manage.” Her grandmother plucked the shoe from her hand. Leslie looked at Vito who shrugged at her. They both watched their grandmother toss the first shoe back on the carpet and fumble her foot inside. She slipped into the second one and then motioned for Vito to hand her the cane.

“Don’t let me forget. I have a present for you. Please get that light switch will you?” She left the room with Vito at her heels, leaving Leslie to turn off the light and follow.
Leslie gritted her teeth through the rush hour traffic. She’d suggested a car service twice but her grandmother insisted there was no point when they already had a vehicle. Her grandmother and Vito sat on the couch in the back, talking about some paintings and a friend of his she didn’t know. She barely listened to their conversation, focusing instead on fitting the RV through narrow gaps and trying to ignore the honks that were almost non-stop behind her. Her jaw and shoulders ached by the time she pulled into a parking space behind the restaurant.

They’d decided to go to Villa Monte, all the way on the other side of the island by where she and Vito had lived. It had been their family’s go-to pizza place for Friday nights and after-school; during Leslie’s junior year of high school when she worked at the deli next door for three months, one of the cooks knew her order by heart – a chicken roll and a small order of garlic knots. Now, though, she didn’t recognize any of the workers, including the perky hostess who seated them in a booth in the dining-in section. Vito and Leslie sat on one side while their grandmother sat on the other side.

“That is quite the vehicle you’ve got,” her grandmother said. “You had it checked out by a mechanic?”

“Yeah,” Leslie lied, fiddling with a parmesan cheese shaker.

“Good, you can’t be too careful.”

A waiter came over, a slick-haired teenager with a budding goatee. He took their drink orders—7Up for Vito, water for Leslie and a ginger ale for their grandmother—then rattled off the specials in a thick Staten Island accent. Leslie’s own accent had faded.
over the course of her years at Stanford, though she found it emerged at times when she was angry or excited.

After he left, their grandmother addressed Vito. “What do you think of the RV?”

“It’s cool.”

“Do you feel safe in it?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?” she pressed.

“Yeah, it’s all good.” He cleared his throat and unwrapped his utensils from the paper napkin.

“Of course it’s safe,” Leslie said. “I made it all the way here just fine.”

“I know, dear,” her grandmother said. She unrolled her own utensils, smoothing the napkin onto her lap. They were silent until the waiter returned with their drinks and took their orders. Vito and Leslie decided to split a pepperoni pie while their grandmother ordered a spinach roll and a salad. She patted her stomach as the waiter left.

“Watching my girlish figure, you know,” she said with a smirk. Vito laughed but Leslie felt unsure about how to respond, like an acquaintance who wasn’t quite in on the joke between friends.

“So…” Leslie groped for a topic. “What’s new with you?”

“Why don’t you tell her about your painting business?”

Vito told her, showing her a grainy photo on his phone. “We’ve sold five so far. Hoping to sell a few more before we leave. Duane has got a website up so maybe we’ll start to sell some there too.”
“That’s great!” Leslie peered at the photo, just able to make out a dog leaping beside two deer. “So people’s pets huh? That’s pretty brilliant. What are you gonna do with the money?”

“Good question,” his grandmother said. “What are you going to do?”

Vito hesitated, his eyes moving back and forth between something inward, as if making a decision. “Well, one thing I’ve been thinking about is…getting my name changed.”

“Here we go!” The waiter arrived with the steaming pizza and a stand to place it on. Another waiter came up behind him with the spinach roll and salad.

Vito stared down at the oily, steaming surface of the pie. He reached for a slice but Leslie slapped his hand away.

“Hang on a minute. You want to change your name?”

“Yeah. I need $65 for the court fees.”

“Your first name? Or last? Or both?” Leslie said.

“First. I think just first.” He reached for a slice and this time Leslie let him take it.

“What are you gonna change it to?” she asked. Their grandmother was drizzling dressing onto her salad, seemingly focused entirely on that task.

“I’m not sure yet.”

“Why do you want to change it all of a sudden?” Leslie dragged a slice onto her plate.

“I don’t know—”

“Because of your dad?” their grandmother said. Leslie frowned. She’d thought Vito would be proud to have his name, to carry on someone’s legacy, even if he hadn’t
known him for very long. Then she thought of how it must have felt for Vito to see his own name carved into the marble tomb that held his father’s body. And hearing his mother call his name and forgetting for a moment that there was only one of them now. And the mail and the phone calls that still came from solicitors years afterwards—yes, she could see why he might want a change.

“No,” Vito said slowly. “Because…I want something different. Look, it’s not a big deal. Just something I’m thinking about spending the money on.”

Leslie took a bit of pizza, the hot sauce filling her mouth. She swallowed hard, grimacing at the burning. “I’ll give you the money.”

Vito looked up, really looked at her for the first time all dinner. “You will?”

“Yeah. We can go get it changed before we leave.”

“I do need a guardian to come with me.”

“Then that’s it. We’ll go tomorrow, okay?” Leslie smiled at him, pleased to be able to help him in this way.

Their grandmother cleared her throat. “That’s not gonna work. I’m afraid you’re not officially his guardian yet. We need to go to court and fill out the paperwork for that first. And it needs to be processed.”

“Oh.” Leslie slumped forward and smiled half-heartedly at Vito. “Well then we’ll go when that’s taken care of. Promise.”

Their grandmother made a noise like she was about to say something but instead took a big bite of salad. She didn’t speak again until after the bill came while Leslie and Vito made stilted conversation about the television shows they were watching.
“Well, I think it’s time for me to be getting back,” their grandmother said, stuffing bills into the check holder. “You guys can do whatever you want. You know what we do have to do before you leave, though, and I think we should get it over with tomorrow morning.”

Vito and Leslie reluctantly agreed. They gathered their coats and headed towards the door, each deep in their own thoughts.

The hostess even seemed to notice and worriedly asked them if everything had been to their satisfaction. They all nodded in unison, heads bobbing like buoys at sea.

“Come back again soon,” she called after them, as the door shut, the bell that signaled entry tinkling its farewell.

***

Leslie didn’t go through her routine as usual that night. Vito hopped into the bathroom when she stepped out to get her floss and she kept the bottle of whiskey tucked away at the bottom of her closet, the gun hidden in its secret compartment. She listened to music to try to help herself fall asleep but didn’t drift off until sometime after 3.

