

NUMBERS

A SHORT STORY COLLECTION

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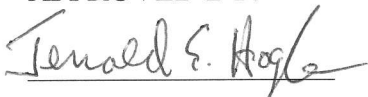
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Introduction:

Life seems to rarely happen the way we anticipate. We grow, learn, and change our minds, or sometimes life changes our minds for us. Unexpected realities constantly surface, sometimes at the worst times possible. As many women before me (like Eleanor Roosevelt and Marilyn Monroe) have said, “Life is what you make it.” Life is a series of unpredictable events and the choices we make, the ways we deal with what life presents us, are the moments that define our character, teach us lessons that change our lives, change us in ways that determine the future decisions we will make. However, the most difficult decisions we will ever make are the ones that don’t just affect us, but determine someone else’s life as well. And possibly the most difficult reality to understand is that *every* choice we make affects those around us and will have emotional impact on the future choices they will make as well. Family is at the center of this; the moment a life is created the choices and decisions begin.

As an adopted child I’ve always found myself trying to define a family. I’d decided at a young age that since I was adopted into another family that I could adopt whoever I wanted into my own definition of family; I grew up with many friends who I consider to be my family despite the genealogy, despite the legal contracts, despite the similarities or differences. We have all experienced and witnessed moments when a single decision has changed everything, we have all been products of this moment. I suppose you can say that this is where my stories begin—with a choice—a choice made because of a series of choices that preceded that moment.

Numbers is a series of short stories that explores the ways in which we come to a decision and the ways in which a decision has a chain reaction, the equations that create us, the equations we create and the answers we come up with, and the blurred line in a series of equations that doesn’t always supply a correct answer.

Two Together

Piles of other family's lives are carefully written and prepared in the biographies in front of me. The black and white pages are crowded with words attempting to supply an explanation of who they are in a situation that is anything but black and white. Genetic history and random facts about their occupations, religious beliefs, and interesting hobbies attempt to define their family and how they will raise this child. Uneasily my hands shuffle through the sticky notes on the pages' edges. *Skiing in the Mountains. Botanist. Insurance Lawyer. Hiking. Agnostic. Protestant.* All I can think is how unprepared my family was, how unplanned this is now. If I was to construct a biography of my family, it would be the most haphazardly disheveled mess of unconventional life events. I can't help but wonder how in the world these couples managed to create a pleasant list of attributes to define who they are and why they want to be parents. I can't help but wonder what lies underneath these words.

Samuel and Jeanine Melendez. Genetic History: Fair. What does that even mean? The counselor at the adoption agency with the stiff buttoned shirt told me to review the files before the interview. I've tried to study these piles of biographies like the equations for my pre-calc examine last year that I desperately needed in order to graduate. It's incredible how quickly the biggest decision of my life can transition from \tan or \cos^2 to another human's life. For the last four weeks the desk in my bedroom has been nervously cluttered with sharpies, markers, and sticky notes on

colored charts with positive and negative traits of these couples and the information they've provided.

The adoption counselor said that I'd chosen too many couples to interview. "Go with your gut" she said as a response to my inquiry of how to determine the fate of someone else's life with a pile of random facts.

I had replied, "My gut is being kicked by a baby at the moment. Am I just supposed to assume one kick for no and two for yes, and decide her fate that way?" She didn't find it funny, but right afterwards the baby kicked once, and I couldn't help but smile at a secret harmony only I could understand, a kick only I could feel.

Technically the counselor can't determine how many interviews I do. The brightly colored pamphlet I received the first day here describes this process as *catering to the needs of the pregnancy*. I remember the first time I read the bullet points on the first fold about this process: choose the best choice from a selection of only a few piles at a time, accumulate a wish-list, interview the chosen ones and make a final decision. It sounded like the seminar from my junior year of high school about choosing a college, except this was a future plan for someone else's life, someone whom I'd really never actually met. I remember thinking that first day that this was the only choice that made any sense at all—any married couple who was going through this process had to be more equipped than I was, at least they had careers and a house. But none of my options seemed simple, nothing seemed quite right.

That first day was six months ago. I had been sitting outside the adoption agency's front doors for 2 hours but couldn't walk inside. Women with protruding abdomens walked in and out of these white walls, some smiling, some fretful, some just ready. Couples holding hands, some with matching rings on their fingers, some with other little children swinging arms between them strode past me. Until a brunette woman with long legs and peppermint tea approached my observing eyes that were wet from deserted hope. She handed me the pamphlet and the tea with an encouraging smile. "Peppermint helps the nausea, and the headaches." I couldn't reply, but my knees that I had been tightly hugging to my body in an attempt to cover the swelling bulge for the past couple hours relaxed and carried me through the doors.

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The night before that day the peppermint tea lead me through the doors of this adoption process, I had received yet another call from the young bartender, who knows my mother too well. It's usually always around 3am. You can hear the too understanding yet tired tone in his *hey, it's me again*, which is code for *please come get her from the swivel seat attempting to hold her up against the wall*.

After I poured water down my mother's throat and carried her to the bed in the corner of our apartment that I grew up in, I laid there next to her. Her body was motionless, helpless, tired from too many hours at Champs lifting trays of heavy plates above her head, tired from balancing the trays and my life for the last 18 years. I crossed my hands over the belly bulge no one else could notice yet but to me felt like

Pikes Peak. I know my existence caused the lagging dark circles under my mother's eyes; I know my existence caused him to walk out one day with merely a grunt and a "I just can't do this"; I know it broke her heart and left her too alone; I know she says "You are my everything Jessi-girl", but I know deep down that I'm not enough to fill that hole he left.

But we don't talk about that day, at least not the truth in detail, it would hurt too much. We ignore the empty wine bottles that fill the trashcan by the end of the week, and my mother pretends to sleep as the bartender habitually places her in the passenger seat of the car with an empathetic smile. When she opens her eyes the next morning, it will only be a bad dream and I will let her wake me up in time for class like the responsible mom she wants so badly to be.

The next morning I knew something needed to be different. The pockets of cushion in the mattress shuffled as she tumbled out of bed to make coffee before waking me. The bitter-sweet coffee aroma seeped through the air of the apartment as her cold hand stroked the ridges of my spine. "Good morning pretty girl. Time for class!" The sweet trills in her voice suddenly sounded too misleading, too depressed, like a line from a movie, written by someone else. She handed me cereal that sounded too unappetizing.

"I'm just not hungry mom, I ate late last night," I lied. But I couldn't watch the disappointed frown pull at the corner of her mouth. I know the frown's

disappointment was directed at herself and not at me, but I know it's my job to make her smile—no one else seems to try. So I took the cereal and said thank you, only to run out of the house in 20 minutes claiming to be late but really just needing to throw it all back up. I found myself driving not to class but to the adoption agency that I googled the night after I told Alex we were pregnant.

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Nothing about this is conventional; the pamphlet describing the placing process and legalities of relinquishing your baby to the hands of a stranger, the biographies alphabetically placed in tall tin filing cabinets waiting to be stamped. As much as the agency attempts to prescribe a system to the adoption, I can't help but feel so strange in the purple walls of this interview room. Nonetheless, as unorthodox as this process appears, a part of me hopes to find a couple that can provide a kind of stability that I can't even imagine. The sticky notes are sealed to the traits that I wish I had, the variables that I hope will create a somewhat normal life—whatever that means.

Couple #1: I write on top of the spiral notebook lying on the desk in front on the cushioned chair the agency provides for the birthmothers as a kind gesture of some sort—but the cushion sinks more than I'd like. It provides a sort of trampoline so as she kicks whatever organ is on the left side of her, which she has gotten so acquainted with, we both move more than I'd prefer. My thumb skims the top left corners of the family biography sheets. They pass over the ridges in my skin faster and

faster as I near the end of the pile, until the second to last corner slices through the lines of my fingerprint marks. *Shit!* As I'm leaving the apparently comfortable cushioned chair in the interviewing room to find a band aid, there is a light knock on the door.

The kicks turn into a sideways flip and push my stomach against the walls of my ribcage. She is the only person moving as the three people about to discuss the qualities of the nurture that will determine the rest of her life stand still. Eventually the woman begging to become a mother on the other side of the door utters a "is anyone in there?" Her high pitched quivering voice waits restlessly, but her apparent nerves calm mine and I open the door, which feels like a welcome into the most delicate aspects of my life. Anxiety and unease meet together in the purple interview room.

"Hi"

"Hello, your Jessica, right?" The man's kind eyebrows reach toward the center of his tall forehead as the light touch of his hand brushes against the grinning woman's low back to guide her through the doorway.

"Yeah, that's me. And this is her." I point at the center of my belly button. The pamphlet didn't have a fold on the etiquette of these interviews, but the counselor said to just be myself. So uneasily I am being my nervous, awkward self. Maybe that wasn't the best advice.



The woman habitually gliding toward the two seats in front of the desk longingly stares at the belly button I just poked. I've never had big boobs, so I never understood the phrase *my eyes are up here*, until I grew a mountain of a stomach that people seem to try to use their x-ray vision on. "So it's a girl?" The potential mother's gaze still hadn't moved.

"Yeah." Every time I'm asked the sex of the baby I remorsefully imagine my mother and me. She says she will support anything that I want to do. But I've watched my entire life—the emptiness, everything she left behind, the struggle to keep afloat and the attempted motherly instinct to keep me afloat. "Yes a girl", I repeat. "I want her to have a nice home, a place with a mother and father to give her everything and not need anything in return." I know I have deviated from the carefully developed questions that the counselor and I wrote down to start the interview, so I quickly divert to the front page of the spiral notebook.

"We have prepared a loving supportive home that we want to raise a child in, we are financially in a place that can give her whatever she aspires to." An anticipatory squeeze is exchanged between their interlaced hands.

I smile with kind reassurance and return to the spiral's questions: #1. Why do you want to adopt a child? The woman relaxes her head down to her lap, seeming embarrassed, as the husband explains the medical reasons her body won't release an egg. "...We've tried everything and done our fair share of research, but it seems that

science just isn't quite there yet. So we want to adopt a baby and give him or her a life that they wouldn't have had otherwise."

"What kind of life do you expect to give a baby?" I curiously inquire, wondering if anyone can define a good life apart from the random facts in their biographies.

The man's eyebrows rise kindly again and I watch as his fingers graze the side of her cheek and lift her chin. "Well we've seen that together we can get through anything, and together, we intend to raise a child to be the best person they can be." His attention shifts back to the discerning look displayed across my face. "What do you imagine as the kind of life you would want for this baby?" The woman worriedly kicks the side of his foot as if to say *you can't just ask a question like that, you're not supposed to do that.*

"Together, that sounds like a nice theory. I wish that is how my story began."

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I was alone; It was just me and the plastic stick as the blueness filled the bathroom. Watching a blue line slowly appear across the pregnancy test, I froze. *I'm just late*, I had thought. Yet at the time, a part of me felt reshaped, altered. The blue reflected off every tile in the bathroom, casting a glow in the room. I had been waiting for a second line for weeks; I had taken a few tests throughout that past month, but every one resulted in one desolate blue line. Waiting for a second to join the other, the plastic baton seemed at the center of the universe. The color of the first line gradually

became a deeper darker shade. Still frozen and unmoved, every muscle in my body tensed as the blueness settled into a reality of my life.

All I could think was that these two intersected lines were too late, for Alex and I were too far from the mutual excitement of playing house that resides in the first year of a relationship. Our light was merely flickering now. Yet the blue glare in the room was intensifying.

I didn't cry. Maybe I was too in shock to cry, maybe I was just not sad because I'd watched my best friend, Larisa make it work, or maybe it simply hadn't hit me yet. Nevertheless, the blueness had to be hidden. On the other side of those walls, my mom was sprawled out on the couch, feet overlapping each other on the ottoman, a bottle of wine almost gone in one hand, and in the other the strings of her apron wrapped around her finger still lingering with tip money.

I wrapped the plastic reality with layers of toilet paper and buried it beneath the tissues marked with leftover makeup in the trash to make sure she didn't stumble upon the test and the cross. I remember wondering if that was how my existence was revealed to her, with two intersecting blue lines, alone in a blue glowing bathroom. I wondered if she was as entranced by that blueness as I was then.

Notes from Mariah Carey's "Always be My Baby" interrupted my thoughts as they sang through the speakers of my vibrating cell phone on the porcelain sink. A sliver of hope hiked through my veins as those notes lingered against the echo of the tiles; *It's Alex*. I haven't heard from him in over a week, I'd gotten accustomed to his

nonchalant proud greeting to leave a message after the tone because he's 'too busy to answer'. I thought with too much optimism: *Maybe I was wrong, maybe he isn't drifting, maybe I'm just feeling needy because of all these pregnancy hormones people talk about, this will be ok. He knows me, I know him; It's been years. We did this together, I'm sure we can deal with this together.*

Excitement followed the unexpected smile that glowed at the sound of Alex's non-voicemail greeting voice. I knew I needed to tell him, but the phone seemed hardly a desirable way to do so, especially because we'd already been feeling too distant from each other lately. I was sure that when I told him it would rekindle the attachment to one another we exhibited as high school seniors—tight against the lockers, his fingertips tracing the seams of my jean pockets, so close, so inseparable.

“Can I see you tonight?” I quickly interjected the casual how-are-you’s. Already, I was writing the conversation in my head of how to tell him—at the time, that was enough to distract me from the hesitation before he responded.

“Uh...well I'm going bowling tonight.”

“Oh yeah with Larisa and Josh, Sounds Great!” *Great I can tell them the news too. I wonder what Larisa will say. I'm sure she will be so excited. This baby and little Derek can be best friends. I should probably tell Alex first though. We can tell her and Josh together.* “Great!” I repeated.

“...I mean you can come...you know, if you want I guess...”

