

**It's Complicated:**  
**Grief Portrayal in Memoir**

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## Abstract

A great portion of the corpus of memoir examining grief and death present with similar literary problematics: circumventing the moment of death or pivotal scene(s) of death, avoiding complicated and difficult relationships between the grieved and the bereaved, and examining these traumas in relation to the misinterpreted Kübler-Ross five stages of grief and dying. These generalizations preclude deeper insight into the author's experience within a societal context.

This project highlights how the contemporary Western memoir is a powerful artform for examining the nuances of grief and death, especially if the writer utilises storytelling methods that counteract the aforementioned problematics. This project also explores methodology for such narratives to reject emblematic depictions of grief, such as structure, content, epistolary additions, and verb tense. As such, this project also examines the memoirist's decisions related to which memories to include or exclude as this pertains to their definition of creative non-fiction, personal truth, and fact.

Keywords: memoir, grief, dying, letters, trauma, structure, Kübler-Ross Method, stages

### **Author Declaration**

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original, except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University.

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## Definitions

*Autoethnography*- ‘An approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography’ (Ellis, Adams, Bochner, 2011, p. 1).

*Autobiography*- ‘Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality’ (Lejeune, 1989, p.3).

*Memoir*- ‘An autobiography or written account of one’s memory of certain events or people’ (Barber, 2004). Further, ‘memoir deals in memory; the writer must make choices about which memories to include and how to portray them’ (Bacon, 2017, pp. 386).

*Bereaved*- ‘Saddened by the death of a loved one’ as it pertains to the verb bereave, defined as ‘to be deprived of a relation, friend, etc., esp. by death’ (Barber, 2004).

*Grief*- ‘Deep or intense sorrow or mourning’ from the verb, to grieve, which means to ‘suffer grief, esp. at another’s death’ (Barber, 2004).

## Introduction

The written word allows for the sharing of common and unique human experiences that endure beyond the oratory tradition, expressed through the author's lens and later, interpreted by a reader. These topics are natural thematic fixtures in both contemporary and historical written works, and more recently, in the surging popularity of memoir (Karr, 2015, p. xiv).

Memoir, a sub-genre of non-fiction, is often conflated with autobiography, despite differences between them. While both autobiography and memoir are alike in that in both instances the author writes about their personal experiences, memoir requires the author to present lived moments within a thematic framework, thereby not including memories unrelated to those themes (Lejeune, 1989, p.3). This definition is supported by Bacon, who writes that 'memoir deals in memory; the writer must make choices about which memories to include and how to portray them' (Bacon, 2017, pp. 386). Similarly, the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* specifies memoir as 'an autobiography or a written account of one's memory of certain events or people' (Barber, 2004). Therefore, while autobiography would detail a summary of life experiences and events that span all manner of themes and plot lines, a memoir collects experiences around specific themes and derives meaning from those events.

Dani Shapiro's most recent memoir, *Inheritance*, serves as an example of the differentiation between memoir and autobiography (Shapiro, 2019). *Inheritance* recounts Shapiro's discovery that her father is not her biological parent. Shapiro is the author of five other memoirs, and while they all contain content overlap for context, each collects memories thematically rather than chronologically and in full (as with autobiography). *Inheritance*, for example, focuses solely on themes of family, identity, and belonging. Alternatively, my first memoir, *Girls Need Not Apply: Field Notes from the Forces* (Thompson, 2019) was published at age 34 but examines a life between ages 18-28, addressing themes of sexual harassment and gender inequity, mental health, and family legacy. Thus, Shapiro's life events outside of those aforementioned themes were not included in *Inheritance*.

While technical definitions of memoir exist, each author creates their own definition of memoir by nature of methodology and employment of craft, such as the inclusion and deletion of memories, and the author's decisions as they relate to the line between fiction and non-fiction

(Thomson, 2015). No matter each one's personal definition, a constant in all memoir is a personal story brought into public discourse.

Through analysis of many available memoirs that explored similar themes to the creative portion of this project, three authorial trends emerged in relation to memoirs depicting bereavement: 1. Avoidance of conflict, namely, the moment of death; 2. A focus on positive, affectionate relationships between martyred protagonists, allowing the bereaved's grief to be predictable and expected, and; 3. Rarely straying from or refraining from mention of the debunked convention of the Kübler-Ross five stages of grief and death.

Yet real-life relationships are rarely without conflict, and death and grief rarely follow tidy routes of mourning. These literary tendencies lead to underdeveloped characters and stories that limit deeper, unique understanding of the experiences of death and bereavement.

This project seeks to fill this gap in literature by exploring grief's portrayal in memoir texts by examining how, despite memoir's potential for factual inaccuracy, in employing a variety of literary tools, this sub-genre can challenge myths pertaining to death and grief and contribute new understanding of grief models by pushing against literary trends in related themes. As product of this research, the creative element of this project, titled *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021), will serve as the practice-based methodology, written specifically to embrace conflict with the moment of death relayed in scene, portrayal of a relationship between the dead and the bereaved that is complicated and layered, thereby eliminating the martyrdom of the dead, and a structure that dismantles social and misperceived scientific expectations of death and grief, namely, the Kübler-Ross five stages.

### Literature and Epistemological Gaps

Literature review for the purpose of this study was broad in range, genre, and subject matter, and is to be discussed more extensively in the formal literature review section. Works examining similar themes of grief, abuse, addiction, family, and illness were vital to the research and spanned a wide range of genres.

While thematics served as one criterion for selection of research material, memoirs related to any subject or experience were researched in relation to structure, voice, and other literary devices employed to share personal stories. Although the focus centred on memoirs that detailed accounts of death and bereavement, there was also a spotlight on stories of mental health

struggles, domestic abuse, illness, and other traumas that are included in *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021). This choice allowed the annexing of memoir that centred on celebrity, professional or business advice, and others that would be considered pop culture rather than literary explorations.

Beyond plot and content, books were also selected with a mind to diversity, varying in authorial background, religion, sexuality, and ethnicity, allowing for an inclusive understanding of a collective experience. Many of the selected texts were rooted in North American literature, although this was due to publishing rights limitations within Canadian borders and physical access to texts. Research was planned within university libraries, however, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted access to such lending facilities in the wake of national health protocols and protections.

What emerged during research was difficulty in sourcing work that allowed the reader to sit with the precise moment of death—a choice meant perhaps to spare the author reliving these complex emotions or to spare the reader having to witness this conflict. Regardless of the author’s reasoning behind the decision, avoiding this pivotal scene resulted in the reader and author being distanced from the climax or inciting incident in the text. Another trend in these texts was that some characters, especially the grieved, were often martyred. There was also a tendency for these accounts of bereavement to adhere to, mention, or discuss the Kübler-Ross Stage Method, a theory long since debunked scientifically and anecdotally (McVean, 2019). Essentially, a majority of literary depictions of bereavement and death were tidy narratives without the complications inherent in these lived experiences.

The literature review culminated in the inclusion of epistolary collections, or epistolary memoirs. Within letters, authors presented a natural tone, dialogue, and style, alongside personal accounts of experiences untainted by the expectation of a global audience. Researching these collections enhanced understanding of character and the choices made by an author to portray character through consciousness, dialogue, and agency. Letters also generated a sense of personal connection between author and reader, regardless of the intended recipient of said correspondence. Furthermore, letters created a line of dialogue between the bereaved and the grieved, even after death, and thus, held creative potential for storytelling within *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021).



Further, this project was supported by articles about the practice and methodology of narrative therapy, texts exploring the craft of writing, as well as studies pertaining to domestic abuse, cancer, and grief. Also examined were texts that explored the Kübler-Ross stages of grief, including works written by Kübler-Ross, and other academic research that related to differing grief and death models.

### Research Questions and Methodology

Research for this project was multifaceted in approach. The first step was to conduct a thorough literary review to gain a sense of authorial approaches in discussions of grief, bereavement, addiction, and abuse—all themes within *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021). Texts were analysed for narrative approach in relation to structure, character, scene setting, point of view, and narrative distance. The creative approach taken in *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021) is further detailed later in this project but was carefully considered in relation to point of view, tense, structure, and with the inclusion of letters between the main character and her sister to allow the reader personal insight into their relationship.

This project will answer several questions in the study of creative writing memoir.

1. Can and should a memoirist mitigate their cognitive dissonance in relation to accuracy in memoir, considering trauma's effect on memory, or does memoir allow for ambiguity?
2. How can memoirs that examine grief/death contribute to the global understanding of grief while portraying realistic, flawed characters experiencing conflict in scene?
3. In what ways can memoirists approach narrative storytelling to dispel the myth of a collective or prescriptive grief/trauma model, including the Kubler-Ross Stages Theory?

### Findings

This project highlights how the act of writing memoir helps authors to better analyse grief by way of shaping story in relation to inclusion and exclusion and specific memories, which is

partly guided by the writer's personal definition of memoir as it pertains to factual accuracy. Furthermore, memoirists can contribute to the study of grief and death by embracing conflict portrayal and problematic relationships with the dying. Through methodology as well as literary research, it became clear that literary devices such as characterization, structural organization, and epistolary content could showcase deviation from standard prescribed grief and dying models and more accurately reflect the complicated nature of these experiences.