Leslie dreamed that she was at their old house during the storm. She was a younger version of herself, lying in her twin bed in her old pink bedroom. The windows were rattling and the rain on the roof was like a thousand arrows striking again and again. She was alone in the house, she knew that much—Vito and her parents were gone, safe somewhere else. She had stayed behind to wait. Her eyes locked on the hands of the Mickey Mouse clock on the wall. His pointing fingers ticked away another minute.
She was no longer on her bed but on the rowboat from the lake, waiting in the center of her otherwise empty bedroom. She closed her eyes and waited for the water to rise, to seep over her, to fill her completely.

The sound of Vito in the shower woke her the next morning. She lay in bed for a while, trying to detangle herself from the dream world. *The letters, the letters.* She had to ask about the letters today.

She began making coffee, then paused, wondering if Vito drank coffee yet. She made enough for two just in case then set out the bagels they’d picked up the night before on two plates.

When Vito emerged from the bathroom, his hair was wet and he wore blue track pants and a white t-shirt with a silhouette image of the Master Chief character from the video game, Halo.

“Is that what you’re wearing?” she asked.

Vito shrugged. “Yeah. Why does it matter? They won’t be able to see me.”

“Real nice.” Leslie shook her head. “Do you drink coffee?”

“Yes.” Vito took the mug she offered. He took a sip and grimaced. “Sugar?”

While he emptied packet after packet into the mug, Leslie tried to psyche herself up for the day that lay ahead. They’d agreed to pick up their grandmother at ten AM, head to the cemetery, and then to the courthouse to transfer guardianship over to Leslie at eleven-thirty. A rather eventful day for the whole family.

“Hey can I use your phone?” Vito asked. His lips were still turned down at the corners as he took another sip of his coffee.

“For what?”
“I just need to look something up. For a friend.”

Leslie raised an eyebrow but handed the phone over. “Don’t look at anything gross. Or how to make a bomb or something.”

Vito scrolled as she ate her bagel in silence. It was almost time to go when he handed her the phone back. When she went into the bathroom to wash up, she opened the browser. He had closed out of whatever he’d looked at.

*Respect his privacy, she told herself. It’s probably nothing bad.*

“Hey, do you know if Grandma still has that storage unit where she put all the stuff from the old house?” she asked when she emerged.

Vito shrugged. “Probably?”

“I’ll just ask Grandma.”

He sat in the back finishing his bagel as Leslie drove. She pulled up to the front door of the retirement home in the circular driveway. She sent Vito inside to get their grandmother and the two of them emerged a few moments later. Their grandmother had wrapped her hair in a purple scarf and hunched over against the wind. Leslie realized she hadn’t asked her grandmother how she was feeling once yesterday. She dug her fingernails into her palm as hard as she could, then hopped out to help her grandmother into the backdoor and onto the couch.

“How are you doing today?” she asked with a smile. “It’s a chilly one out there.”

Her grandmother looked at her. “Yes it is, Leslie. And now for traffic Vito?”

“I just mean, how are you feeling with…you know…everything?”

“You mean my cancer? Oh it’s like little elves are jumping around on every platelet in my body.”
Leslie didn’t know if she should laugh so she looked to Vito for a cue. He just shrugged. “Well,” she said finally, “if you need anything, let me know.”

“I’ll do that.”

Leslie paused, trying to decide how to ask about the letters. “Whatever happened to all the stuff? You know, from the old house?”

Her grandmother’s eyes narrowed. “Like what?”

“Oh, I don’t know. The stuff from my room. I thought maybe there might be things in there we could use in our new place.”

“Don’t worry so much about stuff. We’ve learned that the hard way, haven’t we Vito?”

Leslie climbed back into the driver’s seat, face burning, wishing she was more thoughtful, more generous, more everything granddaughters were supposed to be. “Why am I such an asshole?” she whispered.

“What?” Vito poked his head into the cab.

“Nothing. You riding back there?”

“Thought I’d ride up front. If that’s okay?”

Leslie tried to hide her surprise. “Of course. That is the crash zone, though.”

“I live on the edge.”

Leslie didn’t know if they were joking about their parents’ deaths or if Vito was even aware of what he’d just said. She set her jaw and turned her focus to the road.

A few hair-raising turns later, they pulled up near the cemetery. After dropping off Vito and their grandmother, she searched for a parking space on a side street. She found one large enough in front of a house with a skinny tree growing out front near the
curb. Two stakes supported it from either side; Leslie was reminded of the passage from *The House on Mango Street* about four skinny trees that bit the sky and were angry. She had never read about an angry tree before that, and she liked the idea that something young and thin and beautiful could be so angry.

She felt as if the owners of the house were watching her between blinds, waiting for her to hit their car or knock down their poor angry tree as she pulled in. She ended up more than a foot from the curb but figured there was enough space for a car to pass and locked everything up.

“I should have hitched a car,” Leslie said as she walked up to her brother and grandmother near the gate. “This thing’s a pain in the ass for short trips.” Vito and their grandmother just murmured in general agreement, apparently no longer in the mood for conversation.

The glass doors to the mausoleum squealed its greeting when they entered. The scattering of people in the mausoleum—an older lady with a tiny spaniel on a leash and two dark men who appeared to be brothers—looked up. Leslie felt as if they’d disrupted something private even though they of course had just as much of a right to be there.

Their parents had opted to be buried inside one of the three enormous concrete buildings scattered throughout the cemetery. Dozens of other people were buried in there, sealed in marble walls, each tomb engraved with the usual words found on a gravestone.

Leslie hadn’t been to visit since her last time on the island after she’d helped sort through the last of their mother’s belongings. She’d come by herself the day before she departed for Madrid. The mausoleum had been empty then, and there were many more blank tombs than there were now. It was hot that day, the air conditioning inside the
mausoleum bringing relief, despite what she’d come there to do. She’d spent a long time in front of her father’s tomb first, catching him up on her life since she’d last visited—almost finished at Stanford, Dean’s list, her plans to travel around Europe during her holidays and weekends abroad. She reminded him that Vito’s birthday was coming up and laughed her way through the story of how they’d found her father’s grade school report cards while cleaning out the basement.