I was still playing out the possibilities of how to tell him the new in my head, I was still distracted by the hope that remained in my veins from the perfect timing of the call, and the thoughts of Larisa's reaction, still not aware of the distant, disconnected, dubiety in the inflection of his tone. I elatedly agreed, "Well of course I want to, of course I will." No response. "Well I will see you soon baby." *Baby..That word sounds so different now.* I quickly exited the blueness to get ready, hopefully to not make the same mistake my mother made.

"I'll take a.."

"Six and a half for her, and fourteen for me." A voice a few octaves lower chimed in overhead to complete my sentence. *Just like the old times.* I smiled up to Alex's broad shoulders and thick arms that towered a foot over my 5'3". I had always liked the idea that two of my feet could fit in his one shoe. He could devour my entire being in one arm; I felt protected. I knew how the shape of his biceps intersected his triceps and smoothed around his shoulders. I'd run my finger over the curves of his arms enough to have them memorized, enough to know the sweet light touches they would incur on my thigh, the gentleness I thought no one else was familiar with but me. That gentleness that I savored the night his hand gradually slipped below my belly button, where he usually would stop as we made out. Those sweet chills that pushed my legs apart and that gentleness that I latched onto as the large circumference of his arms situated themselves on either side of my head.

My anticipation of the news that was gaining excitement in my imagination was reassured as I heard my shoe size articulated from those lips I had kissed so many times. A smile closed around my voice, and I gulped back the air bubble with a vulnerable weakness for I had admired his powerful nature at taking charge. *See he does know me, he does care, our light still lingers.* I thought I knew in that moment that I was truly loved. That I was one of the lucky ones. I couldn't wait to tell him. *I want to be alone together. I'll tell him we should go get food really quick before we start. I have to tell him now, I don't want to forget my pre-planned conversation.*

Thin wrists flopped two dissimilar pairs of bowling shoes onto the counter right in front of Alex. Even the guy behind the counter could detect that my boyfriend loved me and therefore would carry my shoes—I felt as if my prince was escorting me over to our lane. Alex's brown skin stretched around the arcs of his arm as he reached for the tangled laces on our shoes. *Now. Ask him now to go get food. To go somewhere. Anywhere together. Now. Say something.* Anticipation and anxiety filled my lungs ready to say something, anything.

Nonetheless, a loud voice interrupted with a holler across the crowded bowling alley, "HEY ALEX! Over here, look at this score! I've got this shit on lock tonight, Larisa is floundering. Ha!" Distractedly, he turned toward Josh's voice and suddenly forgot all about the shoes, about the shoe size he remembered, and about the obvious love, hope, and togetherness that struck between us in that moment. I sighed,

knowing I'd have to hold all that in until the games were done. There was nothing I could say to interrupt Alex's game once he'd begun.

Larisa ran her fingers through her dark heavy hair and rolled her eyes with a small grin at Josh's competitive remark. Her foot playfully kicked his shin, as he cooed with reassurance to his wife, "Babe, it was just a joke." She reached to fix the blanket in the baby carrier placed on the swivel seat next to her. I knew it isn't easy for Josh to have three jobs at nineteen, to spend sleepless nights listening to cries or Larisa suctioning the milk out of her sore breasts. That summer the baby was born I spent countless nights keeping Larisa company in their musty motel room until Josh returned from his late night pizza delivery job. Cries every hour. Guessing a hundred different requests the baby was screaming for. Piles of diapers. I knew how it is. I'd heard it all plenty of times 'it's so difficult at that age' 'it's not ideal' 'it isn't worth the sex' 'it won't last'...etc. Nonetheless, I found myself still admiring what they had as my fingers stretched out over my own stomach.

I remembered Josh proposing to Larisa on graduation day a month before the baby was due. She was glowing. What girl wouldn't want to be glowing like that too? All the girls at school would flock around her and I at lunch. Girls that never used to acknowledge our existence suddenly wanting to touch the moving life inside, wanting to feel the kicks, hear her stories, see her latest ultrasound pictures. They must've seen the intensifying glow too. I looked up to her relationship with Josh; they seemed to

have it figured out together, especially regarding all the bets against them; I knew Alex and I could figure it out too. Together we could do it.

Alex and Josh greeted one another in their manly hand slaps and pounds as I turned to pick up the worn laces of the abandoned shoes left on the counter. *At least he was going to take them over there for me; it's the thought that counts.* Plus, I was tagging along. Wednesday dollar bowling night followed by movies all night was a ritual for Alex, Larisa, and Josh. None of them were going to college, so I was the only one who would get too caught up in homework to attend. My mom had told me that if there was one thing that she wanted for me it was to not be a waitress for forever, to do something. Larisa and I used to be so close, inseparable in high school. But our lives had gotten busy in different directions and we didn't get to talk like we used to. Occasionally I got the chance to come along to catch up with Larisa and reminisce about life before we graduated, but nothing was really the same anymore. We caught up on Josh's new jobs and the store that she found the best pair of jeans on sale, and I told her about the teacher in my Biology class that I swore was out to fail me. The conversation was casual while I waited to make a big deal when Alex conked over every pin with one swoop, and console him if he fell short.

Bowling was always silly in my opinion; I didn't experience the same thrill Alex did when knocking things down in a musty smelling building of neon lights and loud reverberating crashes of pins falling to their sides. But, I would've done anything for him; that's what love is, or what I had figured it was. I knew a relationship had a lot to

do with compromising, for that was all Larisa reiterated that entire summer. She compromised her flat abs, Josh compromised his soccer scholarship, she compromised the summer art program in New Jersey, he compromised to 1% instead of whole milk. So that's what I was doing then. Compromising in those lime green shoes, or rather flimsy fabric and string laces that reeked of emulous sweat. I knew he wouldn't acknowledge the shoes that I set down conveniently in front of him, or the blue ball that I knew fit his strong hands just right that magically appeared, or the Coke that I refilled every other turn, or the nachos he loved that I bought for everyone and set on the table. I knew he just wouldn't notice, because we'd become accustomed to each other's presence. Yet in those moments, like when he recalled my shoe size, I had reassured myself that he loved me back, that he really cared. In those moments I would fall deeper in love with him, for he knew me better than anyone else. In those moments I felt that I was glowing too. *Tonight, I will tell him. Tonight, after the bowling alley I'll find a way to get him alone.*

Gulping down the liquid yellow mush coating these stale chips, I took a break from my anticipatory goo-goos and exaggerated expressions at little Derek and turned in my seat to watch Alex's turn; I had to prepare myself for what ever expression I would need to plaster on my face once the heavy ball overcame the fluctuating pins. Unexpectedly, his bright blue eyes looked up from the ball clenched in his hands toward me, with the same look I had treasured at the counter an hour earlier. A deep breath through my body attempted to inhale this moment and hold onto its bliss. *He*

forgot his good luck kiss, like we used to do in high school before his turn. Maybe now I can convince him to take a break outside really quick, under the stars, I will tell him then! He abruptly set the ball back down on the conveyor and rushed toward me. *I'm more important than that game,* I froze, bewildered by the imposing energy in his walk, smiling at that intimate caring look. But, those large shoes escaped behind me and those strong arms, which protected me, which touched me gently, flung around her.

“Finally, I was wondering where Sarah was! I wonder why she’s so late tonight!” As these words slip through Larisa’s pink glossed lips, all I could think was *tonight? late tonight? tonight as opposed to...?* I’d heard about her before. I’d heard about her before because she was one of Larisa’s friends that she met when they were living in the motel, and that was all I thought at the time. *What is she doing here, now? Touching and being so close with Alex? How does he know her...that well?*

I was watching her look up to my boyfriend as her distinctly spiraled dark hair squished against his body from a ‘friendly’ hug. Their glances seemed to have a sort of unspoken conversation; the too close familiarity between them sent a chill up my arms from the fists that clenched onto the jeans hugging my own body to my torso that had stopped inhaling. The two wandered over to our lane. Too close. Too habitual. Too routine. Josh had already plucked three letters into the computer to add her to our game: F.O.X. *what in the world?* Larisa saw me glancing toward the screen, and simply stated, “Everyone says she looks like Megan Fox.” She must have thought I needed more explanation when I didn’t react to this remark, for she continued,

“You know? The hot actress from Transformers?” I was sure the rolling of my eyes and slouching back against the hard plastic seat with my arms trembling sent off a bad vibe, but I had not been in the mood to be displaying proper social etiquette in a bowling alley. Not then, not that night. Observing my boyfriend’s attention to Miss. Fox, that sliver of hope and excitement about the news began to seep from the pores on my forehead.

“It’s warm in here Alex, lets go outside for a sec.” That was my attempt at regaining his attention. That was my attempt to rekindle that hope, that love, that gentle comfort in having each other, in being together. My attempt at convincing myself that wasn’t the end, but the beginning. *He will change once he knows, he will hug me and kiss my forehead once I tell him. I need to tell him now. I need to save this now.*

Without a look toward me, without a smile fixed in my direction, without an acknowledgement of my existence, Alex awkwardly settled back in front of the lane with the ball that I placed there for him. *Maybe he didn’t hear me.* He prepared with a large swing backward and plunged the ball forward with a 20mph speed down the lane. “CLASH!!” Two pins were left standing on opposite sides, facing each other. They shifted back and forth from the momentum of the already annihilated pins in between them, teasing my imagination that they would wondrously collapse. Everyone else had given up hope but I stared straight through at the building impetus swirling at their bases.

“Damn, I hate that”, Alex was tumbling back to the conveyor to wait for the ball. His eyes still hadn’t gazed in my direction. I didn’t let my attention drift from the lane and imagined the pins as if they were in a show off from an old western movie. Spinning guns on the tips of their pointer fingers and snapping with a tension stringing between the air acting as a gravity pulling them together. The pin on the left dived toward the center of this tension. I smiled, knowing what would come next and hoping Alex would acknowledge me from mere thrill and enthusiasm. The pin descended, kissing the right one with a smack, and STRIKE. Hollers and celebration obliterated Alex’s sense of failure. I couldn’t look away. I knew I needed to congratulate him, yet there was a somber air that rushed down the lane toward me as they struck, and that wouldn’t let me disconnect.

“Why do you look like that? That was awesome! You should be kissing me, or rather bowing to me HA! Not sitting there with that disgusting look over your face”, Alex’s voice addressed to me is the only thing that pulled me away.

With raised eyebrows and high cheeks squeezing a smile out, “That was awesome! Great job baby, you are so fantastic! I didn’t doubt you for a sec.” But it was too late, my reassured animated support was brushed off Alex’s shoulder as he turned to her, yet again. I missed my chance. *Later. I will tell him later.*

Alex’s cell phone was settled in the cup holder of the leather couch in his parent’s basement. Call of Duty talk echoed through the speakers of his T.V.; I was

supposed to be reading some article for class, but was distracted by the thoughts of what that cell phone could expose. Earlier that night at the bowling alley, Josh quickly became aware of the awkward tension and kindly suggested an earlier end than usual to their Wednesday evening events. I had kind of gotten the hint that everyone was disappointed that their foursome sleepover movie night would be ruined by my existence, but I didn't care. My life, my relationship, my everything depended on this conversation that I needed to have with Alex. I needed the reassurance once I told him that all wasn't lost, that this light was still hanging on, that we'd be okay because we had each other.

The plastic phone seemed at the center of the universe. Frozen and unmoved every muscle in my body tensed at the thought of the truth, the reality of my life that the dark blue phone in the cup holder could reveal. At the bowling alley, the conversations between Josh, Alex, Larisa, and Sarah were puzzle pieces. Puzzle pieces that I had attempted to put together as the angry tension in my face created an awkwardness between us all. Observations that had lead to my realization that the nights Alex slept over at Josh's were concurrent with Sarah staying over to 'watch movies' as well. I pictured them both on the pull out couch next to Derek's room in Josh and Larisa's two bedroom apartment. I imagined that gentle touch that only I knew, yet observed in their friendly hug. That disgusted look Alex noticed after his incredible strike still has not wiped off my face, in fact as my imagination had been wandering, I was sure it has gotten more intense.

Larisa had always been a little oblivious, but Sarah was even more so. *Insensible, inconsiderate, dumb fox*. She had somehow remained completely unconscious to my Cyclops optic blast emitting from the squint at the corner of my eyes the entire game. Josh seemed to be the best at interpreting my body language toward Sarah and Alex, for it was him that held me back from strangling her as she offered my boyfriend the lollipop she'd been consuming since the beginning of the game. I justified her actions with that she was absolutely and entirely just that heedless of a person, yet I couldn't help questioning if there were some other motives in that innocent, absentminded façade that she put on under that perfectly applied eyeliner and perfectly prepared hair.

I was yearning to press the messages or call logs button on Alex's phone. I had to know. I had to know if I was truly overreacting as he always reiterated to any emotions I expressed. I had planned out my speech of informing him of the child we had created together. But I couldn't say anything until I knew that I was the only girl in his life. My curiosity was too much, it overcame the muscles in my fingers as they stretched out and slipped the phone into the palm of my hand. "I'll be back, I'm going to the bathroom", I told Alex fully aware that he hadn't, and would not be paying any attention to anything but the strategizing of that war game underneath the control of his thumb.