## Literature Review

### Academic Works

As the literary review of available memoirs on grief and dying in a primarily North American experience revealed a common trend towards the Kübler-Ross five stages theory, thorough understanding of the titular books written by Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (Kübler-Ross, 1969) and on *Grief and Grieving* (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2014) was vital to the study of grief portrayals in memoir. Furthermore, an academic analysis of the stages proved vital in showcasing the flaws within this grief model and other potential models that provide an expected framework for the bereaved.

More recent research in the field of death and grief included texts such as *Anxiety: The Missing Stage of Grief* (Bidwell Smith, 2018), in which the author, a grief counsellor who has experienced bereavement, suggests alternative paths through grief that deviate from the Kübler-Ross model. In her book, the author notes that despite the theory being challenged many times since it emerged in the sixties after Kübler-Ross wrote *On Death and Dying* (1969), a majority of her patients come to her office expecting their route through grief to fit into the five stages, then feel concern when they do not, which adds a new psychological layer to their grief (Bidwell Smith, 2018, pp.48). ‘I cannot overlook our culture’s insistence upon holding on to the Kübler-Ross model, and that’s why I have chosen to talk about anxiety as a “missing” stage...So in addressing this “missing stage,” I feel that I am amending the mold rather than breaking it’ (Bidwell Smith, 2018, pp.47). The remainder of the book presents anxiety as a potential grief stage, not because the author believes anxiety to in fact be a stage, but because of the pervasiveness of the Kübler-Ross model in grief and dying knowledge bases, and the necessity to work within that framework in counselling her patients from a point of reference they understand.

Another text that presented an alternative method of bereavement is *Grief Works: Stories of Life, Death and Surviving*, as presented by grief psychotherapist Julia Samuel (Samuel, 2018). The collection is presented in sections according to the type of loss (parent, sibling, friend, etc.) with a series of patient case studies. The author then provides reflection and analysis at the end of each section, drawn from her experience working with the bereaved in her twenty-five years

of practice. Upon researching the variety of experiences presented by the author's patients, the only trend that emerges from the shared grief experience is the lack of linear progression through stages as described in Kübler-Ross's work and alternative emotions not discussed in *On Grief and Grieving* (Kübler-Ross, 2014). One such emotion was jealousy; as she notes, 'A common difficulty that can emerge in families in which one sibling is dying and the other is healthy is the unspoken jealousy and envy the dying sibling directs at their family members who are well and have a future' (Samuel, 2018). The author also counts grief as a form of shame, as in her patient Mussie, who battles feelings of self-hatred and shame surrounding his brother's death (Samuel, 2018). These texts summarize changes in the way we process and manage grief by presenting alternatives.

In relation to this project's analysis of methodology, despite having a personal experience with bereavement as well as experience in the art of memoir, an understanding of a broad range of creative writing texts and their role within the study of grief was vital so as to contribute unique knowledge to this field. Furthermore, understanding the creative work as methodology was vital to increasing research scope to include creative writing practice as an academic act. The scholarly study of creative writing presents unique challenges of separating product from research, and pedagogy from theory. The anthology of essays in *Writing Creative Writing* (Rishma, Tysdal, Uppal, 2018) offers insight into the separation of these areas of study and their role within academic practice and how that scholarly examination of subject matter differs from the more creative elements of writing, as pointed out in the essay by creative writing professor Stephanie Bolster. 'Unlike academics, who achieve recognition because of what they know, how they articulate what they know, what they do with what they know, and how much funding they can secure, a writer gets to where she is for blurrier reasons. So much of what writers, particularly poets, do comes down to us: to our perspective, our vocabulary, our imaginations, our idiosyncrasies, and often our experience' (Rishma, Tysdal, Uppal, 2018, p. 232). Canada offers only two PhD programs in creative writing, with little history of academic research of this area of practice (Rishma, Tysdal, Uppal, 2018, p. 230). This equates to scant academic study that has been performed within my home country, offering little content upon which to draw from a Canadian perspective, despite many of the researched memoir texts having been written by Canadian authors.

What became clear in the literature review was that the art of memoir, as an academic practice-led form of research, is a form of autoethnography, and that ‘as method, autoethnography is both process and product’ (Ellis, Adams, Bochner, 2011, p.1). To better understand the experience of bereavement, an ethnographic area of study, the practice of memoir became a means by which—a practice—to understand comprehension and analysis of that experience, a concept supported by researcher and creative writer, Gaylene Perry’s chapter in *Practice as Research* (Bolt, Barrett, 2007). ‘As I wrote, I learned my own lessons’ (Bolt, Barrett, 2007, p.39). While creative work as methodology for research is an established practice, Canada (and North America in general) has scant PhD creative writing programmes (Bolt, Barrett, 2007). Bolt and Barret point out that in academic settings, studio-based research has been regarded as less trustworthy. The introduction reads, ‘Since creative arts research is often motivated by emotional, personal and subjective concerns, it operates not only on the basis of explicit and exact knowledge, but also in that of tacit knowledge’ (Bolt, Barrett, 2007, p.4). Some writers note disliking academic analysis of a creative act, and yet considerable knowledge within the field of creative writing has been garnered through such research. ‘The innovative and critical potential of practice-based research lies in its capacity to generate personally situated knowledge and new ways of modelling and externalising such knowledge while at the same time, revealing philosophical, social and cultural contexts for critical intervention and application of knowledge outcomes’ (Bolt, Barrett, 2007, p.2).

Overall, these academic texts provided a framework within which to analyse creative writing practice as a method of study.

### Memoir

A wide range of contemporary memoir was researched for this project, showcasing the breadth and range of the genre. A large proportion of the texts were North American and European in origin, and centred on themes of grief, dying, and addiction. Fiction and poetry treatments that shared themes of this project were also researched to showcase the elements of literary craft that can be applied across genres (characterization, imagery, dialogue, etc.), although had less relevance to this project. In memoir, there was a particularly large pool from which to select in thematic analysis of grief and death.

In exploring less traditional structure and form, two graphic memoirs were examined, *Last Things* (Moss, 2017) and *Fun Home* (Bechdel, 2007), both of which tackled themes of death, family, caregiving, and abuse. These memoirs employed visual images to serve in storytelling conjunction with dialogue bubbles and narrative texts. As such, these books did not rely as heavily on literary imagery and description that was otherwise represented with drawings. Both books effectively showcased a resistance to exposition, as well as which elements of a work could be described and what elements were better served in narration and dialogue. These lessons applied effectively to *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021).

Memoir was also studied for its use of tone and imagery and potential application to *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021). In memoir, tone and dialogue are vital for the reader to gain insight into the lens through which the author experiences their life. Characterization is also created through tone, and explicitly, dialogue. In his addiction memoir, *A Crowbar in the Buddhist Garden* (Reid, 2012), the author uses addict slang and casual language to convey the nature of addiction. ‘My hands are broken, my ribs are broken, and I’m dope sick beyond belief, but I know the real pain is in the mail, deeper than broken bones. It’s about broken promises, broken hearts, and broken lives’ (Reid, 2012, p. 27). Use of terms like ‘dope sick’ make evident that Reid is familiar with the language of addicts and the world he is recreating for the reader, and his phrase ‘the real pain is in the mail,’ is poetic yet accessible to his audience, nodding to his particular generational phrasing. Terminology known only to addicts, combined with concrete imagery adds to the realistic tone of the book, and thus, credibility to the author.

Dialogue was another important research factor in the corpus of examined memoirs. Yet in memoir, the decision to include dialogue is bound in the analysis of truth versus fact, and what can and cannot be remembered, to be discussed in a later section. However, some factual purists argue that entire discussions cannot be recalled without the aid of recording, so the author may ‘make up’ dialogue to summarize a conversation. Memoirists also must—as any author writing a fictional or real character—ensure dialogue matches the tone and voice already established in the characters’ mannerisms, backgrounds, cultures, and life experiences. Literary choices are made by the author but also determined by what is in service to the story. As such, dialogue is a powerful literary tool with great benefit to memoir, especially one portraying thematic analysis of grief and death in which a personal connection to the material is vital to build authority on the subject.

In *Dead Mom Walking* (Matlow, 2020), the nature of the author's relationship to their mother is especially vibrant when displayed in dialogue. Without seeing the effect of their humorous relationship in scene, more exposition would be required.

'You're not going to live anyway if I die. There's nothing in this for you. You've gone rogue.'

Mom was talking to her cancer cells. Out loud....

'Cancer cells are holding toxicity that would otherwise go into your bloodstream and cause a stroke or heart attack. Cells only become cancerous because they don't know what else to do.'

'So you don't see it as a battle?' I asked.

'No, I don't. The language of war is *so* patriarchal. I'm not fighting anything. I talk to my cancer cells with *respect*.' (Matlow, 2020, p.100).