“You got on my case about straight As yet you got a C+ in gym!” she’d berated him with a grin. It was as if death had turned their relationship into the perfect all-American sitcom father-daughter relationship.

“So….where are they again?” Vito whispered.

“You should know that,” their grandmother said, slapping him lightly on the back of the neck. She looked around and hesitated. “Uh, Leslie. Why don’t you lead the way?”

Leslie tried to remember. To the right? How far down? They were somewhere near eye-level, she remembered that much. “Let’s just split up.” She headed to the right, Vito to the far wall and their grandmother to the left.

Leslie spotted them first, directly next to the one at which the woman with the dog stood with her wrinkled hand against the smooth marble. Her sniffles echoed in the cavernous space.

*It’s right here,* Leslie mouthed as her grandmother and Vito slowly walked over. She stood awkwardly behind the woman, the dog sniffing at Leslie’s shoes. Moments ticked by and the woman did not move, besides the occasional shuddering breaths and to tug the spaniel back to her side.
Leslie’s throat tickled maddeningly, but she was afraid to make a sound, or even move, lest she disturb this woman who was grieving at exactly the most inconvenient spot at exactly the most inconvenient time. Though, she supposed it was unfair to call her grief inconvenient, or maybe exactly fair because wasn’t all grief inconvenient? Wasn’t it by nature an inconvenient experience no matter when or where it occurred? She tried to imagine a scenario in which it would be convenient: when the tissue box was full, when the sheets in the bed were freshest, when your black dress was back from the drycleaners?

Her grandmother was gesturing for Leslie to do something. Leslie mouthed back, *What do you want me to do?* Her grandmother just kept pointing to her wrist. Leslie got the message—they needed to get this over with and head to the courthouse for their appointment.

Leslie took a deep breath, and reminded herself she was good at this. Acting. Charming. The receiving line at the Nutcracker reception. All the teachers who let her leave class for a fake doctor’s appointment or community service project.

She knelt to pet the spaniel. “What an adorable dog!”

The woman started and looked down at her dog and Leslie. The dog seemed overjoyed at the attention, planting its paws against Leslie’s denim-clad knees and wagging its tail so hard it slapped against the woman’s leg like it was spring-loaded. The dog yipped twice, and the brothers at the other end of the mausoleum turned around to stare.

“Sorry,” Leslie said, getting to her feet. “Didn’t mean to get him all riled up.”
“It’s all right,” the woman said, cautiously, as if trying to discern what exactly was happening here.

“We’re here visiting our parents.” Leslie motioned to Vito who moved closer.

“This is our grandmother.” Their grandmother waved, her face solemn. The woman’s eyes darted from face to face, taking in the situation, the ages of the siblings, the words “poor orphans” almost visible in her pupils like a neon sign.

“I’m so sorry,” the woman said tugging her dog closer. “I—I’m just very sorry.” She bowed her head quickly as if weighed down by her sympathy. “I’m here for my dear friend Bess. I come every Saturday to say hello. I’m sure you…well I’m sure you want some time with them.” She reached out and squeezed Leslie’s arm. Leslie smiled graciously, like a first lady on inauguration day, and the woman ushered her dog out of the mausoleum. The brothers followed her out too. Leslie thought he heard one of them say *pesadilla* which she knew in Spanish meant nightmare. Leslie wanted to know what they meant, whose nightmare, what it was, but also knew it didn’t really matter, that nightmares, like dreams, like waking, was subjective.

“Well that felt wrong,” Leslie said, standing between her grandmother and Vito. Her grandmother patted her on the upper arm.

“We’re New Yorkers,” she said. “When we’re on a schedule, it’s best you just get out of our way.”

They stood in a line in front of the tombs which rested side-by-side, their father on the left, mother on the right. Vito Verranzo 1952-2003. Josephine Verranzo 1951-2008. That was it; no inscription, no “caring mother,” no “beloved father.” Only names and years—just the facts, ma’am.
When their father died, Leslie had been there beside her mother with the funeral director when he asked what she wanted engraved, whether she wanted anything more than the name and years. Her mother had stared into her lap and shook her head. Vito had been quiet, sitting in his chair with his favorite Power Ranger action figure, the blue one. Leslie wished it was acceptable for her to hold her favorite childhood toy, a plastic pony with red tangles for a mane and a gold star stamped on its right flank. Instead her hands only had each other to grip as she stopped herself from demanding something more for her father’s inscription. And yet, six years later, she’d done the same as her mother when asked about the inscription—shook her head and looked away, not wanting to face any judgement from the funeral director or Vito. It felt like an impossible task, to sum up someone else in a few words that were meant to last forever. When she’d seen the tomb a week later, she exhaled her relief that she’d left it blank. It was simpler that way. She only had to face what was absolutely, unwaveringly true – that name and those dates.

Now, she kept focused on them, unwilling to look to either side of her to see how the others were reacting. She listened, though, for a change in breath, or movement, but they all seemed to be staying as still as her. Her eyes traced the edges of her mother’s tomb where glass shaped like scallop shells marked each corner. Did she think of this moment, of her children at her tomb when the wheel turned—when she turned the wheel?—and the car skidded over the edge? Did she imagine it would be this silent, that no one would touch the granite, or touch each other? Leslie thought again of the letters, if they might bring a semblance of meaning to any of this.

When Vito spoke it was like a gun went off. “Why did they want to be in here? Instead of the ground?”
Leslie had wondered this too, though it’d felt like too morbid of a question to ask.

*Why didn’t you and Dad want to be dead in the ground instead of in a marble box?*

Their grandmother stood rigid, gripping her cane like it was keeping her from drowning. She didn’t say anything until Vito nudged her with his elbow.

“Do you know why?”

“You don’t want to hear that old nonsense,” she said.

“He wouldn’t have asked if he didn’t,” Leslie prodded. “I want to know too.”

“Is it a bad reason?” Vito said.

“Not really.” She sighed.

“Is it complicated?”

“It’s pretty simple actually. They wanted something indoors because they thought it would encourage visitors. That rain or snow wouldn’t stop anyone from coming at any time, leaving flowers, as much as they wanted to.”