Those bathroom settings had become way too familiar over the last few weeks. They'd become the only haven where I could sense any reality, any truth. So it was there that I brushed my finger over the blue buttons of his phone, the ridges that

create my identity slide over the elevated numbers on the key pad undecided on the reality that I wasn't sure I wanted to read. Suddenly, thumping approached the door of my shelter. The heal-toe heal-toe got louder as Alex tumbled toward the bathroom. My heart jumped into the tip of my finger and pushed the messages button out of nervous anxiety. Thump. Thump. The thumps got faster until a pound at the door reverberated through the room. "Jess!! Where's my phone? I know I had it next to me! Don't play games with me girl. Where the fuck is my phone?" I couldn't respond, I was trying to magically disappear, to allow this room to take me away, anywhere but there. *Messages. Inbox. Scroll. Larisa, Josh, Mom, Dad...* The door handle spun violently until Alex appeared in front of me. His hand clutched my wrist and I struggled to press enter to something, to someone, anything for answers. Received message: Larisa 'Last night was amazing, you feel so great inside me'. A reflex of weakness and shock let go of the phone. It hit the floor. The battery slipped away on the tiles, leaving the phone lifeless, only a dark blank screen resided. I couldn't find the breath to say anything. *But Larisa and Josh have it figured out, against all the odds, against all the bets. This can't be real.*

"Bitch! You broke my phone", as he threw my arm downward, his knuckle pierced the clasp of the tennis bracelet that I had received for our one year anniversary. It descended as I descended to the tile. The diamonds and gold clasp sprinkled into the crevices of the floor in too many pieces to put back together. "God jess! What's wrong with you?! I can't believe you break everything", defeated I

struggled to stand back up. Alex snatched his battery off the ground and picked up a piece of the bracelet and chucked it toward the floor where I remained, unable to stand.

Crushed loneliness. *My best friend, my ex best friend, the father of this baby, the ex father.* I couldn't comprehend this reality, this distress, this couldn't be real, *I can't be alone. Not now, not tonight.* Somewhere amidst all the defeat and that miserable strike a strong desperation for a different truth spiraled from my stomach as I lunged toward the phone sprawled out next to the door frame and screamed, "I needed to tell you! I.I, we had to talk! but everything, every time..." I was screaming, but not crying. I still couldn't cry. It would've hurt too much. A victorious mix of hopeless agony and triumph splurged through my veins as I stared at the blank screen in my grasp and stood up in the door entryway, until STRIKE. Alex slammed the door into my defenseless body, and I collapsed, unable to pull my gaze away from the grave energy of the phone. *If I had told him already earlier, if he had known my news he wouldn't have done this. But Larisa. Betrayal, How could she do this to us? To us together? To her and Josh and Derek, they had it figured out. Everything wouldn't let me tell him then. I have to tell him, now. He will come back to me. He must! It's what we've done together.*

"I'm pregnant." The words came from spite, debacle, too many setbacks. Not the way I had imagined in the conversation I had planned hours before. They were whispered through the heavy breaths as I attempted to regain my composure and held the phone up for him to take.

My eyes burned as if I'd been staring into a fire too long entranced by the movement of the flames. Something about the exciting activity of the roaring fire behind his eyes had kept me entranced for years, hypnotized. Every time an impetus tumbled forward consisting of mere hope that this time the fire would create a warmth and comfort without exploding to an uncontrollable strike of loud popping and skipping sparks. Yet these burst sparks were all that remained now from that lingering light. I was completely and entirely knocked down.

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“I don’t want kids.” “I don’t want you to be pregnant.” “You can’t be.” “You have to get rid of it.” “You have to make this go away.” “I don’t want this.” Those are the words I couldn’t forget, lying on the cold tiles, afraid to open my eyes. *Maybe I passed out here last night, maybe that was all a nightmare.* Praying last night was not true, I slowly opened my eyes to the blue gloom that still reflected off the walls. It seemed like a bad dream that couldn’t be reality. But the absence of the diamond linked bracelet I never took off assured me that everything was different then. I remembered falling through the door late after my mother had already passed out on the couch. I collapsed on the bathroom floor. After the words I’d carefully constructed all night sizzled through the screams and thumps, I never murmured another word. I listened to the I’s the You’s. Never a We. Sitting motionless, I felt nailed to the door behind me. Once his speech ended with, “...for us to be together you have to have an abortion, I want to just be with you, not you and a baby”, my legs found sensation

and allowed me to stand up and walk out. I had nothing to say and apparently Alex didn't either, because he didn't try to stop me.

The cold tiles in the bathroom sank into the back of my legs. "I don't, I want, you have to, don't, I, I, I", the echo continued through my memory as I clutched my stomach. *We would've been fine together.* I had thought. Yet quickly I remembered Larisa's text, the destruction of her family, her togetherness, the destruction of my togetherness, my imagined family. I wondered if this was how it happened when my dad walked out, when he left us behind, left her to deal with me alone. I couldn't believe that all those years were for nothing, all this love was for no one.

Here it was, the first time I cried.

I realized I was alone. You can't fall in love alone, you can't get pregnant all by yourself, yet I did. The tears came like a barricade that was just broken through, and everything flowed out at once. Alone. Empty. I recognized this emptiness from the dark holes in my mother's eyes. My eyes were burning from tears. Gentle thumps approached the bathroom door. "Jes. What are you doing in there? Are you crying? Are you okay?" I couldn't answer. All I could do was cry, for nothing seemed together anymore, I'd been disassembled. The tears streamed down my cheeks and were the only sensation I could feel anymore. A fearful look of retrospect entered the bathroom doorway. All I wanted to do was apologize.

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“Are you okay Jessica?” The woman on the other side of the interview desk compassionately responds to the swelling glaze of tears over my eyes.

“I’m sorry, I am just overly emotional I think...So many estrogen cells, or whatever, swimming around. That doesn’t sound right. I guess you should know that I’m not good at science. I don’t know if that is a genetic trait or anything..but yea.”

She smiles with an encouraged glance toward the apologetic look still lingering beneath her husband’s dark mustache. We continue the interview as the pamphlet instructs and through the questions I’d created. The two interlaced hands walk out the door glancing back with too many anticipations to conceive. Alone in the room I begin to sort through the color coded family biographies disconcertedly, as a couple kicks reassure me of a secret harmony that only we can feel. A harmony that I somehow have to relinquish. Another knock approaches the door. I turn the page and write Couple #2, tracing the curve of the 2 a few times before calling to the next couple’s excited nerves to enter the purple interviewing room.

Two times Two

I'm waiting—watching the all too familiar, desolate, blue line slowly appear on the pregnancy test. I freeze and wait, knowing that this is my last hope. It's just me and this plastic stick as the blueness fills the empty room, as I desperately wait for a second line. I remember how Nick used to sit on the cold bathroom tile next to me as we'd wait together for the results from the fertility treatments. Our hands linked as he tickled the inside of my palm because he knew how it calmed my nerves.

“Stop looking at it, it'll go faster...like boiling water on the stove.”

The low tones in his voice had a soft echo. But there was nothing worse than his excitement that so quickly turned at the site of 'not pregnant' to a pat on the shoulder and a kiss on the top of my head that silently breathed *better luck next time honey*. Nick preferred the clearly printed words on the tests, as opposed to the blue lines, because he thought they were more definitive—I guess that was the very reason I refused to buy them. The words seemed too absolute compared to a glowing faded line, which left a little glimpse of hope. Now, I stop by Walgreens on my way home from work, hide the box under the sink, and wake up 20 minutes before his alarm, to wait, alone.

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I remember the first time he tried to give me the hormone shot. Our laughs swirled together as we played “doctor” in an attempt to make it less weird or serious, but it suddenly turned silent, and he just whispered under his breath, “Rach, this seems so unnatural.”

I responded with pursed lips and eyes looking past him, “What feels unnatural is not being able to get pregnant.” He set down the needle, and I jabbed it in my side. The pulse surrounding the sharp sting intensified, and I bit my lip.

For the last four years at this infertility process, Nick had avoided the ovulation and pregnancy tests piled next to syringes and needles under our bathroom sink; he refused to open those cupboards because it reminded him of the college classes he had barely survived. We had met in CHEM 201 sophomore year of college. He shuffled into our lab class after high-fiving every guy in the hallway. I couldn't help but notice how his secure demeanor was so suddenly replaced with anxiety. There were no names beginning with any of the letters between N and R, so we ended up as lab partners for the semester. Initially, he attempted to act like a chemist expert during the labs—like he actually knew what he was doing and like he actually was enjoying what he was doing. When he left the table to go get something from the stock room, I'd correct everything he did wrong so we wouldn't blow anything up.

His dark hair was always a mess with product clumped in one spot, and his socks were always the same color but different shades; his smile leaned a little to one side, but his eyes looked at me with fervor. He had asked me out with this cheesy folded up note, like we were in middle school: “Since we already have chemistry together, we should go out on a date...circle Friday or Saturday.” I had circled both and penciled in a smiley face. There was something about his confidence and sense of humor that was oddly placed in a disproportionately long body, which triggered a strange admiration in me. I'd be explaining something from lecture and look up to see those blue eyes watching my lips so carefully but obviously not knowing a word coming out of them. Eventually he admitted to not understanding the lab. He was looking at the floor with embarrassment, shuffling the right tennis shoe (like it was a confession to something I

hadn't perceived already). From then on, he decided to let me do all the lab work and he'd watch from the end of the table. I guess that is kind of how we still do things now, in our marriage and through the fertility processes. Except he stopped sitting next to me on the tiles years ago, and his disinterest turned to disappointment.

When the shots, pills, and nothing else had been working, the doctor sat us down to explain the next steps toward Assisted Reproductive Technology, mainly in vitro fertilization. Dr. Kin kept referring to the processes as ART, two variables that must be combined at just the right time in a lab, sit for three days to grow, and then inserted into my body to watch the reaction. I told him it sounded more like a science than an art, and Nick uttered through an exhale, "At least its right up your alley, Rach." It felt like college, I take notes and do most of the lab work and he listens, confused.

We stopped really talking about having a baby years ago. It got too difficult. We started treating the process and doctor's appointments like a class lecture about someone else's life. Not ours. When we would talk about our fertility process it was so matter-of-fact and casual, like 'how was your day at work honey' but instead, 'did you pick up your hormone pills today', 'how are the bruises from the shot', 'what did the ovulation test say'. After too many years at this process, having a baby is like a cloud that hovers over and in between us but not a part of us.

A month ago, we had found out that the IVF didn't take. Again. Neither of us had looked surprised, but still let down. Dr. Kin offered a brochure on adoption; I knew that this was just what he was supposed to do at this point in the process, but I wasn't interested. Dr. Kin told Nick and I all the facts regarding the risks as we proceeded into the next steps of an infertility surgery; I knew that this was just what he was supposed to do at this point in the process, but I couldn't

care. I knew that I could do this; I knew that there was nothing more I wanted than to feel a baby growing inside of me. I imagined resting my arms on my pregnant belly and knew that I needed that companionship; I yearned for the unity that only a pregnant mother could feel.

Following the results from Dr. Kin, I was used to Nick's thick black hair that would always fall to one side as he would drop his head and reach his hand out to touch my knee. But that day, he stared straight ahead without stirring. The bright blue eyes that I had fallen in love with looked through me, past the doctor's words, and between the blinds at the graying sky. When Nick didn't pass me the portfolio on the seat next to him that we kept all our logs in, I snatched it up and flipped back to page one, where I took notes for the next steps of our fertility options. The doctor knew by then that I would ask every question possible, so he leaned back in his checkered cushion chair and slipped his glasses to the edge of his nose.

Nick still didn't shift. He wouldn't even look at me. I should have known then that things had changed. The doctor had told us at our very first visit that there were no guarantees. He had explained to us that one day, during this process, we may reach a line—a line that is different for every couple (he called ours The RachaelNick Line)—a line that as a couple, Nick and I would have to decide if we wanted to cross and keep going. As I sat in that chair determined to scribble down notes for everything that came out of Dr. Kin's mouth, I felt that I was crossing that line. But I crossed that line alone, and looked back to see Nick on the other side, watching me walk further and further away.

That night, I was scrubbing the pots from our lasagna and reminding Nick how I made our next appointment for Tuesday to discuss the possibility of transferring more embryos at a time, and how it'd increase our chances exponentially. He stood next to me drying an already dried pan without a word. I was too scared to ask what was wrong, so I just kept talking

aimlessly about stories I've read of new procedures. I let the pots pile up in front of him, until he finally picked up a blue and silver rimmed plate from our wedding. Nick didn't even look up from the now soaked towel, incapable at drying anything anymore.

He candidly stated, "I can't go, I can't do this anymore."

I should've prepared myself more for that day, I knew it would come, but it was too hard a reality to come to terms with. I'd dreamed of a family for too long. The holes in the sponge squeezed out any excess water as I attempted to hold myself together. He reached for my crackling hands from too many dishes, and I just started screaming. I bawled that he was quitting on our child, and I couldn't do this by myself.

His blue eyes looked sadly at my shaking resentment, "You've been doing this by yourself, Rachael". He said as much as he wanted a baby he felt like he was losing us in the process. "We spend more time talking about a part of us that doesn't exist than the relationship we have that does. All our time and energy is being spent on a person that isn't even here yet."

I had agreed at the time and calmed down enough to place my head against his chest out of utter exhaustion and dissolution. His heart always felt like it was about to jump through his bones and out his body. His flat palm pressed me closer to the loud deep thumps that hit my ear. His body was warm against my head, and he stroked his fingers through the brown curls of my hair, like when we were in college when I'd wake up hung-over. In that moment, I felt like I'd found a lost tiny earring-back that I'd been searching for in the convoluted gray knots of our carpet.

The next morning came, and as usual, I woke up to the alarm set 20 minutes earlier than his. I routinely hit the off button as quickly as possible so Nick wouldn't wake. He laid there so

exhausted. I imagined a little kid tugging at the sheets to wake him up, pleading for pancakes. There was a time when I would've woken up to his morning breath on the back of my neck. There was a time when I would've woken up with Nick and me in such a tangled knot that I wouldn't know whose foot was whose and whose hand was where. There was a time when we'd both go swish with Listerine and crawl back into bed like we had just woken up with passionate smiles.