The dialogue is powerful in terms of language and characterization, showing the reader each character's dynamic, agency, and political orientation. Through dialogue, the reader is shown the diverging opinions of each character, and the interaction in scene between them conveys both love, humour, and personality. Matlow's mother refers to words such as 'patriarchal' and 'toxicity,' which the reader can connect to a feminist, self-empowerment life approach without exposition. Meanwhile, Matlow's humour is insightful insofar as their method for coping with pain, fear, and impending loss—which the author later admits is a form of deflection (Matlow, 2020). We learn a great deal about Matlow's personality through their witty and humorous dialogue and see that deflection of conflict relayed to the reader in scene.

In contrast, memoirs that did not or barely included dialogue, such as *H is for Hawk* (Macdonald, 2013) and in limited usage, *Nobody Talks About Anything but the End* (Levine, 2020) provided an alternative approach. Both were award-winning books that examined the impact of bereavement. Still, their messages were powerful, although the only character truly developed in these texts is that of the protagonist, which in both cases, may have focused the text precisely where the author intended. However, Macdonald's work, using falconry and a falconry text by T.H. White to overlay with the metaphoric experience of controlling the uncontrollable (loss), the author achieves her intended message. Similarly, Levine writes a stunning analysis of grief but employs a creative alphabetic structure to stand in place of other literary devices, such as dialogue.

Two of the most impactful memoir texts researched were *Dead Mom Walking* (Matlow, 2020) and *All Things Consolled* by Elizabeth Hay (2018). Both texts achieved a similar goal as aimed in this project: to present grief and dying in an honest, analytical, and creative manner that does not avoid difficult scenes and relationships. Matlow gives an account of their experience with their mother's approach to cancer diagnosis (treating it ineffectively with natural methods) and the anger, frustration, and other emotions involved in this journey. Hay writes of the death of both of her parents, keenly examining her relationship with her abusive father.

‘Why are you so *belligerent*?’ my mother would ask me.

The lesson she taught, I believed at the time, was peace at any cost. When my father lost his temper, he didn't really mean it. When he rode me, he was only having fun. And when I defended myself, I was belligerent.

So we argued, my mother and I, about memories, and the moment never seemed right to ask my question. She was too busy defending him. ‘He was just ribbing you, why can't you laugh?’ she said for years. *Just ribbing you*. As if he had some right to. Women created as we were.

My anger when I was growing up was nasty, uncooperative, curdled, whereas his, though explosive, was not a state of mind. He glugged himself on bad temper and felt better, while his children were left like a flattened field of hay. (Hay, 2018, pp.66).

Despite his abuse, Hay goes on to care for both her father throughout the remainder of the memoir, as well as her mother, who permitted this abuse, and, as Hay describes, did nothing to stop it.

In research conducted for this project, very few memoirs detailed relationships that were complicated and nuanced. Both Matlow and Hay write specifically about the challenges of their relationships with the dying, and also, both books detail, in scene, the moment in which their loved one died, as did Ann Patchett in *Truth and Beauty* (2004). For these reasons, these texts proved most valuable on a personal level in deepening understanding of the pain of bereavement, while also highlighting the realities of what it means to die.

Overall, analysis of several memoirists' approach to tone and dialogue highlighted the necessity for dialogue in *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021) as a form of characterization, and the necessity to convey meaning through relationships that are less often examined in text.



## Epistolary Collections

While epistolary collections were not an intended element of research for this project, letters as object and process provided creative and academic insight into the study of grief and death. Referencing this style of text stemmed from a therapeutic suggestion to undertake the epistolary format in response to my personal bereavement in the death of my sister. While some researched memoirs were presented in an epistolary format, collections of correspondence presented unique qualities without traditional narrative storytelling. Their impact, however, on the text led to the concept that letters could augment memoir in thematic storytelling.

These collections also held unique research value as it applies to the analysis of accounts of dying and illness, as it is common practice to write letters to the person who died for therapeutic effect, or letters of condolence to the bereaved. Even in the earlier stages of study in palliative care and bereavement counselling, Kübler-Ross was a proponent of writing letters addressed to the dead. In *On Grief and Grieving*, she wrote, ‘For many, writing letters to their loved one is a convenient, always available way to get the words out and communicate’ (Kübler-Ross, Kessler, 2014, p.58). Letters, then, allow the writer to maintain a conversation and communication with their loved one, even in death.

Letters—condolences letters, in particular—was long considered its own genre; *consolatio*, after Cicero famously wrote *Consolatio* in 45 BC in epistolary format (which he addressed to himself) to self-console after the death of his daughter (Englert, 2017, pp.42). Englert writes, ‘The *Consolatio* was an attempt by Cicero to get greater perspective on his grief, apparently imagining a philosophically more detached Cicero attempting to console the grieving Cicero’ (Englert, 2017). *Consolatio* was broad in definition but had several characteristics. ‘As a genre, the *consolatio* is described as “writings of a philosophic bent, whose authors either try to dissuade individuals from grieving in the face of misfortune, or proffer general counsel on overcoming adversity”’ (Agrell, 2016, p.10), and could exist as letters, essays, poems, and more, but ultimately discussed mourning, grief, death, and consoled a loss.

Christianity prevailed in the Eurocentric Middle Ages, and so storytelling in the tradition of the Bible rose in popularity, ushering out the ‘embrace death’ model of stoic *consolatio*. In the mid-eighteenth century, society then turned to personal condolence letters intended to console a particular recipient instead of the more poetic, philosophical and imagery-filled literary examination of death of *consolatio*, with notable writers including Voltaire and Benjamin

Franklin (Francois-Poncet, 2020, pp.32). Meant to assuage the sadness for the bereaved, a letter of condolence is an expression of empathy and sympathy to the reader—a personal communication rather than a public discourse.

With the history of *consolatio* as genre and condolence practice, epistolary collections are firmly established in the study of grief and contribute deeply to the understanding of processing and coping with loss. Most notable is *The Dark Interval* (Rilke, 2018), a collection of condolence letters by poet and prolific correspondent, Rainer Maria Rilke. In many of the letters in the collection, Rilke’s connection to the letter’s recipient is distant, yet his beliefs on coping with loss serve as a common theme of encouragement for the bereaved to sit with their grief as a state of being and as a sign of having loved. The introduction to the collection by Ulrich Baer reads,

Time is critical when someone has lost a beloved person, and Rilke knew that an immediate response could lessen the terrible, gaping solitude that had opened up in someone’s life. A condolence letter would not fill this loss. But if Rilke responds right away, the fact that he had thrown himself into confronting the death of the beloved person head-on in his letter, rather than relying on conventional formulas of sympathy, meant a great deal to those to whom he wrote. Rilke aimed to bring the bereaved back into communication, and coax them back into the conversation that we call life, right at the moment when they felt most cut off from the world. He gave them words when those were lacking, and told them there is a way to articulate their pain even if that pain constricts their hearts and throats. (Rilke, 2018, pg xi).

Language within letters seeks creation of understanding through the articulation of grief, coinciding with connection between recipient and sender.

Applying this connection to author and reader, then, may have powerful effects within memoir. This literary tool was employed in Ann Patchett’s *Truth and Beauty* (2004), an account of her relationship with poet, Lucy Grealy. While Patchett effectively tells the story of their friendship, she includes transcribed letters of their correspondence throughout, offering the reader special insight into their shared language, stories, and ways of knowing.

### Memoir Problematics Discovered in Literature Review

When handling the subject of grief and bereavement, research revealed several problematic tendencies in texts that examined these themes.

### **Avoidance of Moment of Death**

A distinguishing feature prevalent in several memoirs depicting bereavement and death was avoidance of the penultimate moment of death. The scenes in which the loved one dies were often presented as euphemism, or skipped over to instead focus on the emotional aftermath. This conflict avoidance robs the reader of the sense of having joined the writer on a journey and having that tension broken in scene, then forming their own connection with the story, denying the reader the storyline's climax. Hodgins writes:

A plot eventually brings the reader to a moment that promises to relieve the increased tension, where conflicting forces are brought face-to-face in an ultimate contest which will cause everything to change, or at least, look different afterwards. Climax. Turning point. Point of no return. This is the moment towards which, the reader feels, everything has been leading. It is also the moment after which nothing will ever be quite the same again... Whatever tension the reader earlier felt now becomes a pressing need for things to be resolved. (Hodgins, 1993, pp.136).

Hodgins speaks of a pinnacle of tension, to which the entire story has built. In memoir, this is often the death of one of the main characters, or the peak of their grief in bereavement. He continues, 'An inevitable result of all that went before, that turning point is not simply a device to release the reader from tension, but an experience that gives the reader some insight into what all this struggle has been about—what meaning the preceding sequence of events has had for the character, and what significance it has to the writer' (Hodgins, 1993, p.137). If the reader is denied access to such a vital element of the story, connecting emotionally to the journey alongside the protagonist has less value for the reader.