Leslie was mildly impressed that her parents somehow managed to guilt trip her even in death. Vito was staring at their mother’s tomb as if she might slide out and contribute a better explanation. What would she look like if she did? Leslie wondered. Would her brown hair be long and scraggly, her nails curled in spirals down to her knees? Would her lips still purse like they did when she disapproved of them? Would her pale skin have turned to flaky yellowed paper, like Revolutionary-era love letters? *The letters.*

“Maybe we could come visit more often,” Vito said. “No matter where we live.”

Leslie almost told Vito not to worry so much about it, that their parents couldn’t really tell if their plan had worked. At a sharp look from their grandmother, instead, she
said, “Of course we can. Come rain, sleet or snow. Like mailmen.” She smiled with what she hoped was encouragement. He looked down at his shoes.

They stood in silence until a couple entered with a baby carriage and the baby cried out in a way that they all understood meant it was time to go.
Chapter 11

Vito sat on the steps of the courthouse eating a soft pretzel while Leslie and his grandmother went over the paperwork on a nearby bench. A dribble of mustard fell on his shirt. He scooped it off with his index finger and wiped it back on the pretzel. He rubbed at the faded yellow spot for a few moments then gave up. It didn’t matter how presentable he looked, he supposed. It wasn’t as if he was on trial.

He’d filled out the form he’d needed to a few days ago, expressing his preference for Leslie as his permanent guardian. Preference did not seem like the right word; he’d wanted to cross it out and write 
*reluctant acceptance.*

He checked his phone again to see if Duane had responded to his text asking if he could come over after the courthouse. Still no response. The money they’d made so far--$315—was tucked in an envelope in an inner pocket of his suitcase. They had some promises from other residents of the nursing home that they would commission paintings of their grandkids, and Vito wondered if any of them had made good on those promises to have the aides help them put the orders in during their computer classes.

Vito shoved the last of the pretzel in his mouth as a cop car blasted by, sirens screaming. He watched it turn the corner and he wished them luck in his head.

“Come on, Vito!” Leslie called. “We’re ready.”

Inside, they went through security then were directed to the Family Court waiting room. They signed in and received a number. The man behind the counter asked if they had all the proper paperwork. Their grandmother held up a file folder.
“And you have everything else on the checklist?” He listed off several items which their grandmother nodded for – birth certificate, death certificates, completed forms. Then he turned to Leslie.

“And proof of ID and residence?”

Leslie hesitated.

“You don’t have your ID?” their grandmother asked in disbelief.

Leslie shook her head.

“Well where is it?”

“I’m not sure where I lost it.”

“Well what were you going to do if you got pulled over?”

“They can look it up.” Leslie looked at the clerk. “Can’t you look it up too?”

The clerk’s mouth had turned down at the corners. “We can…do you at least have anything with your name on it? A credit card?”

Leslie started digging in her purse. “Yeah, I have that…”

“And we will need some kind of proof of residence.”

Leslie sighed and pulled her hand out of her purse. “Grandma, can we just come back another time? We’re not ready.”

“You’re not ready. I was only wrong in assuming you were.” She looked at the clerk. “Is there anything we can do to push this through? We’re kind of on a clock.” She gestured with her cane. “Cancer. You know how it is.”

The clerk’s face changed to one of surprise and pity. “I wish I could help you. I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do for you here. If you speak to your lawyer, they can ensure your will is in order so that guardianship is changed as you desire.”
“There’s nothing? Not even for an old lady dying of cancer?”

He apologized again and told them they could come back with the proper documents whenever they were able to.

They left in silence. Leslie and Vito let their grandmother storm out ahead of them, even though they had to significantly slow their paces to do so.

Vito couldn’t help but feel relieved. Maybe Leslie would never officially become his guardian and he’d just have to stay with his grandmother after all.

That hope was dashed though, when they returned to the RV and his grandmother asked to use his cell phone. She called her lawyer and said she needed to come by to talk about some things.

“Anyway you could draw up some papers for me? Proof of residence.” She spelled Leslie’s name, then asked how the family was, if the girls were graduated yet, if Ruth was still making those ceramic Jesuses, oh, she’d started making Marys now? She told him they’d be by to discuss their options in a couple of hours.

When she hung up and handed the phone back to Vito, he just stared at her with his eyebrows raised, waiting for an explanation.

“What?”

“You asked your lawyer to make up fake papers?” Leslie said, looking over her shoulder at them from the driver’s seat.

“He’s a friend of your grandfather’s. Oh, don’t talk about it like we’re trying to smuggle drugs across the border. It’s just to get through this guardianship red tape.”

“I don’t see what the big deal is,” Leslie said, turning back around. “If we take care of it here, or later when Vito and I are settled somewhere.”
“You know, it worries me to hear you say that. Not a big deal. It makes me think you have no idea what you’re doing.”

Vito felt a sense of déjà vu only not quite exact. Leslie and his mother had bickered in this same way, the slow simmer of anger beneath their words, not looking at each other as they talked, each trying to get the final zinger in. He’d always felt most uncomfortable with those types of arguments; the explosion was unpredictable.

“Hey,” Vito said, “Duane said I could come over for a few hours to say goodbye. Can you drop me off there?”

“Don’t you want to come get lunch?” Leslie asked, craning her neck around again to look at him.

“His mom’s making us lunch.”

“Oh of course you can go see your friend,” his grandmother said. “I want to say hi to Marie myself.”

“Oh, actually, she’s not home. She left us lunch. She had to go take his brother somewhere.”

“Shouldn’t I be the one to say whether he can go?” Leslie said. “Isn’t that what a guardian does?”

“But you’re not the guardian yet, remember?”

“I’ll tell him we’re on our way,” Vito interjected. He hunched over his phone pretending to type. He hoped Duane would be home when they arrived. He hoped Marie didn’t answer the door.

When Leslie dropped him off, she said she’d be back after they picked up the papers from Johnny. She waited, of course, for him to ring the bell. To Vito’s relief,
Duane answered. Vito turned to wave at the RV, then shoved Duane inside and shut the door.

“What are you doing here?” Duane said.

“I had to get away. They’re driving me crazy.”

“Was that your sister? With the new home?” Duane turned away from him and walked into the kitchen. Vito followed.

“Yeah. It’s kind of nice I guess. So you got my texts.”