For a moment, I stared at the curve of his back, turned away from me. Then I crawled out from under the sheets and opened the door under the sink. The single pregnancy test box laid front and center in the smooth wooden cupboard. I could never buy more than one box with a single test; I had convinced myself that buying the packs of three or five would just be admitting that in the morning when I'd go to take the test I'd end up with a negative and would need another one for the next day. And nonetheless, the register guy at Walgreens had become an emotional necessity; he had become a part of my compulsory routine, which I needed every evening on my way home to my quiet childless house.

He always waved with such an encouraging smile over those yellowing teeth and bulging zits as I would walk through the automatic doors and retrace the same footsteps to aisle five. His "What's up?" as I would approach the register was a welcoming invitation that began my daily therapeutic rant. He was this safe venue where I would update my current status without anyone trying to input or comfort me. He merely grinned through my daily monologue. I'd tell him what Dr. Kin said that day, or the preparation for my IVF the next day, or occasionally "The ovulation test says today is the day!" I'd figured it was sometimes more information than he cared to know about an anxious woman almost twice his age, but his young smile never waned. I needed that.

One day the lady at the pharmacy was up at front and overheard me, the corners of her mouth twitched as she tried not to laugh while informing me that my Walgreens guy was deaf. For a moment, I had nervously wondered why he thinks I come in here to buy a pregnancy test every day. But I find comfort in his forgiving smile and young eyes, I find a sort of renewed courage in his, “Good luck, have a nice day”, even if he hasn’t heard a word. We had a sort of song and dance to our 5pm Monday through Friday visits as he would ring me up and I would chatter on. So it was what had become of my life; I didn’t know what it would look like without it all anymore. Maybe that was Nick’s point.

Nevertheless each afternoon approached and I’d enter through those glass automatic doors to the deaf register guy’s uncompromising smile. A part of me knew that Nick would get upset, so I’d shove the single box in the bottom of my purse and head straight to our bedroom to sneak the box under the sink. Each morning came, and I just couldn’t let that ‘yet’ escape me—the baby isn’t here yet, meant that there was a possibility of a later. I couldn’t give up. I would sit down on the cold bathroom tiles alone, to wait for the expected desolate blue streak. Every time the single streak augmented the empty hole in my gut that I carried around as an unfulfilled function of its purpose. But I couldn’t give up. There was nothing more satisfying than imagining that one morning the test would illuminate with a positive plus sign; I would need no more evidence of my motherhood, I would close the door under the sink and never have to open it again. Everything was all too habitual now to just stop: going to Walgreens, seeing Dr. Kin, it felt weird on the off days when I didn’t pee on a stick or google up and coming fertility research.

I had wondered if Nick knew I still checked every morning with too much hope, but just didn’t want to say anything. I had wondered if he saw my eyes linger too long at the tiny booties at Target that could fit over my pinky, or my hand that grazed the onesies close to the isle. Nick

was unrealistic in thinking that we would just suddenly stop everything that we'd been working toward for four years. I figured that he was just so disappointed that he needed a break, which I understood—Dr. Kin said that sometimes the process would get too emotional, but I was too determined to let anything get in the way. I was sure that one morning it would just happen, and I could proudly walk over to him still lying in bed and show him the positive cross and say “We did it!”

Last night, the clash of the cabinet doors reverberated through the house as Nick's voice crackled at the echo of the bing from the loose pipe under the sink that we hadn't gotten around to fixing yet.

“Goddamnit Rachael, I thought we said we'd take a break from all this fertility stuff. It's just not gonna happen. I don't even know who you are anymore. Sneaking around, hiding tests and pills, and lying to me. Seriously Rach?”

I tried to defend myself with the role of being a woman and that it must be possible somehow. It's expected that at some point in a woman's life she will conceive and lose her figure from baby weight, as she complains about the sore ankles and stretch marks that seem irreversible, the odd food cravings of Funions and grapefruit, the mood swings worse than usual, and years later when the teenager is screaming through a slammed door ‘you can't tell me what to do’ she'll respond ‘I can, I carried you for nine months and gave birth to you’. At least that's how I've imagined it would've been like if my mother had been there when I was a teenager. When I was little I used to think that she'd come back some day knowing exactly how soupy I like my mac-n-cheese and tell me I had to finish my math homework before watching T.V. That's how it should've been. That's how it should be now.

I already feel that I've lost the capability to relate to any of my girlfriends. They text each other coupons for Cheerios and send pictures of one covered in spaghetti sauce and the other lying on the floor asleep after tearing all the pots and pans out of the cabinets. Each of their phones has a preset group to send messages simultaneously: women who have been able to conceive with their husbands, women who are molding a life, women who teach a child to talk and walk and sing and dance, women who can see their own chin and their husband's nose together on the face of another tiny version of the two of them. I am not a part of that world. Nick and I have drifted from the realities we used to understand to an artificial universe of disconnect.

"Do I even exist to you anymore?" Following the slam of the sink door, there was a grave tone ringing through the escalating pitch of his voice that sounded foreign to me. All I kept wondering was what he could've been looking for under the sink.

"What do you mean do you exist? You're right here; arguing with me in fact!"

"I'm invisible to you, we barely even have sex anymore and when we do it's because your goddamn ovulation tests says it's a good time. It's a fricken science experiment. I'm a donor living in your house, doing your laundry, and occasionally jerking off at your discretion! I said we needed a break Rachael. Why couldn't you listen?" He slouched and crossed his rigid hands over his face appearing more worried than angry.

"Well I couldn't just stop and give up, I'm on all these meds anyways! I figured I could at least keep checking since we've come this far and gone through so much!"

"Four years Rach, four fucking years and thousands of dollars, I know what we've gone through, that's why we have to find a stopping point. Did you hear the doctor calling this

surgery...it's dangerous...this has gotten out of hand!" His uneasy voice calmed down as he reached over to graze the top of my hand. "Rachael, I love us the way we are. You can't let this destroy you and me."

Our fights were usually sarcastic and irrational with flippant retorts that never had anything to do with what we would be arguing about. But last night he was too composed. My voice never rumbled louder than his. Nick's hand was too quietly placed over mine. I didn't understand the nervous look in his eyes until he finally filled my shocked silence: "If you can't stop this then I can't continue with us."

"Let me just take that last one, and then I guess I'll stop buying them for now."

"Rach, you aren't listening..I'm done, it's not just *for now*. I just can't be with you anymore." His voice was escalating again. I was praying that meant this was a usual foolish fight where we say things we don't mean and apologize when neither of us can fall asleep in bed later.

"What does me taking a test have to do with you *being* with me!"

"It's not just that. I should've known you'd keep taking them. It's just everything. I haven't been your husband for years. I've tried so hard to just be us, but you can't let this thing go!"

"Are you trying to make me choose between a husband and a baby! That doesn't even make sense Nick!"

Nick's dark hair fell to the left as his head dropped with defeat. His words whispered with very carefully thought out phrasing. "Rachael you'd already made that choice years ago. I thought that I could be enough, just me. But I've realized that I'm not enough for you, and I can't

live with that constantly over my head, that I'm not enough for you without a baby. I can't do this anymore Rach. I'm so sorry..."

As Nick got his suitcase out of the closet I ran into the baby's room. Paint swatches were pinned on all the walls, along with thematic ideas I'd seen on the internet of jungle creatures and moons and stars. I had slammed the door and crumbled into a ball in the corner next to the baby's dresser with all my old books and stuffed animals from my dad's house patiently waiting. I cuddled with a ragged small white elephant like a child. It was the only thing my older sister, Jade, and I had from our mother when she left.

I was too young to ever remember our mom, but one night when I was asking too many questions about where she went and why dad didn't go to find her, Jade handed me the elephant that apparently had been mom's when she was a child. The elephant now felt smaller than I remember but still had a tear behind his left ear. I slept there. I don't know where Nick slept. This morning when I woke up on that soft carpet in that empty room, the house was silent. I braced myself against the bare walls and told myself I would treat today like any other and went to take my test.

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Though this is my routine, everything feels out of place. I watch the blue reflect off every tile in the bathroom, casting a glow in the room. These 10 minutes that used to give me butterflies just make me sick to my stomach now. Waiting for a second line to join the other, the plastic baton seems at the center of the universe. The color of the first line gradually becomes a deeper darker shade. A soft suction from the front door closing sounds through the hall. Chills run through my body, either of hope or nerves or relief. But then I hear the whisper of my sister's voice. Well, I think it is her.

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Jade moved away the day after high school graduation and I've talked to her 5 or maybe 6 times since. The last time I saw her was in front of her brown Chevy, her feet slowly turning away from me toward the west where she said she was going to visit for awhile. At the time, I had asked her as any twelve-year-old would, "Why the west, isn't it just boring dry fields of nothing and dust?" She had replied with a smile after a long inhale, "Yeah, sounds like a great place to start." We were always so different. Jade's daring and whimsical, never wanting anything more than to move out of Maine. Yet I enjoy the bright tall green leaves framing the roads and the horizon of the water that seems to go on forever.

The few times I've gotten a call from her she'd try to talk over the crackling from bad cell service in the middle of who knows where, hiking up some mountain or another. "Don't you miss the ocean Jade", I had asked her, hoping she'd at least come home to visit it.

"Naw, it's so beautiful out here! The ocean always made me feel trapped anyways." Usually that was as personal as we'd get. However, in our last conversation a couple months back she wondered, "How's dad?" with a nostalgia I didn't recognize.

I didn't know what to say at the time, "He's good!" I quickly corrected, "Fine... We're all fine here, I guess. Nick and I have been trying to get pregnant." I had wondered if she remembered who Nick was. She sent a post card from the top of Pikes Peak that arrived the day after my wedding day with a *sorry to miss it, sure it was amazing, best of luck to the two of you, hope to meet the lucky guy some day.*

She had paused too long after hearing the word pregnant, then came up with "Well that sounds fun."

“Oh no not like that, we’ve been doing infertility treatments for a few years…it’s really technical, lots of shots, pills, meds, appointments. Hopefully you’ll be an aunt sometime soon though!”

I could tell she was grinning a little, “Well I will probably be in range for awhile so give me a call. But hey I gotta go, we need to bike back down to the cabin before sun down. I’ll try to talk to you soon sis.” I picture her thin ankles scratched up, her long arms buff, and the hair she always curled at the ends sprinkled with dirt and tiny rocks instead. Before I could inquire into who “we” was she had hung up.

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“Thanks Nick, you should probably go for now, and I’ll call you later when I get the chance…it was nice to meet you finally by the way.” The softness in her voice down the hall reminds me of when I was growing up. She’d get quieter when she was trying to be stern or reprimand me. I’ll never forget how delicate her tone was the day she told me she would be leaving Maine. It was the first day of her senior year of high school. She’d never talked about college or anything, but I was twelve and it had never crossed my mind to ask her. I had always thought she’d just be there making sliced bananas covered in peanut butter when I came home from school, that she’d always come turn off my light when I fell asleep reading. But her senior year everything changed. “It’s your turn now”, she had told me with a banana unpeeled and the peanut butter jar not opened. At first I had pictured it all like a game and was excited to glob as much peanut butter as possible on everything I ate, however once she started making me push the laundry around and take out the trash my adventurous grin wore off. She had explained to me in that soft voice of hers that she needed to get out of here but she knew I would do just fine.

Occasionally I would whine and complain, once I even asked why dad couldn't do some of this. I knew the answer, but I didn't really understand at the time.

“Dad works late, you know that.” Sometimes I would hear them screaming at each other late at night. Once I had peeked out of my room because I'd heard a loud crash. The end table by the couch had split into too many pieces, “God dad, you can't even fucking stand up, just go to bed. I'll clean this up.” He had said he was sorry under his breath as she picked up his mess and I tried to fall back asleep knowing Jade would open the door soon to make sure I hadn't heard a word.

“Rachael, it's Jade.” She knocks on the bathroom door and I feel as if everything is a weird dream, an illusion. “Hey Rach, are you okay? I'm coming in, alright?” I know that none of this can be real as I stare at the two crossed blue lines on the test in my hand. The door knob spirals through the blue glare. Her hair still curls at the ends but up in a pony tail and she is wearing normal jeans and a t-shirt, but her skin glows with a deep brown. “What are you doing on the floor girly! Come up here and give me hug!” Jade's eyes are still young yet commanding and her ankles are thinner than I'd thought. “Rachael! Are you okay?” My head feels heavy and tilts to the left until it collapses against the side of the tub. “My god Rachael, what in the world have you done to yourself? Rachael wake up! Wake up...”

I wake up to these terrible fluorescent lights in the hospital that give me a headache. For a moment I feel like I'm simply getting done with an IVF procedure and soon Nick will come around the corner with my favorite green Jell-O that we always take home and my Bath and Body Works chap stick. Jade's rough hands reach up my forearm, “Hey Rach, are you feeling okay?”

“mm yeah...” I manage to mumble through cracking lips and heavy eye lids.

“Well way to welcome your sister home!” She banters through a slight smile. I don’t understand why she is home. I remember Nick’s voice this morning and her pony tail swishing over my face. I don’t understand how I got from taking my test this morning to the hospital, until I remember the two blue lines. A family is all I’ve wanted, ever. This was going to be the happiest moment of my life, of Nick’s and my marriage. Where is he?

“I’m pregnant.” These are the words I’ve practiced in front of the mirror for years with just enough excitement, not too much fear or prospect. But they sound like nothing I’d rehearsed. Every morning that I wake up to take my test I stare at the mirror as I wait; picturing myself with a baby wrapped in a cloth around my body, poking at my boobs and imagining what it might feel like when they are much fuller, and moving my eye brows and gummy smile around to convey exactly the right emotions to tell Nick. I’d always wondered if Nick would know by looking at my face before I said anything, so I made sure to hold back a little from the ear to ear grin so I could say these words. *I’m pregnant*. There’s strength and vigor in being able to utter those words, but I feel too weak right now looking instead at my sister’s high curved cheek bones and concerned eyebrows.