In the practice of creative writing, conflict avoidance can hint at discomfort with the subject matter, and an inability to press into the darker moments, which in memoir, is a necessity of the genre. In discussing the need for the memoirist to delve deep into the good and bad of an experience, Moore writes, '...as James Baldwin reminds us, we are always writing from our own experience, but it is up to us, and indeed, our responsibility as writers—to squeeze from our experience "the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give"' (Moore, 2010, p.28).

If memoirs serve to tell a true story, how true is that story if the reader is not given access to one of the most vital scenes of that journey? Memoir is required to draw the reader into the protagonist's journey, as highlighted by Karr. 'It's usually your emotional connection to the memoir's narrator that hooks you in. And how does she do that? A good writer can conjure a landscape and its people to live inside you, and the best writers make you feel they've disclosed their soft underbellies. Seeing someone naked thrills us a little' (Karr, 2015). When the author denies the reader a pivotal moment that alters the understanding and being of the narrator, the author limits the reader's ability to join that journey of discovery.

Only two texts thoroughly placed the reader in scene in the moment of death: *All Things Consolated* (Hay, 2018) and *Dead Mom Walking* (Matlow, 2020). The personal impact of these texts, along with their award-recognition within Canada, highlights the value of memoir that does not turn away from the difficult life experiences and the climactic moment of a book that examines grief.

### **Martyrism of Uncomplicated Bereavement/Relationships**

*De mortuis nihil nisi bonum (Do not speak ill of the dead).—Chilon of Sparta*

*Do not speak ill of the dead* is a common refrain adapted from Latin and a statement attributed to Chilon, the ancient philosopher (Guarino, 2018). It was, as Guarino writes, more common to adhere to this refrain before the age of the Internet and more public portrayals of mourning, and while some users remain staunch in this social nicety, many are now using such tributes as an opportunity to examine the flaws of the deceased, which those more inclined to adhere to the traditionally mannered approach rebuke (Guarino, 2018).

And yet, even persons held in highest esteem are human, and therefore, flawed. Creative writing classrooms espouse the necessity of realistic characters, and so, to write realistic and authentic characters in non-fiction, authors are required to ensure characters are portrayed with a broad range of traits—both favourable and unfavourable. Hodgins wrote, 'If we are to care about your characters we must believe in them' (1993, p.105). The same is true, then, even if a character is dead or dying—to feel realistic to the reader, that character must have flaws and negative attributes alongside their positive traits.

Yet the social practice of only speaking kindly of the dead is a hard habit to break in a chronically polite society. Kübler-Ross noted, ‘People often change reality to fantasy after death. Some of this is cultural. We are taught never to speak ill of the dead, and we feel guilty for even remembering the mistakes they made’ (Kübler-Ross, Kessler, 2014, p. 100). This martyrism emerged as a common problematic in the corpus of memoirs read for this project and resulted in an inaccessible primary character.

In *Blue Nights* (Didion, 2005) and *Year of Magical Thinking* (Didion, 2011), Didion writes about the death of her husband and daughter within months of one another, combined with her battle to cope with those losses. While the writing is obviously full of merit, Didion avoids discussion of the cause of her daughter’s death, despite lingering on other complicated and emotional scenes, such as the decision of whether to have a tracheotomy performed on her child. Early in *Year of Magical Thinking*, we learn that Quintana Roo Dunne, Didion’s daughter, is in the hospital, and the reader is provided brief mention of medical issues relating to Quintana’s anxiety, which fed her drinking. But the reader is not provided with a diagnosis or a reason, only symptoms (Didion, 2011, p.48). However, several later works by Didion, as well as biography of Didion, highlights her unwillingness to examine her daughter’s alcoholism as a potential reasoning for her death, instead attributing it to ‘acute pancreatitis,’ which is always caused by prolonged drinking or drug use in young people (Daum, 2015). In not acknowledging her daughter’s addiction, and perhaps, Didion’s own role in that addiction, Quintana Roo is solely a tragic character without the nuance that is so vital in creating realistic characters.

Similarly, in *In A Dark Wood: What Dante Taught Me About Grief, Healing and the Mysteries of Love* (Luzzi, 2015), Luzzi repeatedly describes his deceased wife, Katherine, as an angelic and romanticized character. He writes, ‘Katherine heightened the start of each day, from the first light that fell on her though the blinds beside the bed, illuminating the dust in chiaroscuro stripes, to the rhythmic weight of her breath, as heavy on my shoulders as her resting arms’ (Luzzi, 2015, p.8) and later, ‘With Katherine, I was learning that I didn’t have to dream of a better life or try to write myself into one—I already had one with her’ (Luzzi, 2015, p.195). The sentences, and much of the book (as it is also connected to the study of Dante), are highly romantic in structure and tone, which lessens the credibility of the author’s voice due to an inability to see the darker side of his partner, which invariably exists. Luzzi does briefly complain about his wife’s spending habits and their lack of agreement on political matters

(Luzzi, 2015, p.55), but he otherwise leaves his wife's flaws unexamined, while fully detailing his own. Throughout the book, he spends many pages exploring her beauty, the whiteness and pinkness of her skin, her willingness to be a stay-at-home mom—all things he prizes as a self-admitted traditional man (Luzzi, 2015). By martyring his wife, Katherine as character is one-dimensional and without agency, serving only to give the protagonist a plot line.

The tendency to martyrise the dead is also evident in Helen Macdonald's *H is for Hawk* (Macdonald, 2013), in which the author explores grief and bereavement of her father through the focal lens of falconry. The commercial and literary success of Macdonald's book speaks to the quality of the writing, however, the author does not consider her father from an angle outside the lens of his role as her father. 'My dad had been my dad, but also my friend, and a partner in crime...' (Macdonald, 2013, p.14). In *A Grief Observed* (Lewis, 1961), the author paints his wife, H, as saintly. 'For H. wasn't like that at all. Her mind was lithe and quick and muscular as a leopard. Passion, tenderness and pain were all equally unable to disarm it. It scented the first whiff of cant or slush; then sprang and knocked you over before you knew what was happening' (Lewis, 1961, p.60). So too, does Barthes depict his dead mother. 'A stupefying, though not distressing notion—that she has not been "everything" to me. If she had, I wouldn't have written my *work*. Since I've been taking care of her, the last six months in fact, she *was* "everything" for me, and I've completely forgotten that I'd written. I was no longer anything but desperately hers. Before, she had made herself transparent so that I could write' (Barthes, 2009, p.6). Barthes does not lament any of his mother's flaws as he moves through grief, solely holding her in positive esteem. The effect of overlooking the flaws of the dead is the reader's skepticism towards other statements made by the author. Did their parents never hurt the writers? Were they never angry with one another? Only looking at one side of an experience precludes a thorough analysis.

Martyring the dead or dying character emerged as a method authors utilised to showcase their love while giving the reader a reason to share the author's grief. However, realistic characters have flaws, and so, in portraying characters without failings, strips them of humanity and therefore, resonance with the reader.

## **The Five Stages of Grief and Death Model**

One of the most evident issues within the research conducted was the prevalence of mentioning, discussing, or examining grief and dying within the framework of the Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' five stages of grief, despite the model having been proven ineffective, inapplicable, and outdated (Bidwell Smith, 2018) (Crunk, Burke, and Robinson, 2017) (McVean, 2019). And yet these texts, while relating to, in some capacity, the prevalence of the stage model, consistently showcase a lack of adherence to these stages through plot, observation, and anecdotal experience.

Kübler-Ross' book, *On Death and Dying*, was revolutionary when it was released in 1969, as she discovered that little if any medical research and study had been done into the experience of the dying. She conducted interviews with dying patients and determined there were five stages of dying: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Kübler-Ross' work became known as the impetus for the subspecialties of palliative and hospice care. Later, Kübler-Ross released *Grief and Grieving* in 2014, applying the same five stages to the process of grieving.

The books were immediately welcomed by the medical profession as a simple, linear infrastructure to impose on the bereaved and dying patients, and the stages were quickly adopted into social nomenclature, a concept supported by author and literary critic, Weisberg. He writes, 'Over the years, as the stages have disseminated across popular culture, readers have interpreted Kübler-Ross's stages as complete and successive, a conclusion that reflects less what was written than a desire among caregivers and doctors for a concrete process to guide them beyond the brink of uncertainty' (Weisberg, 2018). Kübler-Ross, however, claimed to have never intended for *On Death and Dying* (1969) and *On Grief and Grieving* (2014) to provide a perfect framework for how one should grieve or the approach a patient takes to dying. She wrote, 'They [the five stages] are tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling. But they are not stops on some linear timeline of grief. Not everyone goes through all of them or goes in a prescribed order' (Kübler-Ross, 1969).

The same stage theory was later applied to a bereavement model. In order to grieve properly, one assumed they were to follow the prescribed stages by Kübler-Ross. In his analysis of grief in art as part of a PhD dissertation, Horn writes about the impact of early grief models, including the five stages. 'Early models of bereavement adhered to predetermined linear programmes of development set within limited time frames. Such models tended to be orientated around stages and phases. Emotional responses were subject to normative and standardized

expectations. A universal approach was adopted regardless of an individual's personal outlook, experiences, cultural background or belief systems' (Horn, 2018).