“Yeah. Your texts. I got them. After I sat by myself at lunch yesterday and figured it out for myself.”

“Sorry,” Vito said, taken aback. “I didn’t have a chance to until—”

“Whatever. It’s no big deal. I was just saying. So why did you come by?”

“Well, I wanted to…see if you got any orders on the website.”

Before Duane could respond, his younger brother, Jeremy came barreling into the kitchen and right into Vito’s legs, nearly bowling him over.

“Hi!” Jeremy said. “You haven’t been to visit in forever!”

“I know, sorry kid.”

“Momma said your house got blown away in a tornado.”

“It was a hurricane,” Duane said, impatience evident in his voice.

“Actually it was a superstorm,” Vito said.

“Same thing,” Duane muttered.

Jeremy tugged on Vito’s hand. “Wanna see something cool?”

Vito looked at Duane who shrugged, looking away as if anything else in the world was more important to him than whether Vito stayed or left.
Vito followed Jeremy into the living/dining room, where the dining table was piled with stacks of papers, toys, and books. On a small plastic footstool near the closest leg of the table sat a jar. Inside, a lady bug crawled up a leafy twig. A tiny square of cheese rested on the bottom of the jar. Jeremy explained that he had found it outside during recess and his teacher helped him set up the jar and do some research about lady bugs. Jeremy didn’t like the idea of feeding it other bugs, so he thought he’d try out his favorite foods on him first.

Vito knelt and watched the bug reach the top of the twig and stop, survey his new kingdom. “What’s his name?”

“Jeremy Junior.”

“Oh he’ll be sick of that name in about ten years.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind.”

Duane shuffled into the living room and leaned against the door frame, arms crossed. “We got one.”

Vito stood. “One what?”

“Order.”

Vito felt a surge of excitement. What was the order? What did they want him to paint? How would he decide what to include in the picture? Duane had included a little comment box on the order form for the patron to include any relevant information they thought would help Vito “most accurately capture the essence of the subject” and Vito hoped they gave him something helpful to work with.
Aloud, he just said, “Great. Were you going to tell me or are you suddenly painting too?”

“Were you going to tell me you’re really leaving?”

Vito knew he should concede that his transgression was worse than Duane’s. He should tell Duane he was sorry and that he would text a lot and call and visit. He should play jacks with Jeremy one last time and give Duane something to remember him by like a nice card or his lucky shoelaces.

He’d once watched a movie with Leslie, the summer before she left for college. In it, a group of girls separated for their first summer apart and sent each other a pair of jeans that somehow fit all of them despite their disparate body shapes. They each experienced their own traumas and joys and came back together at the end of the summer close as ever. Leslie had laughed scornfully throughout the film, and at the end she threw up her hands.

“No friendship is actually like that,” Leslie said. “What a fantasy.”

Vito had tried to argue, but she asked him if their parents had any friends from their childhood. He had to admit they didn’t seem to. The only company they ever had were their father’s cousins and their work colleagues.

“Friendships are strong when they’re convenient. That’s it.”

He hadn’t fully believed her at the time, but he hadn’t been able to shake those words from his memory. Now, looking at Duane, he wondered what it was that really tethered them together.

“Don’t make a big deal out of nothing,” Vito said. “Just show me the commission.”
Duane’s lip curled like a pale worm.

“Do you want to get paid or not?”

Reluctantly Duane went over to the computer in the living room. The commission was from a friend of his cousin’s, a woman out in Brooklyn, who, according to the comments section, was recently divorced, looking to redecorate, and liked to get in on the ground floor with new talent. Vito’s face warmed at that phrase, “new talent.” His ego deflated slightly when he read the next sentence, which said that at the very least the piece would be a funny conversation piece for dinner parties.

Still, it was an order. Forgetting his anger at Duane, he looked at his friend with a grin. Duane’s eyes flashed with excitement before he seemed to remember himself and cleared his throat.

“Now here’s the kicker.” He opened the attached jpeg.

At first Vito wasn’t sure what he was looking at. Then he realized it was a half-naked woman laughing, her long black hair strategically falling across her chest and face. Her lower half was wrapped in pink silk down to her ankles.

“Who, uh, is this the woman who ordered the painting?” He tore his eyes away from the image to check the order. “Denise Lyons?”

“Dunno. It doesn’t say.”

“Is this…illegal?”

Duane snorted. “Sending nude pictures on the internet?”

“I mean…we’re underage.”

“Yeah but she don’t know that.”
They looked at the picture for a few seconds more until Duane abruptly clicked the mouse. “I’ll print this out for you so you can work on it.” While he did that, Duane gave Vito instructions for sending the paintings. He would mail them to Duane using the padded envelopes Duane had purchased. Then Duane would print a more official looking label and send it off to the customer once their payment went through online. It was clear he’d spent time thinking all this through, which warmed Vito a little bit—that Duane had every intention of at least keeping up their business while he was gone.

A snore erupted from the dining room. Jeremy was asleep on the floor, his body curled around Jeremy Jr’s jar like a comma.

“He just falls asleep all over the place now,” Duane said. “Even in school.”

“Night terrors still?”

“My mom said she had them when she was a kid too,” Duane said, shrugging as he pulled the picture from the printer. “So it might be genetic.”

Vito didn’t know what was genetic for him – pancreatic cancer, a receding hairline, it was all a mystery to him. When his 6th grade biology teacher had them map out their own genetic traits through their family tree, she had been at a loss when Vito asked what he should do instead. She told him to just go ahead and map his family in the same way and that it might be kind of interesting to see which traits coincidentally matched. He couldn’t see why such disconnected information would be interesting but he made the chart and got an A.

“Sucks,” Vito said. “Poor Jeremy.”

“He’ll be all right,” Duane said faintly, staring down at his brother.
Vito tucked the photo into one of the padded envelopes. Duane shut off the computer.

“Well, I guess I’ll head out then,” Vito said, even though Leslie and his grandmother wouldn’t be back for a few more hours.

He stood on Duane’s stoop and looked at his best friend the way he’d studied the photos for the paintings: like he was trying to replicate him, but more than that, to weave him into a canvas to become a thing that could be transported at will. That the thing, the canvas and the paint was somehow more than that because of the form it took. That the value of a person could be transferred to a thing that could be carried and kept, because otherwise how could anyone leave anyone, ever?