“Oh Rachael...” She looks behind her for someone and nods to a nurse outside the room. “...I’m so so happy you are okay.” I know why she is stalling; I know what she probably doesn’t want to tell me; I know she doesn’t know what to say. Dr. Kin’s shoulder’s slouch and his receding hairline is even more visible when he watches the floor as he walks in. I know how to read his expressions after this long. He had explained to Nick and me that nothing is a guarantee for at least the first 5 weeks after IVF, that it could take but not show up on a test at first, or it

could take but not follow through into a second trimester, that 1 in every 6 pregnancies end in miscarriage but that it doesn't mean I can't get pregnant again.

His voice suddenly sounds so foreign, like a doctor, not the man who has been lecturing, monitoring, and mentoring Nick and I about in vitro and hormone levels and blood tests for the past few years. "How are you feeling Rachael?"

"Why am I here?" I don't know why he is beating around the bush; he knows I like to get straight to the point.

"We think you were just very dehydrated on top of everything else, you were beginning to lose a bit of blood as well and..."

"Was I really pregnant?"

His eyes are trying to be kind and gentle, and factual and informative at the same time. "Well yes, the IVF seemed to actually have taken, but the progesterone levels in your body were too low to detect the pregnancy when we expected to be able to. As the pregnancy progresses the hormone levels should be rising every day as you know, however the progesterone levels were unable to reach high enough levels to hold on to the embryo. So the embryo detached and when you arrived here you were bleeding quite a bit, so we had to do a DNC." I begin to feel sick to my stomach again, like this morning. I can't envision being cleaned out and emptied, like washing a pot from the stove to use for later. "Fortunately, we now know that you can take the IVF, and we can give you progesterone to increase your cha.."

"No."

"Excuse me?"

"Just no Dr. Kin." His glasses swoop down to the edge of his nose like when he is preparing to answer every question I have. "I can't hear all this anymore. I know this and that

will increase my chances of *possibly* being able to do something like this again. I don't know if I *can* do this again, I don't even know where Nick is."

I turn to Jade still sitting beside me, taking in years of my life she has missed and trying to understand. I wonder if she still feels lost, or if she still feels trapped being back in Maine; I feel both lost and trapped now. I wonder what made her come home. Her hand brushes over my bangs and strokes my hair, like when we were kids. I remember the day our mom left. She had said she would come back for us someday and I had believed her at four-years-old, but Jade's tiny hand shook on my scalp as she weaved her fingers through my curls with tears in her eyes knowing she wouldn't. I see what I remember of mom's autumn colored eyes shaped like perfect little almonds on Jade's face. For the first couple weeks when she would cry at night, I would crawl into bed with her and tell her "You heard mom, she'll come back." She had replied, "It's just really hard to want something so much, but not be able to do anything about it."

Dr. Kin's gentle-just-give-them-the-facts look that I'm sure he has rehearsed in front of a mirror has wiped off his face and been replaced with surprise and apology. "Rachael you know I'm just here to help you exhaust all your options in this process of creating a family."

"I think I'm exhausted then Dr. Kin. These aren't options anymore, it's just a guessing game of chance, but with a life...I think that is what Nick was trying to tell me." I feel guilty. I want to cry and scream that I feel that my body is at fault for just losing a baby. I want to yell at Dr. Kin for letting me get kind of half pregnant, but I know it's not his fault and I know that he will just try to explain to me the statistics again of miscarriages and IVFs and the variables to fiddle with to attempt to fix me.

"Yes there is some chance involved Rachael and occasional guessing I suppose, but everything is based off of.."

“Doctor, can you just give us a few minutes. Thank you so much for everything. I know Rachael appreciates it.” A part of me doesn’t want to hear my sister speaking for me when she hasn’t been here and doesn’t understand how this has consumed my life for years, but I can’t listen to the doctor’s explanations anymore. The doctor quietly shuffles out and I just want Nick here, I still don’t understand why *she* is here.

“Nick is the only one who understands; he’s been here and never abandoned me.” I reconsider, “Well he was until last night I guess.” Everything feels so out of place at the moment, so turned around; my sister here, Nick who knows where, the pit of my stomach that is still turning from the two blue crossed lines I’d been waiting on for the last four years of my life, yet the vacant emptiness inside me still. I had said I’d do whatever it took to have a family, but now I feel the defeat I couldn’t understand at the drop of Nick’s head into the palms of his hands last night before he left.

“Honey, Nick just needed a break, I’m sure he will come back around.”

“Jade, don’t you dare just bounce back here and act like you understand my marriage, my life now. You have no idea, *you* left, *you* ran away to the middle of nowhere and left everything here. I’ve been here. I pay for a maid at Dad’s, I bring him meals in Tupperware and eat with him at least once a week. I paid for him to see a counselor for awhile. You don’t even exist in this world anymore Jade. Please don’t try to tell me what my husband needs and what he will do.” The frustration in my voice comes out more spiteful than I intend.

“I’m sorry Rachael. You’re right. I didn’t know any of that. Why didn’t you tell me on the..”

“Jade you fucking hang up after a couple minutes to escape back into your dessert mountain landscape or whatever, far from here.”

“I know, I’m sorry. I just...well I don’t know. I’ve been selfish. I’m sorry.”

“You’re running around like a wild animal and I’m being a responsible adult! Why are you even back here?!”

“Nick called me.” I scrunch my forehead and don’t know what to say. The one time I tried to call her I ended up leaving a voicemail that I was getting married. “...about a week ago. I thought maybe you were calling me back to tell me that I was an...well it was him and he pleaded with me. His voice sounded so sad and defeated, Rach. He said he didn’t know who else to call at this point, that things were out of hand...” I’m rolling my eyes and beginning to tap my toes and fingers on the ugly hospital white sheets. “...that at every appointment things were getting more dangerous, that you kept wanting more surgeries and injections...he said that he felt like I’d be the only one to understand..”

“What in the world could you understand about my life now, you don’t even know me anymore.”

“I know you want a family. I know you’ve always wanted that. I remember at the first snow fall every year how you’d sit outside and watch those two kids down the street with each parent pushing them down the hill and running to catch them at the bottom. I know how wonderfully hopeful and optimistic you are.”

“Yeah well, that’s changed now..I gave up on mom the day you left, and I gave up on you soon after that.”

“If it had changed, we wouldn’t be sitting here right now Rachael.”

These sheets are too static, the room is too bright with artificial lighting that gives me a headache, the walls are too blank and empty. I just want to go home. “It’s just really hard sometimes to want something so much and not be able to do anything about it.”

Jade squeezes a smile through her distress and remorse. “That’s when you embrace what *is* here Rachael.”

Jade checks me out of the hospital and wheels me out, because apparently I’m not allowed to walk out. “I feel like I’m pushing you in a stroller again” she banters.

“Yeah yeah, I’m walking the moment we get out of here!”

We approach her brown Chevy parked in a handicapped parking space with a ticket on the front. “Did you drive out here Jade? God you’re so weird! Why can’t you take a plane and buy a phone that actually has service like everyone else!”

“Of course I drove...and why?...well because I’m apparently the wild animal and you the responsible adult.”

I hand her the parking ticket “Yeah exactly!” We exchange the smiles that dad always said reminded him of our mom, and we drive back home. It’s almost five-o-clock by now and we pass the Walgreens. I wonder if my register guy is waiting for me to walk through the doors toward isle five. I wonder if he’ll suspect that everything has changed.

One plus One

I'm waiting for a Johnnie Walker Green on the rocks and can't remember the last time I set foot in a bar in the middle of the afternoon. The bartender, apparently his name is Joey, sets down the beverage napkin with one hand, while juggling the bottle in the other with such routine ease. He appears so young, but I am sure that he is in his mid-thirties or at least a couple years older than I am. I feel old sitting on these terribly cushioned stools that I don't remember drilling so hard into the bottom of my tailbone; I keep shifting in my seat hoping to find some comfort.

The oak wooden planks along the walls give the room an old warmth and simplicity, a sensation that I can barely recall from a previous time, when life was plain and uncomplicated—a time when my wife would've been twirling on the stool next to me with a lemon-drop martini balancing in her hand. She would be discussing world events and planning how we were going to travel to every city and analyze its anthropological aspects; she would be handing out sarcastic comments wherever possible; and she would be smiling—god I miss that smile. I miss the way her cheeks would tug so hard at the corners of those bright red lips so that you could see every one of her molars. Her eyes would be bright, young, and wistful.

Rachael used to have such an enthusiastic ambition for all that life could offer. When I met her sophomore year of college in our CHEM class, I'd watch at the back of the lecture room as her ponytail bounced back and forth in the

front row; she would take notes so actively that her entire body would move. I never understood what she found so fantastic at 8am, while listening to such a monotone professor, but she found passion in everything. She had this dream to travel: India, Egypt, South Africa, China, and Greece. This list was endless, and all of them were equally wonderful in her mind—she could never choose just one. I remember in college when she would fervently ask me about the weather in August versus October for countries I'd never even heard of.

Rachael had detailed plans for every place—each street highlighted and point of interest circled on maps. She had all the trains pinpointed with precision. Eventually the trip became a tour of the world for the two of us, but one that we would never embark on. I supposed a lot of kids in college were unrealistically ambitious, but Rachael wasn't like them—she was the kind who obsessively moved forward.

On her 'free' nights when she wasn't doing homework, she'd grab her keys off our shared hook on the wall and say, "Let's go!" At first I'd try to figure out where we were heading, but quickly learned that we were just driving, just zoning out to the lull of the wheels grinding on the rough pebbles of the tar, just moving, just going. By the end of college, I swear we'd driven through every neighborhood within a 50 mile radius.

After we got married we moved into one of those neighborhoods, about 20 minutes from where she grew up. We had planned on a trip to Florida since that was about all we could afford at the time, but even that wouldn't happen. Her father ended up in the hospital a couple days after the wedding. We had to

use the account we had saved up for a honeymoon. Fortunately for our landlord, Rachael was quickly offered a job working for the American Cultural Resource Management projects issued by the state. Her father's health had become "too important to abandon on some trip anyways", she had told me after confirming her acceptance of the job. Monday that next week, she skipped breakfast and grabbed a snickers bar on the way out the door; she wore a black skirt and dress coat with her hair in a sad bun. Usually when she wears heels, I can hear them a mile away. But they barely made a click as she tiptoed through the kitchen and out the door. She looked like she was going to a funeral, rather than her first day at a new job.

I don't even really know how things are going there, because our conversations begin and end with fertility treatment talk. It consumes our relationship. I'd become overly excited to go to work. At least at the news station we'd talk about everyone else's lives. Nonetheless, eventually I couldn't even find an escape at work. My collared shirts, ties, and dress pants now lingered with that weird doctor's office smell; I couldn't wash it out no matter how hard I scrubbed between the threads. We've become products of this infertility process instead of the process providing us with a product—in fact, it has been depriving us of any production at all, which is reflected in our bank statements. Every IVF is thousands of dollars, and every time something doesn't work and we go into further debt, it gets more expensive with the next advancement. She makes about twice as much money as I do as a meteorologist at our local news station; and in her mind the extra money she

makes is what pays for the treatments, so it's not my choice: "It shouldn't be a concern of yours," I'm told. So I've followed her for years on this expedition, hoping for it to just work or just stop; but we've been in between the two. We've been in some sort of static middle ground, incapacitating us to move forward in life. I can barely remember the time when I wanted a baby—when a baby meant something less dangerous than needles and surgeries, and something more organic than doctors and jerking off in a cup. When a baby didn't mean losing the woman I love, losing who she is, who we are together.

The first time we talked about having a child, it was early on her birthday. I woke up as she kissed my cheek. Those eyes looked brighter than I'd seen since our wedding, and the pink in her cheeks glowed in the sunlight escaping through the blinds.

"Nick, I want to have a family with you."

I replied with a grin, "Well good, because you did marry me; and birthday girl, we can make babies all day if that's what you want."

"I'm being serious Nick!" She teasingly pushed my shoulder and readjusted herself to a sitting position to look directly at me.

I slipped my hand on her lower back where it starts to curve in and pulled her on top of me. "So am I." She had an eager affection in her giggle as I flipped her over on her back; her little hands wrapped behind my neck and disappeared in the mess of my bed head at the bottom of my skull.

It's not that she lost her innate desirous ambition—that determined spirit is so deeply ingrained in the cells of her DNA, it's what drives her—it's what made me fall in love with her. Nonetheless, her eager determination has merely shifted, from trailblazer to colonist. And for the last four years she has been focused so strongly on a single goal—to have a baby. She has forgotten all else: who we were, where we were going, who she was. The majority of our marriage has shifted from the excitement we once shared in each other's infatuation to business partners on a single mission to have a child. We've gone through every adjustment possible to both our hormonal balances and natural bodily tendencies to get her pregnant, *her* pregnant, it wasn't even *us* anymore.

She had once asked Doctor Kin if it was her fault, but he just replied, "It takes two to tangle," with this odd suggestion on his face. At the time I didn't know that tangle was referring to the cells in a petri-dish—not us. I never really cared whose *fault* it was, but I saw everything changing when the doctor told Rachael that the IVF didn't seem to be planting in her uterus—in other words, even though the egg was fertilized and beginning to grow outside of her, her body couldn't provide a prolific enough environment. I always knew family was important to her, because she felt deprived of one in her life. However, I never imagined walking into that first appointment with the infertility doctor, that Rachael would become so consumed, so lost—that I'd become obsolete.