Despite its prevalence within Western society, the Kübler-Ross stage theory presents several issues, namely, in erroneous research methods combined with many assumptions and contradictions. Despite innovation in her field, Dr. Kübler-Ross did not conduct her research in a manner that would meet most research guidelines in academia. *On Death and Dying* and *On Grief and Grieving* were both modelled after her interviews with the dying—over 200 patients (Kübler-Ross, 1969), but the process for procuring these interviews lacks a formal and scientific framework that would ensure proper analysis, gathering of data and information, and consideration of the subject. 'It was essentially "a collection of case studies in the form of conversations with dying patients"' (McVean, 2019). The reader is not provided with recordings or tapes of these interviews, and therefore, validation of the legitimacy of these recordings.

Kübler-Ross also does not factor in her own professional bias towards these interviews. As discovered in the interviews in *On Death and Dying*, nearly all patients interviewed were white and believed in a Christian God, as Kübler-Ross did (1969). While this viewpoint would have been more widely accepted in the 1960s—when a large percentage of the population in her geographical location attended church and the United States promoted a white perspective—today, society aspires to a more inclusive approach.

Despite the problematics of her approach, which McVean notes was refuted as early as clinical studies in 1981, Kübler-Ross's stages have become palliative canon, despite clinical and anecdotal evidence to deny their veracity and application, including studies conducted out of Canada's McGill University.

Since the publication of *On Death and Dying*, a few studies have attempted to test the stage theory's validity empirically. Most of the results have found it lacking. This 1981 study looked at 193 individuals who had been widowed for various lengths of time. Their results indicate that "the stresses of widowhood persist for years after the spouse's death; they do not confirm the existence of separate stages of adaptation." Work by Bonnano in 2002 looked at 205 individuals before and after their spouses' death, and found that only 11% followed the grief trajectory assumed to be "normal"...Not everyone experiences grief in the same way. But in addition to dealing with the loss of their loved one, those whose experiences do not follow the Kübler-Ross model must contend with the idea that there is a right way to grieve and that they're not following it. (McVean, 2019).



Counselling researchers have also noted that the five stages method lingers as a societal expectation despite progression of study within the field, as outlined in *Complicated Grief*. ‘Although Kübler-Ross’s stage theory has shaped popular thinking on grief, contemporary empirical research has generated an evolution of thought on grief from a linear, uniform process to an idiosyncratic experience that can vary considerably between individuals in terms of symptom type, intensity, and duration’ (Crunk, Burke, and Robinson, 2017).

In her grief therapy practice, grief counsellor Bidwell Smith notes that the stages have become synonymous with death and grieving despite their lack of applicability to the actual experience (Bidwell Smith, 2018). As a practicing MD specializing in neurology, Paul Kalanithi would have been taught the five stages of grief and dying, but one would expect that his knowledge and experience would help him to refute those theories. In his memoir about his own terminal illness, he writes that he went ‘through the stages backwards’ (Kalanithi, 2016, p.161), yet again perpetuating their existence. Macdonald writes, ‘I read that after denial comes grief. Or anger. I remember worrying about which stage I was at. I wanted to taxonomise the process, order it, make it sensible. But there was no sense, and I didn’t recognize any of these emotions at all’ (Macdonald, 2014, p.17).

With the knowledge as to how the stages are flawed, we must then ask ourselves why these stages persist in social and medical commentary and more relevant to this project, why many authors choose to perpetuate or reference this model within contemporary memoir. Thorough research indicated two possible reasons, namely, Kübler-Ross’ use of prescriptive language rather than descriptive, and the lure of simplicity to make sense of a complicated experience.

Most of the phrasing within *On Death and Dying* (Kübler-Ross, 1969) and *On Grief and Grieving* (Kübler-Ross, Kessler, 2014) employ a prescriptive language model that would make it natural for any person—or professional—to consider the text a legitimate guide rather than a suggestion, a concept supported by McVean. ‘The five stages model was meant as descriptive but has become prescriptive. Bereaved individuals can feel like there are certain reactions they should be having, and that they are somehow grieving wrong by not having them’ (McVean, 2019). Reading the original text by Kübler-Ross, it’s hard to ignore this prescriptive language tendency. In *On Death and Dying* Kübler-Ross writes: ‘If a patient has enough time (i.e., not a

sudden, unexpected death) and has been given some help in working through the previously described stages, he will reach a stage during which he is neither depressed nor angry about his fate' (1969, p.109). Or, 'The patient should not be encouraged to look at the sunny side of things, as this would mean he should not contemplate his impending death...If he is allowed to express his sorrow he will find final acceptance much easier, and he will be grateful to those who can sit with him during this stage of depression without constantly telling him not to be sad' (Kübler-Ross, 1969, p.85). Or, 'No matter the stage of illness or coping mechanisms used, all our patients maintained some form of hope until the last moment' (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Kübler-Ross writes these passages using phrasing such as *will*, not *may*, *might*, *can*, or other less rigid wording, especially considering her field is both academic as faculty at the University of Colorado, and scientific as a practicing MD and psychiatrist—a professional realm in which specificity is vital. The language used throughout both books provides prescriptive, insistent language that does not correlate with the author's claim that the book was not meant to serve as a manual or guide.

Another reason this grief and death model persists is attributed to the simplicity of the stages, which created an accessible and clear process to address complex, emotional, and frightening issues. Weisberg writes, 'Doctors loved Kübler-Ross's five stages. The stages gave doctors the capacity to diagnose their dying patients, to target their questions and categorize the evidence: if the patient wasn't depressed, then maybe she was in denial. The stages provided guidance on what to say in impossible circumstances. She had, unwittingly, provided doctors with a system for discussing death like a medical process' (Weisberg, 2018).

Memoirs about death and grief that did not play into the five stages trope allowed for a more realistic portrayal of the experience of illness and dying, and bereavement for those connected to the dying. In her book, *The Undying* (2019), poet Anne Boyer takes the reader through a variety of emotions the author felt in her cancer diagnosis, from which she was expected to die, but does not delve into denial or bargaining, instead, writing of fear, anger, and confusion. She writes about refusing denial without referencing the word, which is already linked with the stage theory.

Being sick makes excessive space for thinking, and excessive thinking makes room for thoughts of death. But I was always starving for experience, not its cessation, and if the experience of thought was the only experience my body could give me beyond the one of pain, opening myself to wild, deathly thinking

had to be allowed. *Don't try to make me*, I warned my friends in a set of email instructions, *stop thinking about death*. (Boyer, 2019, p.99).

In claiming her emotions and the fear that permeates them, Boyer creates a credible, flawed narrator that allows her message to better connect with the reader.

Another example of not adhering to the five stages theory is in *A Short History of Falling* (2019), in which author Joe Hammond examines how emotions surrounding his impending death from a neurological disease sprouted at strange moments.

Really bad news is a little like medieval weaponry. It isn't precise like a bullet or a machine-sharpened blade. Part of its brute effect comes from blunt power, so that extensive collateral damage is caused to areas already weakened for a variety of other reasons: areas that are sometimes quite a long way beyond the originally intended location. In this sense, they both destroy and clear away. They bring forward endings in a more timely manner—tidying away what had already grown weak. And I think it's not possible to be properly aware of such quiet, broad-reaching devastation, so that it's only discovered later when performing an innocuous task—like reaching for some tinned tomatoes in a cupboard—and you notice some white part of the bone revealed in a place you would have never expected it. (Hammond, 2019, p.51).

Instead of focusing solely on his personal feelings about death, Hammond instead explores larger issues that occur to him as he wrestles with mortality. Hammond's analysis of unexpected emotions and realizations showcase a lack of linearity to the stages set out by Kübler-Ross, as he does not dwell on denial, anger, or bargaining, instead, recognizes the illness as something inevitable and thus, explores that inevitability through a lens of curiosity.

## Methodology

Analysing the various approaches to creative writing in general, and applying new techniques learned in research, solidified choices surrounding the literary tools and devices included in *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021). Ultimately, this process showcased how memoir can contribute to the global understanding of death and bereavement and how to use the text to dispel the myth of a collective or prescriptive grief model.

### Choosing Memoir

Memoir requires the author to reckon with personal experiences of trauma and reflect those experiences accurately and sensorily for the reader—a process that can prove difficult for the author. ‘In some ways, writing a memoir is knocking yourself out with your own fist, if it’s done right’ writes Mary Karr in *The Art of Memoir*. ‘The form has always had profound psychological consequence on its author. It can’t not. But nobody I know who’s written a great one described it as anything less than a major-league shit-eating contest’ (Karr, 2015, p.xvii). In practice, many friends expressed concern about my choice to ‘mire’ in discussions of dying and grieving while processing my own loss, worried that this decision would lead to more prolonged bereavement despite my career as a memoirist—one that thrives through analysis of difficult emotions. And so, with this knowledge, why do bereaved writers write memoir when there are other genre options available to them?