“You’re looking at me like you’re gonna kiss me or something,” Duane said, shoving his hands deep into his pockets.

“Shut up. Look, I’ll be back,” Vito said. “When I have the money. I think it’ll be soon.”

“Yeah,” Duane said, speaking more to the sidewalk than to Vito.

“Yeah,” Vito said. “Well, I told them I’d meet them at the corner.”

“See ya soon then,” Duane said, his voice dipping a decibel on the word “soon.”

Vito turned away without so much as a handshake with his best friend and headed up the street, the stack of envelopes in his hands.

“HEY!”

Vito stopped, turned back. Duane stood with one foot on his stoop, the other on the front path, arms crossed loosely. “Look in the first envelope, okay?”
Vito opened the envelope and slipped out a piece of paper torn from a spiral notebook. Lightly in pencil, Duane had drawn a crude blueprint for the tiny house. He’d included bunk beds for them and an additional rollaway bed. There was a bathroom and a kitchen and a table that folded down from the wall for “eating, homework, and epic games of Risk.” A porch wrapped around the entire house and there was even a dog sitting by the front door with a question mark above his head.

Vito looked up at Duane who gave him a quick thumbs up. The sun low in the sky reflected off Duane’s glasses, making each lens flash like headlights. This was how he’d remember Duane always, Vito knew, watching his friend’s eyes; they were visible only for the moment when Duane turned away to go back inside, shiny and wet like fountain pennies tossed away and wished upon.
Chapter 12

After they dropped off Vito, Leslie offered to bring her grandmother back to the nursing home until it was time to meet with the lawyer. Instead, she suggested that they kill some time with a ferry ride.

“Do you need to go to the city for something?” Leslie asked as they sat at a traffic light.

“No, we can just take it there and then take it back.”

“Like tourists?”

“Yeah except instead of turning back around on Staten Island and heading back to the big apple, we’ll do the opposite. A couple of extra-stupid tourists.”

They both chuckled. Leslie had to admit, she didn’t hate the idea. The air was chilly but the sun shined through the windshield, warm and strong. She took a right turn at the next block to head back towards the water.

She’d taken the ferry more often in her older years living on the island. She and Kim and a few other girls would occasionally skip school to spend the day wandering downtown, trying on Chinese slippers and knock-off handbags. They’d split sandwiches at delis and sip from the same bottle of water, and on hot summer days, pass a handheld battery-powered fan back and forth as they walked the steamy streets and tried to blend in with the crowds. When they returned to the ferry at the end of the day, they’d sit on one of the outside benches—always on the right side, Leslie insisted, so they could watch the
Statue of Liberty float by. Tourists with cameras and small, cranky children would crowd the deck too, but Leslie didn’t mind so long as she got a glimpse of the green lady.

Leslie dropped her grandmother off then found a parking space several streets over. By the time she’d dug out enough quarters for the meter and hurried the several blocks to the terminal, her grandmother was seated in the waiting area with a coffee in hand. Leslie started to walk towards her but was distracted by the large shiny aquarium in the center of the terminal. Dozens of fish swam in the blue water; children gathered at the base, looking up, pointing and poking, making fish faces at the fish and each other. She couldn’t tear her eyes away from the multicolored fish as she walked towards her grandmother.

“Where did that thing come from?” Leslie asked.

“Oh they put it in a couple of years ago to distract the kiddos or whatever. But I heard the first year almost all of the fish died. Boat’s coming in ten minutes. Did you park in Hoboken?”

Leslie nodded vaguely, her attention still on the tank. She watched a small stingray float like a gray cloud among colorful butterflies. She started when the announcement for the incoming boat sounded over the loudspeaker, and could imagine an added benefit of the tank was subduing the occasionally rowdy, aggressive adult ferry riders too.

They waited for the pushy crowd to board first and then found two seats on the enclosed outer deck on the left side of the Andrew J. Barberi. Her grandmother was trembling as they took their seats, and sat with her eyes closed for a moment, gripping her cane in front of her. The boat lurched and began its half-hour trip across the river.

“Remember when they used to let cars on here?” Leslie said.
Her grandmother opened her eyes. “You remember that? That’s right they banned them after 9/11.”

“Mom took us across in her car once.”

“That seems unlike her.”

“She said she’d never do it again and she didn’t. We went to surprise Dad.”

Leslie smiled. “When we left the car, Mom made sure all the doors were locked. I asked her who would steal our car and where would they drive it to. She said the Hudson Mermaids would drive it right into the sea and use it to visit their mer-friends.”

Her grandmother laughed and shook her head.

“We stood out on the deck,” Leslie said, the memory rushing in like water. “It was one of those open decks where you could lean over the railing and see the water spray up.”

“What else do you remember?” Her grandmother looked at her like a small child listening to a fairytale.

“Well, it was hot—summer, maybe August. But the breeze felt good, I remember that. And Mom had packed us snacks. She made me pose for some pictures when we went by the statue.”

“Just you?”

“This was before Vito. I was ten. Mom was only working part time that summer at the school so it was just me and her a lot of the time. She said she wanted my help at home but I think we couldn’t afford summer camp that year because they were in the process of adopting Vito. She gave me the most ridiculous tasks, like alphabetizing the cassettes and organizing the Christmas ornaments. And then one day, out of nowhere, she
told me we were going into the city to surprise Daddy. We hadn’t gone without him before. Mom wanted to drive because she didn’t like being on the subway just us.” Something dawned on Leslie as she spoke. “I think she just found out that morning about Vito, actually. She wanted to tell him right away.” She remembered now, sitting on the floor with her beading kit, threading a necklace—the colors she couldn’t quite recall—when the phone rang. After a few minutes, her mother came hustling downstairs, the first true bright smile on her face Leslie had seen in months. She announced that they were taking a little trip into the city to see their father. Leslie had been so pleased at her mother’s excitement, that she hadn’t questioned a thing, only slipping on her shoes and taking her mother’s hand as they walked out to the car.

“So she didn’t tell you about Vito right away?”

“No…she never told me actually. Dad did. She wasn’t even there.” It was late September. Vito would arrive in a few months. Leslie had sensed something was happening – the spare room that had served as storage had been cleared out and painted. There were more phone calls, more instances of being dropped off at a friend’s house while her parents went to meetings without her. Something was brewing, like a hurricane.