The first time they did an IVF procedure and the embryo didn't stick, she kept repeating *I lost it, I lost it*, with forlorn tears. In that moment, I understood

that I had lost her; I understood that her and I would never be the same us anymore; and I understood that this was now a process between her and science, which I would not be a part of any longer. Once the procedures began getting more complex and risky, the doctor gave us a flyer on adoption. She left it on the counter as we left the office and said, “I can do this Nick. I’ll make it happen. We don’t need that. I can do this.” She’d gone through life always accomplishing what she wanted if she worked hard enough for it—she just doesn’t know where to draw the line when achievement is out of her control. Since having a baby became this obsession to fill some deep yearning, she has left the rest of the world in the dust—including me.

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“Well we’ve got the place to ourselves.” The bartender’s raspy voice seems apologetic or sympathetic, and questioning at the same time. He is trying to read my body language and expression. The ice in the drink clings against the glass with an echo, as he sets it next to my elbow that is holding my head up on my flopping wrist.

“Yeah I see that. It’s just been a long day.”

“Must’ve been one hell of a day, since it’s still 11:30 AM.” Joey walks back over to a coffee maker at the end of the bar and blows on a still steaming ceramic cup.

I shove the two little black straws in my glass out of the way with my ring finger and smack my lips as the cold ice and whiskey shock my teeth. “Maybe I should say a long few weeks...or a long four years.” The words coming out of my mouth sound strange. They sound like a 45 year old man going through a mid-life crisis because he has lost the zeal for his monotonous life. I run my fingers over the 3 diamonds imbedded in my wedding band over and over.

“Four years is a good run for a first marriage.” I don’t know whether to be offended or not, as Joey refers to my marriage, which he knows nothing about, so nonchalantly and so terminally. A good run—he makes it sound like a computer that ran well, but eventually just ran out of amp to continue. Well, I guess if you think of it that way, he is not so far off.

“My marriage has been *running* for six years and is *still* running, thank you very much...Joey...we’re just at a bump, well we have been...anyways though, I’m not sure where you come off making such bold assumptions about your customers.”

“I’ve been bartending across from that motel for ten years, nobody stops in here unless they are staying there, and nobody stays there unless they are in the dog house.”

“Well, I’m not ‘in the dog house’.” I bitterly retort and sit up straight.

“I’m sorry to assume, but you have the unshaved stubble, wrinkled clothes, and dark circles of a man who obviously didn’t sleep at home last night.”

“I brought my razor, but the goddamn sink is chugging out brown water; and I had to go let Rachael’s sister into the house this morning so she could try to get through to my wife before she kills herself trying to get pregnant.” I’m grateful for the wooden walls here; because last night when my voice escalated in that linoleum floored-high ceilinged house, it echoed back as if my own voice was backhanding me. I wonder if Rachael is screaming back at those walls at Jade, I wonder if she is hoping I hear from where ever she thinks I am; I hope so desperately that I did the right thing in calling her sister and asking for help. I’d never met Jade before this morning, but I see Rachael’s tough determination in her eyes and the sweet longing ambition in her smile. When I had called, Jade answered the phone thinking it was Rachael; she paused out of fear when she heard a much lower voice. She so quickly asked if everything was okay, because in their line of genealogy calls from family members were either really good or really terrible news. All I could respond was, “No.”

There is no echo here in the bar. Joey is stunned silent after my retort for a moment before returning to his concentrated strokes with a blue towel on the glasses behind the bar—eliminating any smudges that not even the dishwasher could obliterate. “Wow...I’m sorry...I don’t really know what to say. I haven’t heard that one before! That’s for sure.”

We are both paying close attention to the squeaks between the glass and the towel, in an attempt to avoid having to look at each other in the eyes; I don’t want to see his pity or answer his questioning thoughts, and I assume

that he doesn't want to see my utter emotional exhaustion and desperation. The distant sound of a siren, shouting to the cars in its way, breaks our introversion. "...Well, I can agree that that motel is a shithole though! I had a guy in here the other day whose wife caught him texting his secretary in the middle of the night, and ironically enough the outlet at the motel wouldn't work, so his phone died a couple hours after getting there...ha. Should've just gone to the secretary's place, but she was married too! haha...people these days, I tell ya!" There's a sort of dark growl in Joey's laugh.

"Mine didn't work either. My phone died on my way over here." He directs me to a working outlet secured into the wood underneath the bar counter; the nails are loose and sticking out of the plastic at different lengths. Nevertheless, it functions. The black smudged screen on my phone lights up for the first time in a couple hours since I met Jade at the house and unlocked our doors.

"...Well how's the drink."

The alcohol stings the cracks in my dehydrated lips, "Good, it's been awhile...apparently alcohol contributes to infertility...along with caffeine...anything with preservatives, and anything not organic. In other words I'm sure that my taste buds are in complete shock at the moment."

Joey appears confused but pleased. "I will take that as a compliment."

As the phone illuminates, there is a high pitched bling to notify me of a message, which sounds once, then twice, then three and four times before I am able to click on one. Jade's phone number shows up without a name, because



she has never called this phone before—a missed call—a text—a voicemail—another text.

I wonder if she saw her little sister that she hasn't seen in so long and forgot how to comfort her. I wonder if Rachael has cried out years of resentment at Jade as she did last night at me, and herself. I really hate when she pulls that anthropological crap out on me: "As much as cultures differ in the world's history, the one consistency is emphasis on reproduction! Having a baby is the basis of societal life. I am a woman, Nick. I will conceive and give birth to a child, it's a part of every living organism's right, it's their survival principle. I will be a mother." All I could say is that I didn't feel like enough for her anymore—she's smart and understands the more dangerous risks that she is taking, but she has become compulsive about this need to get pregnant. Apparently she doesn't see two people as family enough.

Rachael never has lied to me; I mean I guess from what I know, she's just not the type. However, this process of getting pregnant has turned her into a woman I don't even recognize anymore. Last night when I found out that she was still buying all the tests and taking all the pills for her infertility treatments, even though we had agreed to take a break for a little while, I just lost all of the composure that I'd been trying to hold onto for years. I couldn't even discuss or argue anything with her anymore—my voice had been muted in our relationship. I'd become a stepping stone in her process toward this goal, instead of her partner. I'm not sure if we can go back in time to the people we

used to be, but I'm just hoping if she gives this all up that we can at least get closer to that couple again.

I called her sister a couple weeks ago; I pleaded with her to come back to Maine for even a day to talk to her. I've never even seen the woman in my life, because she is as desperate to get away from conventional family ideas as much as Rachael is desperate to create one. But Jade, understands a family past that Rachael doesn't reveal much about. Every Tuesday night, and sometimes Sundays, Rachael will cook potpie in our oven and bring it over to her dad's house. I've only seen the inside once; I was simply the repair man, the refrigerator guy who tramples into a stranger's home with dirty shoes and tools. The wallpaper peeled at the seams and the cracking tiles were cold. Rachael will stock the fridge to last her father the week, and apparently not being able to do so was worse than me stepping foot in her past. There were no picture frames or family emblems, though I know she lived in the apartment her whole life. It looks barely moved into, or maybe just very moved out of. I've never understood their father-daughter relationship, or why she babies the man like an incapable toddler; but the one time I asked, Rachael glared through me as if such an inquiry was impossibly rude to consider. Nonetheless, she has hinted throughout the years that he apparently just was never the same since their mother left.

"I want you to see my father for whoever he is now." She has paid for therapy over the years, anything from psychological to meditation and

acupuncture. But he still appears empty to me, and determined to stay that way. At our wedding, he looked sad and remorseful. Even through all the infertility appointments, she never let them interfere with her dinners with him. I imagine them both quiet, eating in silence but with some sort of understood compliance with this meal constituting some sort of forgiveness and respect. His dark eyes squint at the world with bitterness, except when he looks at the one woman that never walked out on him. The frameless house is evidence of a lack of family unity and what I assume to be the origin of Rachael's obsession with becoming a mother, but since she won't allow me to talk about it maybe Jade is the only one who can get through to her.

Joey's voice is rambling in the background about some customer last week who got divorced due to dietary preferences that the man couldn't handle anymore. Jade's texts read: "911—call me now!" "I don't know what to do. Please respond to me, she needs you." "Where are you?" In the voicemail, I hear the words "..at the hospital" and bolt out of the bar faster than I had gotten there.

The cumulus clouds coming from the west wind are gaining vertical development. I imagine there's a 60% chance that it will rain within the next hour. The heavy wind whips the ends of my hair too close to my eyes. As I merge onto the highway, I feel the wind pushing at my car. I can't think of anything other than the delicate hands of my wife, as I find myself trying to

distract any foolish thoughts. I convince myself that whatever the emergency, it couldn't have been purposeful.

The car screeches as I curve around the entrance to the emergency waiting area of the hospital. My heart has sunk to my stomach by now, and I habitually look in the back seat for her chap-stick and toothbrush, which I would usually have brought her following a DNC. As I realize that this is not the typical visit to the hospital, I hear the sarcastic tone of Rachael's laughter, with a fullness that I barely can remember from too many years ago. I look up from the empty cushions of my car to the dark wavy ponytails of two women approaching a broken down brown Chevy. Rachael is still wrapped by the paper bracelet from the hospital, which dangles at her small, bony wrist as she pulls up a windshield wiper on Jade's car. The first time that Rachael was scheduled for a surgical IVF, I had been late to the hospital and hadn't even looked to check if I was in a parking space. Our Mazda was somewhere in between a forbidden emergency lane and a crosswalk. As I wheeled her out of the automatic glass doors, she had begun laughing. At the time, I thought she was crying because she was laughing so hard. That week was the last time I had seen the sides of her molars from her cheerful, gleaming smile.

Rachael hands the parking ticket to Jade with that same smile, and a part of my nostalgia makes me jealous. I want to run up from across the parking lot and envelop her body in my arms; I want to stroke her soft cheek bones and kiss her forehead; I want to ask what happened; I want to apologize for not being there. However, the two woman look at each other with a gentle

empathy through their laughter, and they settle into their driver and passenger seats with routine ease. I can't intervene. The brown Chevy slogs past. I lean back on the trunk of my car, and the warm metal stings through my spine. The wind seems to have switched direction, and I watch the clouds retreat to the west.

## Two Families

*Today I'm 18.* That is the first thought that enters Lily's mind as she wakes up in her grandparents' guest room. The dim room is cluttered with tossed bed sheets and pillows haphazardly layered on the floor where her cousins had slept the previous night. She is sure that they all abandoned their made up beds at the sound of coffee beans grinding and the smell of her dad's pancakes. Lily can never eat that much in the morning, and after a few glasses of wine she can't wake up to anything. However, for the rest of the family the sweet smell of fluffy pancakes searing on the pan is a call to begin the day with heartiness—especially, after a long night of family card games and too many bottles of Italian wine.

The clock next to her bed blinks 12:40pm, and she sighs; Lily had wanted to get up early so that she could have a moment to breathe in the arrival of her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Nevertheless, it's too late in the afternoon now; everyone has woken up and planned out the day; she knows that she will walk downstairs to the loud clamor of thirty voices enthusiastically and passionately throwing their arms around her, kissing all over her bed hair, and telling her their plans for the family for the day. She flips over to start to sit up on the bed, which she claimed early last night (about 2:30am) while everyone else was still drinking more wine than she could stomach. As Lily puts her slippers on, she watches the imprint of her body on her grandparents' guest bed slowly disappear, and then makes the bed because she can't stand the piles of pillows and sheets.

Lily tiptoes down the stairs. Her dad had obviously made regular coffee that morning, ignoring the high blood pressure he is supposed to be watching—apparently family gatherings are an exception for everything. He energetically slices his hands through the air as if he were swatting flies, while entertaining the rest of the family with a one act comedy of flipping

homemade pancakes, telling random family inside jokes, and laughing with a paramount vigor. Lily smiles at the scene, remembering how all of her friends, who had ever slept over when she was younger, would comment on the stereotypical Italian tendencies that the coffee seemed to amplify in her dad. Surprisingly, Lily is still amused by his morning coffee jitters even after waking up to them for so many years. He hears Lily's soft steps and runs over.

“Give me a hug girl, Good Morning!”

My mom quickly slips between everyone to bring over a large cup of coffee, knowing a sip would turn my vocal cords on.

“Morning Birthday Girl! You excited to have all your family here to celebrate?”

Everyone is talking at once. The flying upper limbs of the family begin to resemble that of the men who direct airplanes on the ground with bright orange light-savers in each hand. One sip isn't quite enough for Lily to interpret the bouncing conversations and animated arm sign language that accompanies the loud voices of thirty people speaking at once. Lily tries to hold tight to the hot cup in her hands as the family crowd throws their arms around her little body and kisses her head and forehead all at once. She always wondered how no one ever seemed to knock into each other; it was like an instinct that she could never grasp onto. When it was someone else at the center of this greeting, she'd always wait in the back and squeeze in for the traditional hug at the last moment.

“Morning sleepy Lily, you tired from the late hours of squeak last night?”

“Yeah, that was pretty exhausting; I think my vocal chords are shot from all the screaming,” Lily mutters with a giggle at the 5<sup>th</sup> sip of coffee.

The uncles had quickly returned to the living room, where they watch the news while discussing the world's affairs. Their voices seamlessly overlap from one to the next, occasionally

getting louder. The living room acts as a sort of court room, or debate club meeting for Lily's family. Sometimes, the debates would get so heated that the aunts and kids would join in until Lily couldn't even decipher who was saying what anymore.

"I have card cuts from Jenni, who kept chucking those cards over my arm!" Uncle Tony had stopped the living room debate, in an attempt to defend his first loss last night, blaming Jenni who gave him one paper cut that he wore around like a war scar.

"I have all these bruises over my hip bone from trying to fling cards to piles on the other side, you kids are too quick!" Grandma laughed as she pointed to the large glass table still splattered with decks of cards.

"We should play again tonight!" Uncle Jim added over the thunderous laughs.

"If we keep this game up every night I'm going to get some good abs. Here I come six pack!" Aunt Carrie shouted from the counter as she shoved a huge bite of pancakes dripping with sticky syrup into her mouth.