### Personal Preference

*I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021) was always envisioned as memoir, since non-fiction is my professional area of expertise and interest, despite having also published fiction and poetry. In short, memoir is the genre I most enjoy reading and writing, and so, to write about a profound life experience such as the death of a sibling, memoir was an instinctual choice because it is the one I enjoy most.

This decision is evident in other creative non-fiction texts, especially those about grief and death. One reason memoir is an attractive genre for communicating grief is the intrinsic power of reading about a shared experience, as well as an opportunity to explore complexities,

including secrets, conflicts, and trauma. In *Inheritance* (Shapiro, 2019), her fifth memoir (although she has also published many novels) Shapiro writes;

I am a spinner of narratives, a teller of tales. I have spent my life attempting to make meaning out of random events, to shape stories out of any accretion of senseless, chaotic detail. And a writer and a teacher of writing, this is what I do...But I had been dealing within the confines of a known world. I am not a fantasist. I have never been drawn to mysteries of the whodunit variety, or to sci-fi. Magic realism interests me. But there are limits to my suspension of disbelief. What never fails to draw me in, however, are secrets. Secrets within families. Secrets we keep out of shame, or self-protectiveness, or denial. Secrets and their corrosive power. Secrets we keep from one another in the name of love. (Shapiro, 2019, p.30).

While Shapiro has won many awards for a wide range of her work, she repeatedly returns to memoir because she enjoys the genre as a reader and author. Karr expresses similar sentiment in *The Art of Memoir*:

As I turn a novel's pages, a first-person narrator may seduce me, but the fact that it's all made up and not actually outlived oddly keeps me from drawing courage outside the book's dream. The deep, mysterious sense of identification with a memoirist who's confessed her past just doesn't translate to a novelist I love, however deliciously written the work. (Karr, 2015, pg xvii).

As Karr says, memoir's power to draw 'courage outside the book's dream,' is a powerful literary device, and never does one require courage quite like when facing the death of someone they love.

### Processing and Understanding

As a memoirist, writing through my grief as a means of processing and understanding it was one of the only ways that I, a writer, knew how to cope. Many memoirists claim that they write that genre because it is how they come to process and emotionally heal from difficult life experiences. In *My Year of Magical Thinking* (Didion, 2005), Didion discusses her inclination towards literature for information gathering when going through difficult events. 'In times of trouble, I had been trained since childhood, read, learn, work it up, go to the literature.'

Information was control' (Didion, 2005, p.44). Creating memoir is also a means of control: controlling narrative and story in an organized manner that serves as information gathering and processing.

While a writer may feel that they make sense of an experience by putting it on the page, a deeper level of understanding through writing is a concept supported scientifically, too. Researchers have explored how the act of writing can lead to greater personal understanding of any analysed theme within a work through the creation of new neurological pathways. 'The creative process arises from the ferment of ideas in the brain, turning and colliding until something new emerges. At the neural level, associations begin to form where they did not previously exist, and some of these associations are perilously novel' (Andreasen, 2006, p.128). Through this creative process, writers can neurologically reprogram their brains to make new connections between their experiences and their emotions and the impact on the world.

In writing *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021), it was clear that the process of writing, of removing myself from the experience as a person and instead regarding myself omnisciently as a protagonist, created a deeper level of compassion and reason behind Meghan's death and her choices around addiction and staying in abusive relationships. Early in the text in which Meghan is an addict reads: 'Meghan's wisdom of the world is through experiences I'll never understand. And I don't want to understand the chemical clouds of uplifting make-believe, which crash down when the drugs run out and reveal nothing but bad choices and an endless string of loosely committed partners. I do not want to be the older sister, yet here I am, pretending' (Thompson, 2021, p.31). Yet, the process of writing *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021), and researching texts and memoir related to addiction and loss, I have developed a deeper understanding of Meghan's choices.

In writing about her death, there was also a personal hope of making sense of death that seemed pointless.

I walk alongside Meghan, the two of us, always the two of us, reaching out to touch her as we move, fingering the plasticky coating of the bag for something familiar but everything feels padded and lumpy, not like human flesh and bone and sister. We keep walking and I turn away from the other families, the volunteers, the people I know keenly because we're all here losing someone, sharing the grief, but they don't understand this grief, this

pain, that is unique to us and I don't want to share it. (Thompson, 2021, pp.237).

While living the experience, it felt impossible that anyone would understand the sense of loss that was felt, and yet, in writing about it, reflecting on the compassion and care of others involved in that death (and experiencing their own bereavement), it was evident that while different, grief as a feeling was universal.

This hypothesis of writing to cope with grief is expressed in several of the researched works for this project. Carmen Maria Machado wrote her memoir and countless stories in response to an abusive relationship. In her memoir, *In the Dream House*, she writes:

You will spend the next few years of your career coming up with elaborate justifications for the structure of the stories you were writing at the time—telling them to young readers in classrooms and audiences as bookstores; once, to a tenure-track job search committee. You say, “Telling stories in just one way misses the point of stories.” You can't bring yourself to say what you really think: I broke the stories down because I was breaking down and didn't know what else to do. (Machado, 2019, p.148).

In not 'knowing what else to do,' Machado turns to a known entity and comfort: writing. Similarly, Paul Kalanithi, a neurosurgeon diagnosed with terminal cancer, returned to literature (and inherently, writing it in his memoir) to process the news of his own impending death. 'I was searching for a vocabulary with which to make sense of death, to find a way to begin defining myself and inching forward again. The privilege of direct experience had led me away from literary and academic work, yet now I felt that to understand my own direct experiences, I would have to translate them back into language...I needed words to go forward' (Kalanithi, 2006, p.148). In her collection of letters, Olga Jacoby writes of her family and her impending death due to a heart condition (Jacoby, 2019). Jacoby indicates that she often writes because she has always loved the process (correspondence, stories and poems), but notes that the act itself gives her peace and physical comfort despite her pain and the knowledge that she will soon die and leave her children and beloved husband behind. 'Doctor, I get warm as I write; I need nobody's help to prompt me to find words, the words come of themselves, for I have never been taught any religion; I have learnt my own' (Jacoby, 2019, p.67). In his self-addressing epistolary collection, *Mourning Diary*, Roland Barthes laments that his depression blooms whenever he is somehow

prevented from writing or inspiration for such writing is unreachable. ‘Now I know where Depression comes from: rereading my diary of this summer, I am both “charmed” (lured) and disappointed; hence writing at its best is merely a mockery. Depression comes when, in the depths of despair, I cannot manage to save myself by my attachment to writing’ (Barthes, 2010, p.62).

Grief counsellor Bidwell Smith also supports the theory that writing can heal. ‘Several things happen when we stifle our stories of loss. Namely, we lose the opportunity to really explore that story, to unpack it, to deeply understand it, and to give it a home outside of our bodies. When we find ways to externalize the story, we gain the opportunity to see the different ways that the story we are carrying serves us or harms us’ (Bidwell Smith, 2018, p.68). Kübler-Ross also discusses the healing benefits of writing and storytelling in *On Grief and Grieving* (2014). ‘Telling the story helps to dissipate the pain... Telling your story often and in detail is primal to the grieving process. You must get it out. Grief must be witnessed to be healed. Grief shared is grief abated’ (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2014, p.62). While this project has examined the flaws in Kübler-Ross’ model, this is anecdotal experience in her years witnessing the stories of the dying. She later reiterated this theory in the text’s introduction. ‘In creating this book, I often felt that if it didn’t make us cry, if it didn’t help us heal our own grief, it would never help anyone else’ (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2014, pg xx).

In her chapter in *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, Perry writes of a similar experience when writing about her main character. Bolt kept a diary while writing her novel and made this observation about the link between her main character’s journal-keeping and the author’s own.

I found a sense of something like healing in the story, in the process of writing... I wonder if what Serena does through the act of writing in her red journal and what I at the same time carried out in my studio enquiry, my writing of the novel, is more like reaching out to touch a fleshly body, the body of real-life events... Is *reconciling* the word for what my character and I are doing? Reaching out to physically touch emotions and troubles, sculpting and moulding them, and yet at the same time to be moulded and sculpted by them? (Bolt and Barrett, 2007, p. 39).

Extension of Benefits to the Reader



Another reason a writer may write through painful experiences, despite the emotional toll, is because of the hoped impact that work will have on those who read it, something grief counsellor and author, Bidwell Smith, discusses in *Anxiety: the Missing Stage of Grief*. ‘It’s not just that the writers of these stories feel catharsis in sharing their stories but that we as the readers feel the same in reading them’ (Bidwell Smith, 2018, p.145).