Her father took her to the marina. Summer lingered that year, leaving a trail of heat and humidity as it dragged along, so they got Italian ices before strolling along the footpath next to the water. He pointed out funny boat names like the Sand Witch and Vitamin Sea. The marina was full of people taking advantage of the weather—working on their boats, their tans, parents with children who toddled dangerously close to the water and were pulled back to safety.
He sat her down on a bench and asked if she’d ever wished she had a brother or sister. She had thought about it of course. Most of her friends had siblings. They mostly complained about them stealing their toys or pushing them around or getting their way all the time. There was a set of twins in her class, Clara and Cassie, who got a lot of attention with their curly blonde hair and matching floral dresses. There were rumors the two girls didn’t speak when they were at home.

She knew where the conversation was going though, so she said yes she had always wanted one. Her father had smiled and said he’d always wished for one too.

“With your mother and I both being only children, we talked a long time ago about having at least two children so they’d have each other.” He laughed to himself at a joke Leslie didn’t get. “Took us a long time to get around to the second one.” He explained that a baby boy would be on his way to them very soon, from Korea just like her.

“Is he my real brother?” she asked. Her father had frowned, confused, his cherry ice dripping onto his fingers.

“You mean your biological brother? No. I mean, maybe…no. He won’t be.”

“Will he look like me though?”

“Yes. He’ll probably look like you.” He grinned, eyes shining. “And we’re going to name him Vito.”

“After you.”

“After me.”

She wanted to ask more questions, like why they didn’t have a baby of their own, why they got a boy this time, why he named him after himself, what happened to this
new baby’s parents, if this meant her mother was feeling better. But she wanted him to keep smiling like that so she just smiled back at him, practiced-genuine joy.

She felt something wet on her skin. She looked down to see her grape ice had dripped through the paper cone onto the belly of her white shirt. She’d pressed her hand over the stain that looked like a bruise for the rest of their walk.

Leslie didn’t tell her grandmother all of these details when she recounted the story. She told it like a bedtime story, sticking with the highlights, the ones that would bring sweet dreams.

“I’m glad you got a brother. My siblings were wonderful gifts.” Her grandmother stared out across the water as industrial Bayonne, New Jersey drifted past. “It’s still strange,” she said. “Not seeing the towers.”

Leslie stretched her neck to see Manhattan approaching. It was the first time she’d seen the newly completed Freedom Tower in person. Like a many-faceted diamond, the hundreds of windows flashed rectangles of light. She’d read somewhere that it surpassed the Empire State Building as the tallest in Manhattan.

“I don’t like it,” her grandmother said, wrinkling her nose. “It’s too much. Ostentatious. Takes too much attention away from the rest of the skyline. The towers were a part of the skyline, never the stars of it. Your grandfather always said they were like the grandparents of the city—tall, reassuring, quietly just there.

“I’d meet your grandfather in the city for lunch sometimes. This was before I started working myself of course. I’d pack sandwiches and cokes and we’d sit in Battery Park, or during the winter we’d find a hotel lobby or sneak into the café at the American Indian Museum.”
She never spoke much about her husband in this detail, not even in passing. Leslie didn’t know a lot about him, having been three when he died. She knew he’d worked at a bank in downtown Manhattan, deterring one would-be robbery in his thirty-five years there. It was his heart that did him in, an attack while playing a golf when he was sixty-one years old. How he made his living and how he’d died were the only facts she had. But for some reason, on this boat, floating between two places, the memories splashed over—willingly or not.

Her grandmother went on to describe one lunch when a pigeon snatched the cookie right off her plate and Leslie’s grandfather chased it down right to the railing that overlooked the water. The pigeon perched just out of reach, enjoying his stolen snack.

“So I guess that was one thief who did get away.”

“Did Mom ever come with you on the lunches?”

Her grandmother shook her head. “She didn’t like to go off the island too often. It made her anxious.”

The answers Leslie had wondered about her whole life about her mother were within reach. Her heart beat fast like she was at the top of the Freedom Tower looking down on all of the city. Questions were birds flying by. She selected one at random.

“When did you know that Mom had BPD?”

If her grandmother was surprised by the question, she didn’t show it. “Oh we didn’t know until she was in her twenties.”

“Her twenties?”

“No one would diagnose a moody teenager. And it took years after the diagnosis to get the therapy and the medications all sorted out.”
Other passengers were starting to walk past now, preparing to disembark. Leslie looked up and realized she hadn’t even noticed the Statue of Liberty go by. Her grandmother began to speak more quickly.

“We didn’t know any better. No one did. She didn’t know, certainly. There was no history in my family or your grandfather’s. They asked us questions like whether there was any emotional abuse or instability in the household. Like we’d caused it. I used to wake up in the middle of the night remembering a time I’d yelled at her or Dylan and I argued in front of her and I’d stay awake combing over that moment, trying to remember the exact expression on her face or what she said afterwards. When your grandfather died, I thought that was it, she would never come back from that. But she did and after that, we got our answers, finally.”

The boat had slowed to a crawl. Final announcements were made about personal belongings and staying off stairs during docking. Leslie gripped the edge of the bench as if she could hold the boat from docking and listen to her grandmother explain her mother forever.

“Come back from what?”

“From the breakdown.”

“Like what happened when we were kids and you had to come stay with us?”

“A little different. It was something called disassociation. Meaning she just disconnected from the world, from her father’s death, from everyone and everything. She wouldn’t snap out of it for weeks. Just blank stares and nods and empty smiles like she was a doll. The doctor told us that was a major clue in the diagnosis.”
Leslie was aware suddenly that this was adulthood: when the other adults who’ve always been in your life begin to tell you the truth.

“Was it a relief to know? To get the diagnosis?”

“Yes and no. Taking action always feels better than doing nothing. But taking action with few results depletes hope faster than anything else.”

*All ashore, all ashore.*

Leslie looked around. Only a handful of people remained on the deck – a couple snapping a photo and a mother with two small children, one of whom had fallen asleep on the bench. The mother was struggling to put his coat on without waking him, lifting his limbs with care and tenderness.

“The relief didn’t come until your father. I didn’t think he would…but he did. He stayed.” She shook her head as if she didn’t understand why.