Squeak was a long standing family card game, where everyone has their own deck, but plays solitaire off of everyone else's cards until one person squeaks when they run out of their deck. It creates a massive mess of royalty and numbers frisbee-ing across the table into a melting pot where no one can decipher whose cards are whose anymore. Lily would explain to her friends the game as her family's version of solitaire; because the original was too quiet, simple, and in isolation for her family—everything was always a loud activity of chaos and tossing things together with how Lily grew up.

"Well you all will have to wait to play until after the show tonight! Remember we are celebrating Lily's birthday by going to *Fame* at Centennial Hall. It starts at 7. So we will eat at 4."



Lily's mother reassuringly smiles at her daughter. "Aunt Rose, can you still get those peppers and sausage from the store, and we'll start cutting everything else up for the dressing."

As the family plans the pasta sauce for an early dinner, Lily's dad drops off her usual banana and yogurt next to the coffee cup that hasn't left her grip. He manages to wedge a candle in the peel of the banana and places it in her hands as he pulls out a lighter.

"You'll always be my little Lilia, even though I know you are dwelling on today as your true stamp of adulthood." Lily notices a confused melding in the happiness in her father's calm voice but sadness in his black eyebrows pulling the wrinkles of his forehead toward the center of the crown of his nose.

Lily had spent the last month thrilled about her big birthday. She never looked that forward to birthdays because they were more of just another excuse for the family to get together, discuss politics and religion, eat too much food, and drink too much wine. But today, was different. Lily felt a sort of independence, a freedom, a yearning to find herself as an individual that she felt was fulfilled by becoming a legal adult. Lily imagined signing a contract on her own, buying a lottery ticket on her own—though she knew she would probably do neither, it was just knowing that she could, it would be the first time she felt she wouldn't have to fit in anywhere, because she could just be on her own.

"Come get the last of the pancakes!" Lily's dad trumps all the loud voices with a call to food.

She tries to blow out the candle that was balancing on the banana and rolls her eyes as she realizes that it was, of course, a trick and tosses it in a cup of water on the counter. The crowd of family members rush toward the kitchen, the plates chime as they hit the counter, a

chaotic whirl of hands toss the fluffy pancakes from one to another, and the youngest ones lick the few they managed to steal so no one could try to steal them back from their plates.

“Hey Lil, what do you want for your birthday dessert tonight?”

“You know I don’t like sweets mom.”

“I know, but everyone else does, so I wondered if you had a preference.”

“No, mom.”

Lily’s mother taps her pen on the shopping list, and defeated, replies, “Okay... why don’t you go hang out with your cousins and...”

“Can I have the car?...I just need to stop at home for some clothes.” Lily quickly interjects before her mother gives her a task in today’s plans. Her mother gets the keys from her purse and requests her return by at least 3.

The car ride feels oddly quiet. Lily’s always finds her family gatherings amusing, and she enjoys never having a dull moment. But today, the mere lull of the engine and wind whistling through the crack in the window has a soothing undertone. She drives around their block a few times. As she finally settles in front of the house, she rests her head on the warm window and stares at an old tree. The large Elm on the right side of her bright blue trimmed house has fewer branches than she remembers. She used to climb to the large V, where the tree’s stump splits in two; she’d sit there and watch the other kids run around on the street and ride their bikes, racing from one house to the next. No one ever saw her up there, behind the numerous branches and leaves. She could lean against the bark and hear her own thoughts.

Lily looks at the clock and realizes that she’d be driving for longer than she’d thought. She jumps out of the car toward the mailbox and quickly snatches the pile of envelopes and

throws them in the passenger seat before running inside to grab a new shirt for dinner and *Fame* later. Lily has been going to see a show for her birthday since before she can even remember. She decides the musical *Fame* prescribes a shirt with sparkles of some sort; she takes the bright blue shining halter top from her closet and grabs some heels on the way out the door. The ride back seemed much quicker.

Pulling up to her grandparents house, half the cousins are outside waiting with the uncles and the others are taking too long to get ready, so Lily's mom is impatiently holding the door open. "Lily, thank god your back! We need to be at the restaurant at 415 to make sure they have the tables set up close to each other."

"Yeah, Okay mom, I need to go change real quick. Be right back."

Lily takes the envelopes with her to see if there is any loose cash to spend after the show tonight. Sliding her fingers in between the leftover sticky film and the envelope paper, she cuts a small mark at the center of her thumb where the circles of a fingerprint meet. She decides to read the cards later as she shakes them from their binding then piles them on the sheets tossed together on the carpet. Most of the cards were from the people downstairs, she never understood why they mailed them and didn't just give them to her when they saw her. Suddenly she notices a name that she doesn't recognize: Abby Woods. A flood of curiosity pools at her fingertips as she grazes the shadowed letters at the top of the envelope: "Happy Birthday." Lily's mom begins calling her down to the van to leave, but the envelope feels too thick in her hands to just leave there, she knew there must be money, but who in the world would be sending that much money.

Lily carefully peels back the flab of the envelope so she wouldn't tear anything inside. She pulls out a stack of papers, folded letters it seems. There is no money, but she counts

eighteen letters. She sorts through paper after paper with intensifying curiosity and confusion, each paper is stamped with the year and today as the date at the top right corner.

“Lilia, I hope you are doing well.”

“Lilia, I can’t help imagining how beautiful you must be by now.”

“Lilia, I’m so sorry.”

“I was 15” “someone else who would give you a better life.”

The footsteps of Lily’s mother begin rushing up the stairs. Lily wipes the intrigued confusion from her face and folds the letters in the pillowcase.

“Lily! We need to get going to Carmine’s. Even your cousin Cassi is out there and ready.”

“Sorry. I just was sorting through my cards.”

“Did you find any cash? You look distraught.”

“Oh no, Yeah. I’m fine. Carmine’s...Let’s go.” Lily mumbles with her usual animation attempting to sneak through the blank thoughts clouding her mind.

Even at the show she couldn’t peel her thoughts away from the letters. A theatre has always been the one place where she has been able to escape the rest of the world and find her own identity in the creation and melding of characters and the environment in the show. It’s a place where Lily can invent her own world, her own self, and feel she can belong without question. But tonight, not even *Fame* can pull her away from the few sentences she scanned on the numerous letters before tucking them away, wondering what they meant, what they meant to her life, who Michelle Woods is, and what she has to do with her. Lily stares at the bright lights revealing the lives of the troubled stars on stage, and just so badly wants to believe that the letters were addressed to the wrong Lilia Alder. She looks to her right and left at some of her

cousins making paper airplanes out of the programs, some texting each other, and half of her uncles heads fallen onto the back of the seat and snoring to the music. Lily feels too out of place, too distant, too alone. Her friends and her used to joke about her being adopted because she was so dissimilar to the rest of the family—Lily sits there thinking about all those jokes and hopes that it couldn't be real, that her parents haven't been lying for the past 18 years. She doesn't want to believe it, she can't believe it, but she can't let it go, because these letters answer too many questions that fill a gap she never understood. The entire rest of the evening, everything and everyone which was once all she knew of the world, suddenly felt like a foreign world, one that she couldn't fit into easily.

A reenactment of squeak is accompanied by Lily's grandma filling the glasses of Moscato D'Asti more often than usual with a toast to the birthday girl each time. This is the world she has grown up in, the birthday traditions and family gatherings that make sense. She can't imagine a more enthusiastic and engaging family—but she can't help feeling like something is just off. The letters seem to be the key to this hole. Eventually Lily claims to be feeling the Moscato and wants to head to bed. Lily's dad responds to her heading for the pillow with a retort to grandma's persistency in filling the wine glasses too often: "Mom, you know she can fill her own now, she is 18."

"Oh, I just was having a little fun Steven. It's a Moscato, it's pretty much juice! You know, when I was in Italy we would try all..." As she drifted off into one of her infamous memories, Lily was able to sneak away to the letters.

The thin pencil lines on the earlier dated ones are blending into the color of the worn college ruled paper, but she can still make out the words: *I am your birthmother*. Lily doesn't

know whether to feel angry at everyone who never said anything or relieved because it makes sense, because it seems to coat the hole she'd been feeling for the last 18 years. The corner of the paper ripped from her shaking hands gripping for answers in the letters. She begins to think about how her mother always commented on teenagers having difficulties feeling that they belong anywhere, that this was a phase, something we all experience and will find our own in the world through our own experiences. Lily's mother just wanted so badly to believe that she was just like every other kid, feeling alone, unable to fit in because of her 'teenage phase'. But it wasn't a phase, Lily had felt like that her entire life. It wasn't that Lily didn't have friends or people around her, like her grandma, persistently there to fill her glass; but that's what made that empty feeling so difficult for Lily to understand, so difficult to find the roots of its origin. Lily supposes that this is because no one told her where those roots came from, where her origin began.

By the end of the first three letters addressing a genetic history and introduction to this woman's world, Lily is ready to gather the letters in one arm and throw them into the center of the spiraling thirty voices in the living room. With tears yearning for answers, explanations, hoping for some truth to who she is. *Who am I?*: This is the only thought in her clouded confusion. All she has ever wanted was to be an adult, 18 years old, because she thought she would understand more about herself and the world and find herself in her individuality. Never had she imagined that she would find more questions than answers.

Reaching for the next letter out of desperate determination for some self-discovery, she reads the first sentence: *Here is why I chose your parents to be your parents.* The woman explains the process of selecting a couple from interviews and the questions she asked. *The difference about your parents from the rest is that they were prepared, not only for a baby, but to*

*raise an adopted child in a secure family environment.* Lily reads through the words, unable to process any particular meaning, barely able to absorb the sentences. She begins to question everything; just as Lily feels one gap being filled, more gaps are found empty. Simultaneously she feels she is finding her true reality and losing her true reality.

She wonders if her name is really Lilia Alder, if she was in foster care, if she ever had other parents. Lily feels so lost and so found at the same time while reading through these explanations the woman, who apparently gave birth to her, wrote every birthday. *Not a day goes by that I don't wonder how you are, or what you are doing.* The letters explain the adoption process. The agency requires that the birthmother only communicate with the child through the adoptive parents until the child is eighteen and out of the system, out of the obligation that the adoptive parents signed in the legally binding contract with the woman who gave them her child. The entire process, the letters, it all just seems surreal. She can't comprehend any of it, who she is, why no one told her where she came from, who her real mother is. Lily thinks her parents would've been better off sticking to the stork-dropped-her-off-on-the-porch story than this accumulation of lies.

Footsteps are approaching the bedroom, so Lily quickly stuffs the letters of truth back into the pillow case, and uses the corner to wipe her wet eyes. Her mother's voice enters with concern and without a knock, "Are you okay Lily? I don't think grandma knew how much she was giving you."

"I'm fine mom, it's not like I've never drank that much before."

"I know sweetheart, I just know that you didn't seem to eat much at Carmine's either. Are you sure you are feeling okay? I can go get the thermometer."

"Mom, I'm not 12. I'm fine."

“Yes I know Lilia. You are a big eighteen year old now.” The remorse in the undertone of her voice seems apologetic, to whom Lily is not certain. It sounds like the slight distress she expresses at the end of her favorite movies when she wants to watch it again from the beginning. “Well if you need anything, I’m always here. You know that. Happy Birthday Lily.”

Lily can’t tell her. She can’t let her in on the secrets she is discovering; her mother, that woman seems so foreign now. Lily doesn’t know where the line between truth and deceit exists anymore. More than anything, she wants to know who the woman in these letters is; something about the familiarity in the voice and personality behind these pages feels right. *I’m sure you have a lot of questions. I would love to hear from you if you’d like to contact me through email, phone, or in person.*

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The plane ride to Iowa feels long due to Lily’s bubbling anticipation. There is something bizarre but fitting about the trip she is about to experience. Lily keeps reminding herself to take deep breaths to hold herself together, because she has this weird sensation like her entire being is completely falling to pieces. Trying to contain all these emotions—fear, enthusiasm, bewilderment, apprehension—she watches the overlapping green hills peaking between the clouds underneath the plane. Lily reassures herself that everything will be perfect, because she will feel like she fits in for once, that she would resemble the people around her, instead of feeling like the only girl in the room without black hair or big boobs. Lily had emailed her birthmother with the desire to merely find some answers from all the information the letters exposed. Every ten minutes she had been refreshing the internet page until her response appeared in her inbox suggesting that they meet up some time.

Lily is driven by a strong determination to find clarity and answers now, so she bought a ticket with the rest of her birthday money and mislead her birthmother by claiming that her parents wouldn't mind sending her to Iowa at all. She figured they'd lied long enough that this wouldn't change anything. Her parents (adoptive parents is apparently the correct phrase) are convinced that Lily is just going up to Phoenix for the weekend to visit her friend Allison from high school. She didn't want them to try to explain or come up with anymore lies than they have already. Also, this was her chance for a self-discovery, an exploration all on her own; this was her chance to find out who she is. There was always this part of her that felt incomplete, a part that existed but she couldn't completely comprehend; she is sure this will all become clear when she meets her my birth mom and her family, or what would've been her family. Everyone else seemed to have a say in how her life began, to make choices for how her life was the last 18 years; now it is time for her to make her own fate.

The lull of the airplane engine sings through the thoughts in Lily's head as she adds to a list of questions in the blue notebook she's been attached to for the last week. The wheels glide to the runway and hit gravity with full force so that her pen makes a jagged line across the page. She hesitates as she makes that first step off the plane, she looks forward at the hallway to the airport doors that seems to go on forever. A sigh of relief pushes her forward into a world that she feels is all her own.