The lingering impact of a work is often called resonance. Resonance is defined as ‘having the power to bring images, feelings, memories, etc. to mind’ and imagery as ‘figurative illustration, esp, as used by an author’ (Barber, 2004). Therefore, the very literary devices used by an author—including imagery—can lead to resonance, or a feeling of deeper emotions that linger for the reader. The hope is that through that shared connection, writer and reader come to a deeper understanding of content and experience. Taylor’s memoir, *Dying: A Memoir*, spoke directly to this sentiment. ‘I like to think that, long after I’m gone, someone somewhere might read a book or essay of mine in a last remaining library or digital archive and be touched in some way’ (Taylor, 2017, p.44) and later, ‘My consciousness could express itself to the consciousness of others and, though I didn’t fully comprehend that at the time, I did feel it in the classroom: the beginning of a quest, of a search for a miracle of mutual comprehension that I have pursued to this day. I still write so as not to feel alone in the world’ (Taylor, 2017, p.116).

This hope of resonance was another motivating factor in selecting memoir form for *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021). This reminder assisted in providing impetus to work through more difficult sections of the text, as evidenced in this scene:

‘I could read to you about us instead. My second book in the works.’ I don’t know what kind of story this second book will be yet. One of hope or despair, of sisterhood or hatred. It’s a mixed bag of bundled emotions I can’t untangle, but writing it while she is next to me helps.

‘I love that you’re writing about us.’ She smiles, eyelids still gently closed. ‘Hey, it’ll finally let me pay you back, on the page at least, for what an asshole you used to be.’

She grunts a laugh but clutches her sore stomach. ‘I’d deserve it. But maybe, you think, other people will read about my addiction and, I don’t know, it’ll help them?’ She’s staring at me now, hope etched into her smooth forehead. She’s clinging to a legacy, one that can evolve with new meaning, a shoot from a seed. We can share it, this future, within the chapters of books. A life that will continue to be led, even if just on a page.

‘Are you saying my entire career is pointless?’ I arch and wiggle an eyebrow. “Because if true stories don’t help people, I’m doing an awful lot of writing for an awful lot of nothing.’

‘I’m serious, Kell.” I watch her larynx move up and down her throat, the tendons so sharp that they look like piano strings. ‘Does it matter?’

‘Of course. Why else do we read about other people’s experiences if not to, I don’t know, find a part of themselves in there, feel understood? Why else do we write about it?’

‘Yeah.’ Relief spreads through her body and she melts into the pillow. (Thompson, 2021, p.211).

Knowledge that the text might one day help others to process their own grief, or for me to process my own, were vital elements in writing the book.

The concept of resonance and community through reading and writing is upheld in several texts, including Boyer’s *The Undying* (2019). In her poetic memoir about battling cancer, she writes:

I would prefer to write about anything else. “But the truth,” wrote Bertolt Brecht, in an essay about the difficulties involved with writing it, “cannot merely be written; it must be written for someone, someone who can do something with it.” I would rather write about anything else, not only for fear of the pain of examining the pain, but also for fear of turning the pain into a product. I would rather write about anything else, not just for fear of telling the same story, but for fear that the “same story” is a lie in service of the way things are. I would rather write about anything else, but I know that other people exist, all of us with bodies inside history, all of us with nervous systems and nightmares, all of us with environments and hours and desires, like the one to not be sick, or to not get sick, or to understand what it means when we are. (Boyer, 2019, p.133).

Boyer perfectly highlights the desire to write both as a creative act for the writer, the compulsive need to write to understand, and the hope that resonance will create the same impactful journey in the reader.

With these factors in mind, in relating a story of grief, there are many reasons to select memoir as the genre for such a story. Each decision must lie with the author and their specific story to share. In the case of *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021), memoir was genre that best answered the proposed research questions for this project.

## Methods for Writing Memoir Well

While research and personal preference made memoir the genre of choice for this project, the question remained as to how to write these experiences well. Essentially, what makes good memoir and what decisions go into that writing? By examining a corpus of creative non-fiction texts, some literary tools (structure, plot, character, dialogue, imagery, etc.) were especially well-utilised in conjunction with the themes of this project.

As reading preferences vary, as do reasons for reading, assessing whether or not a specific researched memoir was well-written was not a fixed, scientific analysis. However, on a personal level, memoirs were regarded as high quality based on perceived honesty of the writer and use of literary craft and skill.

## Honesty and the Autobiographical Pact

Since *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021) is a work based on personal memories, it was necessary to examine the role my memory (flaws, impact of trauma) might play in the storytelling and in creating a text that may create resonance for the reader. Memoir is derived from the author's memory, notes, and ways of knowing, and requires the memoirist to first settle into their willingness to add the 'creative' to the work of non-fiction and establish that boundary in their artform. In *Practice as Research*, Perry's chapter discusses her experience writing a novel as part of a critical exegesis in the study of writing. 'I think what I learned most from the act of writing these notes, was about the instability of boundaries between the fictive and the autobiographical, the singular experience and the collective, the personal and the political' (Bolt and Barrett, 2007, p.37). It is, then, up to each author to create that boundary for themselves and their work.

Phillipe Lejeune, French professor and specialist on autobiography, sought to define autobiography in scholarly study, which he continued to hone as his research expanded (Lejeune, 1989, p.3). Lejeune's criteria for autobiography falls into four areas, including form of language, subject treated, situation of the author, and position of the narrator, with some forms of 'autobiography,' such as memoir and diary, for example, only meeting some and not all of these criteria (Lejeune, 1989, p.4). Therefore, by Lejeune's study, memoir meets some criteria for autobiography, but not all.

However, memoir, as a sub-genre of autobiography, differs in relation to non-fiction boundaries, as it relies on the author's memories and not necessarily a series of factual documents. Before memoir's recent rise in popularity, the line between fiction and non-fiction was starker, as discussed by Dyer. 'The difference between fiction and nonfiction is quite reasonably assumed to depend on whether stuff is invented or factually reliable. Now, in some kinds of writing – history, reportage and some species of memoir or true adventure – there is zero room for manoeuvre. Everything must be rigorously fact-checked' (Dyer, 2015). In memoir, there is some flexibility around authorial choices in terms of content, timeline, and characterization.

For this reason, each author must decide how much manipulation of facts, timelines, dialogue, and content, they are comfortable with. And in turn, the author must decide to what level of honesty and forthrightness they approach this manipulation of experience for the reader's perception. Essentially, does one tell the reader how much of the story is contrived? Or does the author allow the reader to immerse in the story and have the truthfulness of such an experience be secondary to immersion within story?

In his study of autobiography, Lejeune wrote extensively about the autobiographical pact, in which the reader trusts the author is telling a true story. 'All the methods that autobiography uses to convince us of the authenticity of its narrative can be imitated by the novel, and have been imitated. This is accurate as long as we limit ourselves to the text minus the title page; as soon as we include the latter in the text, with the name of the author, we make use of a general textual criterion, the identity ("identicalness") of the *name* (author-narrator-protagonist). The autobiographical pact is the affirmation in the text of this identity' (Lejeune, 1989, p.14). This pact acknowledges the reader's belief in the author as the protagonist in an autobiography, and therefore, in the reality and truthfulness of that writing. But if, according to Lejeune, memoir only meets most, not all, of the criteria for autobiography, then the author has some creative space in which to assert storytelling control.

As a memoirist, I prioritize honesty with my reader about any manipulation of timeline and do not manufacture events. However, in choosing to eliminate some memories from *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021), I am manipulating events by rearranging their chronology. The text does, however, employ use of dialogue, which, as mentioned, can be considered 'manufactured' by some in the literary community.

The nature of memoir requires the author to recreate and re-imagine, as Machado discusses in her memoir. She writes: ‘The memoir is, at its core, an act of resurrection. Memoirists re-create the past, reconstruct dialogue. They cobble meaning from events that have long been dormant. They braid the clays of memory and essay and fact and perception together, smash them into a ball, roll them flat. They manipulate time; resuscitate the dead. They put themselves, and others, into necessary context’ (Machado, 2019, p.5). So where is the boundary between reconstruct and construct, truth and fact? Memoir already requires the author to edit life experiences for inclusion or exclusion in storytelling around specific themes to be examined in the text. Dyer examines the borders between fiction and non-fiction in reference to his own book, which was sold under the non-fiction genre, a decision made by his publisher. He writes, ‘Most of the story – which had originally appeared in an anthology of fiction – is a faithful transcript of stuff that really happened, but that incident was pinched from an anecdote someone told me about a portable toilet at Glastonbury. All that matters is that the reader can’t see the joins, that there is no textural change between reliable fabric and fabrication. In other words, the issue is one not of accuracy but aesthetics’ (Dyer, 2015). This book described by Dyer breaks the autobiographical pact outlined by Lejeune, as Dyer as protagonist and Dyer as author are no longer identical—one of Lejeune’s criteria.