“She was lucky.” Leslie said, nodding. “To have had him.”

Her grandmother looked up, her eyes suddenly sharp. “They were lucky to have had each other.”

Leslie started to clarify what she meant but recognized the pointedness of her grandmother’s statement even if she didn’t quite understand why, and stopped.

A security guard walked up and told them they had to depart the ferry. “If you wish to make the return trip, you must still disembark and re-load with everyone else,” he droned.

They shuffled off the boat and joined the crowd waiting to board in the Manhattan terminal. They were among the last to find seats and ended up on a bench in the middle of the boat.
They were lucky to have had each other. Of course her parents were lucky to have fallen in love, the way anyone who falls in love is. To Leslie, though, it was the same way in which she and Vito were told constantly they were lucky to have been adopted. Good luck didn’t free its recipient of bad luck too. How much of each one needed to become lucky or unlucky, Leslie didn’t know.

Leslie had to try to ask another question even though she suspected it was too late. “Do you think she drove off the road on purpose?”

“I can’t know the answer to that question, Leslie. None of us can.” Her grandmother shut her eyes, leaning her head against the wall. Storytime was over. Her eyelids were faded purple half-moons; the fuzzy white scarf that hung down from her neck rose and fell as each breath filled and left her chest.

“Our things—”

“I have them all in storage. I’ll give you the key. Take whatever it is you came here for.”

Leslie turned away and strained to look out the window but she was too far away. The green of Lady Liberty would blend in with the water—even if she looked at just the right moment.
Chapter 13

Vito walked for a long time. He walked until the heels of his feet hurt and his t-shirt underneath his windbreaker was damp with sweat. When he realized it was time to circle back to Duane’s street so Leslie could pick him up, he shifted the awkward bundle of padded envelopes in his arms and surveyed his surroundings. He’d walked far enough down Hylan Boulevard that he reached Wolfe’s Pond Park near his high school. It was a popular spot for families on the weekend, and for truant teens during the week to smoke and drink and hook up and do all the things Vito heard teenagers were supposed to do. He wondered if Leslie had ever gone there midday—by the time he’d been old enough to ask about things like that, she was already away at school.

In his American History class, Vito had learned that the park had originally been a quarantine zone for immigrants. Local oystermen thought the facility was poisoning the water so they burned down each building right after it was built, again and again. Finally, the quarantine facility was moved elsewhere. Vito had felt proud when he learned that the oystermen had won. He’d thought about what he might burn down again and again in protest and couldn’t think of anything. He liked the idea, though, of being that angry about something you could only keep destroying it. The problem was, the things he was angry about weren’t flammable.

He peered into the trees as he walked by. Many of the leaves had fallen, weaving a carpet of brown and gold, and the bare branches reached to the sky as if in surrender. A creek ran parallel to the sidewalk for a while then meandered back deeper into the woods.
Vito wondered how many kids had lost their virginities in those woods. He thought of a girl in his chemistry class, Giovanna, with her thick eyebrows like strips of black felt and her waist-length gelled curls. Had she been in these woods before? Would she go in there with someone else, pressed up against a tree, laughing, her hair growing tangled against the strips of bark until it was impossible to tell where nature ended and human began.

Vito needed to turn back. Leslie and his grandmother would be worried if he wasn’t there. He looked down the road which led to the water. If he kept walking in any direction on this island, he’d end up at the water. It was equally trapping and freeing. Maybe he and Leslie would end up somewhere landlocked. He wasn’t sure if he would love or hate that.

He began to kick a small gray rock. He told himself when he lost track of the rock, he’d turn back around. He focused on the task for nearly two blocks, before kicking it a bit too hard. It bounced into a storm drain. Stopping in his tracks, Vito stared down through the grate at the pebble which now rested next to some gum wrappers and cigarette butts. He looked up ahead, the open space—the edge of home—just visible.

He kept walking.
Chapter 14

Leslie unlocked the padlock on the storage unit. It was number 209 in a long row on the second floor of Planet Storage. The orange door lifted upwards with metal clatter. She hung the padlock from the loop on the frame and fumbled for the light switch. An array of dusty furniture and boxes appeared. Most of it was familiar to Leslie: the armchair from the living room, the cherry-wood bookcase, the kitchen stools stacked seat on top of seat. The floor lamp from her old bedroom stood in a far corner.

She tugged on some of the nearby boxes, turned them around. None of them seemed to be labeled. With a heavy sigh, she pulled out her pocket knife and began tearing them open.

She couldn’t make sense of what had happened to the organized boxes she’d helped her grandmother pack before. There was kitchenware in with books, and moth-eaten sweaters tucked next to fishing gear. Stacks of loose tax forms and bank statements filled two smaller boxes. Her grandmother would be growing impatient in the RV, she knew, but she poured through the contents of each box carefully, not wanting to miss what she was looking for.

She found some of her things in the fifth box. Books mostly, and some of the awards she’d received in high school. Two more boxes later, amid mounting frustration, Leslie found something unexpected and familiar.

A brown glossy scrapbook, smudged with fingerprints, filled halfway. The pages contained all of the documents and photos leading up to and just after Vito’s adoption. Letters of approval from various government agencies, his Korean passport, airline tickets, the picture of the very moment he was carried through the gate. Her father had
confessed to her when she saw him putting it together just before Vito arrived, that her mother had gotten rid of all the non-legal documents for her adoption, including the ones that might tell her anything about her birth parents. He explained she had done it out of fear that Leslie would find them and try to track down her birth parents. Leslie had been silently furious about it for weeks until Vito arrived. She set the album aside near the door.

In the next box, she found what she’d come there for. She’d kept the letters in small green binder with Chemistry written across the front in gold sharpie. When she opened it, the top pages fluttered. She hadn’t used a three-hole-punch but rather stabbed each letter through the binder rings so that the holes were ragged.

Climbing to her feet, she surveyed the room to see if there was anything else she needed. It was a bit unnerving, she realized, that all of these things deemed too important to throw away just sat there for years. They would never be useful in the same way they once were again. She shut the door, clicked the padlock shut and walked down the hall with the letters (the Letters, the Letters) and Vito’s history tucked safe and solid under her arm.

END PART TWO