There is a gentleman walking beside her as they approach the gate; he stops and looks at Lily as if to say "Go ahead". She looks confused because he'd been rudely trailing too close behind her the entire hallway. He seems to read her puzzled look, so he motions to his other side where Michelle Woods stands with Abby, Lily's half-birth-sister (she guesses that would be the correct terminology). The light brown waves of their hair matched Lily's, and their similar

smiles met for the first time. Lily nods in acknowledgement to the man who noticed their similarities without question. She walks in front of him, accepting that things are sure going to be different this weekend.

Lily feels entirely out of sorts, her mind is in a different universe and nothing, but at the same time everything, feels normal. Life is anything but sequence at this moment. The three wavy brunette heads stand silently staring at the circulating suitcases. There is a repentant sort of look across Michelle's face as Abby, through her giggles, quietly inquires about Lily's life. Lily listens, reminiscing on that once adolescent innocence and absolute excitement for life that she exuberated in a coeval time.

The same four luggage bags were orbiting for the last five minutes. Michelle comments, "Are none of these suitcases yours?" Lily had been too mesmerized by the revolving. She confusedly claims that they didn't look like her bag, however after the forth trajectory they all decide to check the tags to make sure. The green suitcase was Lily's; she had completely forgotten that she took her mother's suitcase, not her usual blue one. Feeling exclusively brainless, Abby's quiet chuckles fill the airport as she declares that her mom is just as forgetful most of the time. A relief overflows Lily's composure, conquering all previous hesitation.

Iowa has a sort of beauty in its simple serenity. There is something about being surrounded by merely a green earth and the blue sky; Lily supposes this is how the world looked before we colonized all its natural grounds. Soft green grass infinitely smoothes over the hills only broken up by the miles of corn. This scenery establishes a sense of harmony and tranquility that calms the long ride back to Michelle's house.

Michelle inquires into Lily's passions, "So what do you like in school Lilia?"

Lily begins her usual long-winded discussions of the books she loves to read and the studies she enjoys, “I love to study controversial subjects, I love to do polls and interviews and talk to so many different kinds of people and find out where their opinions originated. I love the different perspectives I come across, it’s amazing to me how much more there always is to a story than just simple right or wrong, black or white. I think I may want to get my degree in journalism.” Lily suddenly realizes that she has gone on a little rant and quickly turns to look for Michelle’s reaction, her approval to the ideas that she has spent her life studying. She wants Michelle or Abby to say that journalism is a dream of hers too. Instead, the enthusiastic, excited smile on Michelle’s face disappears.

“Well Lilia, I’m glad you like your studies, but there is a right and a wrong. God’s word is always right.” Lily is perplexed at the surety of her declaration. She thinks about her uncles in the living room, debating the inexplicable, the argumentations that never have clear answers, and here was the one woman she thought would make sense of her life and she is disclaiming what Lily has always been so zealous about. The rest of the car ride is occupied by an awkward silence, a longing for a connection that can’t find a meeting ground. After Lily asks Abby about her studies, she only feels more displaced as she finds out that Michelle home-schools her and they mainly read stories from the Bible. Lily came here to find answers but is left in this car feeling still in a foreign country.

The driveway to the house is a long winding road. As Lily walks in through the doors she smells oranges and roses, her favorites. The moment she steps through the frame of the door with her long brunette waves and young figure, Michelle’s husband (Max) turns in shock, unable to speak for a moment. “Hello....Sorry I’ve just...You look exactly like my wife when I first met her.” His smile reassures Lily that she may find some sort of comfort in this weekend, a sense of

fitting in for once. Abby goes to help Michelle create a family dinner as Lily unpacks. Max works on the computer. Michele explained to Lily in one of their exchanged emails that she met Max at a church a couple years after she relinquished Lily to adoption. Lily gathered that Michelle went through some sort of depression after the relinquishment and tried everything to fill the gaps in her own spirit, and Lily assumes that is why she is so religiously bound now.

Dinner is served in small portions of a salad, organic coleslaw, and chicken that was all from the backyard of Michelle's neighbor's home. A small notebook is passed around the table as each individual writes their grateful thoughts for the day. Max launches the conversations and begins to discuss Iraq as a holy war. Excited energy splurges through Lily she question his definition of holy war—the type of conversation she'd have with Uncle Tony. She argues that the two words act as an oxymoron in her personal opinion.

Abby stares at Lily, shocked not only at her actual response but at her disagreement with her father. She whispers from across the table, "Daddy is talking, we must listen to his words and become educated." Again, this creates an uneasy resistance and silence throughout the room. In this moment Lily decides that her entire life is always going to feel like a foreign world, like she was born into the wrong world and raised in an even more incongruous one. She decides that she must sit back for the rest of her trip, and observe this alternate universe of an environment before throwing herself into its orbit.

Everyone had gets ready for bed and is fast asleep by 9:00pm. Lily lies in the guest room, watching the revolving of a quiet ceiling fan, and can't remember the last time she was even lying in bed that early. The silence throughout the house feels too unusual to fall asleep to. Lily searches for answers to her biology to explain all the moments she felt that she didn't fit in with her Italian family. She is searching to fill those moments by fitting in here. Nonetheless, she

slumps down onto the bed and gazes around the room, this room that somehow signifies everything she didn't have and highlighted all that she missed back at home. Suddenly, Lily feels like mere bits and pieces that just don't fit together, like a 300 piece puzzle with parts missing and pieces too broken to fit into the places that matched the picture. Her heart seals with distress and she falls asleep to tears and frustration.

The blinds barely block the sunlight as it reflects off the walls too early in the morning. Still feeling slightly foggy, unidentified, and out of place, Lily's eyes hesitate to wake back into reality. Again, she looks around this guest room in Michelle's house. There is a perfectly folded towel on top of a dresser bellow two nicely creased washcloths. She notices that her suitcase was moved from its haphazard position in the middle of the room, now neatly placed against the wall next to the headboard. There is colorful piece of computer paper lying on the suitcase. Lily adjusts her eyes to the light and reads the bubble letters spelling "Happy Belated Birthday.— better late than never!" The sound of little voices and clanging pots in the kitchen echoes up the staircase and brings a reminiscent smile to Lily's follows the smell of eggs and oranges. There are balloons hung all over the house, a magnanimous bouquet of pink and yellow roses, and more pictures drawn on construction paper with happy birthday wishes covering the homemade cards.

Michelle smiles at Lily's morning groggy surprised look. "Good morning. We thought that we would celebrate your birthday, better late than never right?" Abby bringst over a mug of coffee, giggling that it smells so weird but she had remembered one of their car conversations yesterday when Lily said that she wouldn't talk until she took a sip. Abby is too young to understand the awkward smiles and curious hesitation between Lily and Michelle, but nonetheless, she grew up knowing more of the truth than Lily did. Abby understands that her

mother had Lily before she met her father, and that Lily is her half-sister, and she doesn't question anything about it but looks up at her older sister and asks where she got her earrings. That morning, Lily finally felt like she fit here in more than ever: no make-up, no heels, the same waves flattened from sleep, quietly sipping the mug.

The four members of this skewed family sit down for breakfast. Max says the pre-eating prayers and they smile and eat to the sound of his voice reading the passage of the day from the bible. Michelle's voice doesn't sound until she helps clear the table, she'd be taking in every second with a longing anticipation. Michelle and Lily scrub the cookware and plates next to one another, all four hands swishing in and out of the stream of water. Lily dries and Michelle puts them away in their appropriate cupboards. There is something so habitual about this moment; Lily doesn't feel like such a guest in her house, just a part of it.

Michelle had planned on going out to lunch with Lily today, just the two of them. Lily responds to her plans, "I'd really enjoy that."

Throughout the afternoon, Abby works in her home-school workbooks. Lily watches her teach herself math problems with so much frustration; so while Michelle gets more done around the house, Lily asks if she can go help her with the problems until they leave for lunch. Michelle seems hesitant but then really enjoys the scene of her two girls sitting at the table together. Lily had never known anyone who was homeschooled, they were always the weird kids that didn't talk to anyone else in the neighborhood. But Abby has the same outgoing and energetic spirit that Lily had at her age. Michelle had explained to Lily that she figured this way she could be more a part of Abby's everyday life. So Lily submits to all previous prospects and participates as well in the workbooks and math problems, still purposely avoiding the reading assignments knowing that she wouldn't provide the answers that Michelle would want.

At lunch Michelle and Lily keep things light. Lily finds similitude in Michelle's every step, expression, and voice tonality. The two talk about family—what would be more fitting. Michelle talks about her mother who passed away a couple years ago, her grandpa whom she relates to more than anyone, her passions in high school, how once she got pregnant she had decided to be a CNA instead of psychology until she met Max and settled into the church and home life. Michelle doesn't ask Lily about her family, she supposes it's because it would amplify the disconnect between their worlds. There's a question that has been pushing at the tip of Lily's tongue for a week; she wants to know most of all about her birth father, who he was. However, Michelle's glowing smile as she caught Lily up on the family life flutters away at the sound of father.

"I'm so sorry Lilia." Her eyes glaze over with more emotion than Lily had seen in the last 24 hours. "I am so sorry I let you go, you were perfect but I just couldn't...I know now that you were a blessing from God, and relinquishing you was the biggest mistake of my life, giving a gift from God away."

"I didn't ask about God, I asked about my birth father." The retort springs out of Lily with frustration at this cloak of religion this woman seems to be hiding behind now. "I just want to know what happened."

"I know what you asked Lilia, but God is the reason you are here, your birthfather was not a part of our lives."

"He is as much a part of my life as you are." Lily knows right after her response that she struck a terrible cord with Michelle; she knows that this isn't entirely true because this woman had written and sent the letters, because this woman is actually trying to adopt Lily back into her own life. But Lily came for answers.

“I didn’t grow up with a dad around, and I knew you needed one. I wanted you to have a father, a good father. Your birthdad was not going to be there for us. I know its my fault for being with him at all, he wasn’t a good guy but I was just so young. And I wanted you to have a perfect life, something I just couldn’t give then.” She was shaking by then, overcome with regret and sorrow. “His name was James.” Lily wants to keep probing with questions, but Michelle’s eyes glaze over more than before, too depressing to provoke. “Please forgive me, I made a terrible mistake.”

“Wow, I’m sorry I was such a mista..”

“No!” Michelle quickly interrupts with more vigor, enthusiasm, and passion than Lily had seen in her as she realizes her own mistake. Lily appreciates the fervor and smiles inside a little as she recognizes some vitality deep within her birthmother. But she pulls away from that energy quickly. “I didn’t say you were a mistake. You were perfect. You are a beautiful girl. You weren’t the mistake, I made the mistake of choosing the wrong man to get pregnant by.”

Lily doesn’t see the distinction between one mistake and the other as clearly as Michelle does, but Lily lets her continue looking for answers and explanations. “You would have been with a babysitter for 15 hours a day for me to make it work alone and I just couldn’t do that to you. I went back and forth so many times throughout the adoption process. I didn’t know what was right and wrong then. I just wanted you to have everything I didn’t.”

Suddenly Lily recollecting the thirty voices of her family gathering together at the restaurant passing around birthday cards and the tiramisu bigger than her head, her dad and the banana breakfast. Lily wants to tell Michelle that she turned out okay, but she has been waiting too long for this speech to come out, it spirals through 18 years worth of contained thoughts, regrets, apologies, and pleas. “I know what is right now, I found God. I know a baby is the

greatest blessing one can imagine...but I gave that up when I relinquished you. And I am so sorry Lilia. I hope someday you can forgive me, I ask for your forgiveness for not knowing what I know now, then.” The two wavy brunette heads sit staring at each other’s other physical features that resemble a sort of time machine mirror, but both still feel so lost and so alone there looking into the reflection.

“Michelle, I’m fine. I have a great dad. I really love my parents. My family is great, I love them all. Really. I love my life.” This answer seems to cut through Michelle like a knife, but Lily can’t condone her plea for making a mistake, because to her this would mean she is one. “You don’t need my forgiveness. You chose a great couple, great parents to raise me, I wouldn’t have asked for anything more.” Lily is surprised at her declaration and begins missing the loud vigor in her parent’s enthusiasm. Michelle forces a smile through her distraught tears that have been waiting eighteen years. “I’m okay. My family is about as Italian as you can get.” Lily laughs and attempts to calm her regret with her sure happiness. “I guess you could say I am Italian environmentally, that’s just who I am.”

Michelle smiles, wanting to be happy but allowing too many years of a suppression of guilt to fill her thoughts. “Well, good Lilia. That’s all I ever wanted for you.”

They finish the rest of lunch with talk of high school life, Lily’s friend Alicia and Michelle’s sister Katie, the first time Michelle took a sip of alcohol, the wine Lily has grown up on, Michelle’s favorite choir days, Lily’s dance and acting classes. Michelle lights up at Lily’s desire for the stage. She tells Lily that when she interviewed her parents one of the things she requested was that if the little girl had any desire to perform that they would support her because it had always been a dream of her own. “Music is very close to my heart, I’m glad that became a part of your life.” Both their demeanors have relaxed now, and they comfortably compare lives.

That night Lily calls her mom back at home. The pure thrill in her “it’s so good to hear from you” was undeniable. Lily asks if she can take her and dad out to dinner when she gets back from what she supposes her parents still think is Pheonix. “Well of course Lilia. Just the three of us? Is everything okay? Are you okay?”

“Yes mom. Just wanted to thank you for all you’ve done.”

“Oh! Well my goodness, that is awfully adult-ish and 18 years old of you.” The grateful joy coming through the phone is echoing with enthusiasm as Uncle Tony, Aunt Carrie, Cousin Joe, Cousin Dave, and Grandma’s voices shout in the background. Enjoying the familiar sound of chaos, Lily takes a deep breath and feels at home. She thinks about these two families who contributed to her life, biologically and environmentally, and she realizes that she merely has become a product of them both in different ways. She lays back on the bed in Michelle’s guest room, and can’t wait to go home.

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