Yet Dyer isn’t alone in his point of view. In *The Art of Memoir*, Karr quotes an interview with memoirist, Vivian Gornick, and her viewpoint on truth-telling in memoir. ‘I embellish stories all the time. I do it even when I’m supposedly telling the unvarnished truth...So I lie...I don’t owe anyone the actuality’ (Karr, 2015, p.10). Karr, however, provides immediate rebuttal to this viewpoint. She writes, ‘If I forked over the price for nonfiction, I consider it my business...Truth may have become a foggy, fuzzy nether area. But untruth is simple: making up events with the intention to deceive’ (Karr, 2015, p.11). Both Karr and Gornick clearly hold differing views of their comfort level with embellishment and confabulation as they relate to memoir, but in their honesty surrounding those opinions, the trust with the reader is maintained.

While fiction and memoir have developed blurry delineations as memoir rises in popularity and authors explore the boundaries of the genre, a memoirist faces the risk—should their manipulation of facts be called out by media, readers, or the industry at large—of negating the reader’s trust, and inherently, the reader’s investment in the story and the journey of the

characters. As such, an author must decide their own level of ethics and comfort with such a range. An awareness of this line, and the risk of stretching it, is a key component of memoir.

Helpful in making such a decision is the analysis of personal truth versus fact as it pertains to memoir. Truth is defined as ‘genuineness, authenticity, the matter or circumstance as it really is,’ whereas fact is defined as ‘a thing that is known to have occurred, to exist, or to be true’ (Barber, 2004). These definitions lend weight to the author argument of personal truth and fact serving as separate entities.

All of these factors necessitated authorial choices as they pertain to writing the creative portion of this project. In *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021), one family member does not recall the visit from Jehovah Witnesses after the death of Meghan, and yet notes were maintained for the sake of documentation and made note of the event. Since that note jotted in a diary is not a factual and verifiable document, and the memory is mine, this would be an example of personal truth. In this case, the visit could be fact, but both experiences (mine and that of the other family member) are true.

In response to President Donald Trump’s administration’s promotion of ‘alternative facts,’ Neil DeGrasse Tyson relays to *Vineyard* his definition of the three truths. ‘The first, he said, is “an objective truth that can be established outside of your own mental state,” such as by the methods and tools of science. The second, he said, is “a personal truth,” which could be, for example, a religious belief that you can take on faith. The third kind of truth, he said, is what he calls “political truth.” “That’s what’s true simply because you repeat it so often that everyone thinks that it’s true, even if it’s not the truth,” Tyson said’ (Vineyard, 2017). When an author recreates lived events through the lens of their biases, their memory, and their perceptions (even when another person will remember an experience differently), both are personal truths, the only kind of truth the reader can rely on from the memoir format. In this way, two differing personal truths do not negate one another, as supported by Karr. In *The Art of Memoir*, she writes,

Memoir is in its ascendancy—not because it’s not corrupt, but because the best ones openly confess the nature of their corruption. The master memoirist creates such a personal interior space with memories pieces together, that the reader never loses sight of the enterprise’s tentative nature. Maxine Hong Kingston and Michael Herr don’t manufacture authoritative, there-person, I-am-a-camera views. Their books don’t masquerade as fact. They let you in on how their own prejudices mold memory’s sifter. By transcribing the mind so its edges show, a

writer constantly reminds the reader that he's not watching crisp external events played from a digital archive. It's the speaker's truth alone. In this way, the form constantly disavows the rigours of objective truth. (Karr, 2015, pg 16).

There are, inevitably, those objective truths that can be proven in court with documents and other evidence, but personal truth is unique to each writer.

Regardless of the line between truth and fact, honesty with the reader is vital to building and maintaining trust for the reading journey, and that relationship must be maintained. This was especially vital in this project, in which other characters have different perceptions as to how some events transpired. Furthermore, in writing about domestic violence, addiction, and death, ensuring the reader was aware that the story was solely my opinion and experience as the author, was vital to maintaining trust and transparency with the reader. Honesty with the audience is not a criterion for a good story, but it is a criterion for showing the author as an authority on the subject of which they examine in the text, and if that subject is the author's life, then, as mentioned by Karr, the reader has a right to know if this is fiction, non-fiction, or a blend of the two.

This is often handled with a simple caveat or author's note, either to start or finish the book. In *Girls Need Not Apply: Field Notes from the Forces*, the author's note reads: 'As is the case with most memoirs, certain events have been compressed, eliminated, or rearranged. My memory—which generally leads to me being referred to as the Thompson Family Elephant—does have its faults. The experiences in these pages are also funneled through my own perception' (Thompson, 2019). Other memoirs provide similar caveats, which allow the author to maintain the loose adherence to the autobiographical pact as well as the sense of trust with the reader. In her memoir about Canadian adoption of Korean children, Dr. Heijun Wills, writes, 'This story, these stories are not all mine. Some of them, in fact, belong to no one at all, but are the fantasies that seem to flower so naturally from the mouths of those who've grown lives out of half facts, wishful thinking, and outright lies. Who piece themselves together from the residue of lost records. From withheld or secreted records. Whose orphanages and agencies have been evasively destroyed by fire and flood. Or by shame' (Wills, 2019). Statements such as these allow the reader to not feel betrayed should they find inconsistencies or alternative experiences.

In an article titled, 'Does It Matter if Authors Make Things Up?', the journalist writes, 'Rather than forming a binary opposition, fact and fiction often move on a sliding scale.

Sometimes, the only way to know whether to read a book as memoir or novel comes down to what the author says it is – and here, we ask for honesty. We read differently according to the expectations raised’ (Maunsell, 2018). If the reader’s expectations are maintained and respected, the agreement between author and reader to suspend some moments of reality is more acceptable. Karr writes, ‘The best memoirists stress the subjective nature of reportage. Doubt and wonder come to stand as part of the story’ (Karr, 2015, p.14).

Essentially, as Karr notes, if the writer is honest about their literary decisions surrounding memoir, the reader remains trusting in the writer’s account. It’s for this reason that showcasing the death of a loved one with whom the author has a difficult relationship was an important element of *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021), as well as in other bereavement memoirs, as the very depiction of complicated relationships and their flaws showed an author’s willingness to examine flaws and perceived ‘ugliness’.

To maintain the trust with the reader, *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021) included an author’s note that confirmed the unreliability of memory, the nature of storytelling, and that some details have been adapted for the sake of story. There is little way for the reader to know about the choices the author makes in reference to their own non-fiction work, or what level of textual and contextual information they choose to manipulate within their stories. However, non-fiction as a genre continue to grow and develop complexity as it pertains to definition, a notation of honesty is, anecdotally, memoir done well in maintaining a connection and relationship of trust with the reader.

### Utilization of Literary Craft

In examining how to write an effective and quality memoir, much of the criteria related to the author’s use of literary devices in storytelling, namely metaphor and imagery, characterization, and concentration of conflict within scene, which correlated with the problematics of the corpus of grief memoirs researched. Word choice, imagery and metaphorical language were also key tools employed by authors to tackle difficult themes. Poetry, in particular, achieved metaphorical language to create new connections to shared experiences. *Not One of These Poems is About You* (Harrison, 2020), and *Another Dysfunctional Cancer Poem* (Uppal, Strimas, 2018), used a reframing of typically associated images to reconnect and rewire perceptions we have about illness and cancer.



I'll leave you alone with all this *stuff*.  
The detritus of a life lived  
in a global fervour of collection.  
And I can't stop thinking about where this leaves you.  
No more big spoon. No more little spoon.  
One object left, one object unable to nest.  
I will curl myself inside your heart, and try  
my hardest to leave you the best of me. (Harrison, 2020, p.8).

The connection of love and loss to 'spooning,' of the small acts in life (connecting, sleeping) to the larger elements in life (global fervour, objects) creates a palpable resonance of loss. In the *Another Dysfunctional Cancer Poem* anthology is the poem 'Post-Op Delirium.' I am a cocoon shroud,/lancet veins, hypodermics,/inside the steel hull/of a scanning machine,/a numbed grave,/sutured in nightshade' (Uppal, Strimas, 2018, p.27). Word choice is vital in this poem, with stark, medicinal approach of 'steel, shroud, lancet, hypodermic, suture' reinforcing an emotional experience told through a mechanical one.

By using metaphorical language to explore common themes, the authors develop a new understanding for the reader and a different angle from which to explore their own feelings around similar themes. And that connection, as outlined by Horn, is key to breaking stereotypes and the traditional narrative that has surrounded grief, death, and illness. 'Negative metaphors concerning illness can perpetuate or create new forms of stereotyping and stigma, as Anatole Broyard noted, but positive metaphors can be a source of healing and comfort: "Perhaps only metaphor can express the bafflement, the panic combined with beatitude, of the threatened person"' (Broyard, 1992: 18)' (Horn, 2018, p.62).

Also vital in writing memoir is characterization and the ability to make realistic, relatable characters. Karr summarizes memoirs that fail in *The Art of Memoir*. She writes, 'Most memoirs fail because of voice. It's not distinct enough to sound alive and compelling. Or there are staunch limits to emotional tone, so it emits a single register. The sentences are boring and predictable... You don't believe or trust the voice. You're not curious about the inner or outer lives of the writer. The author's dead in the water' (Karr, 2015, p. 181). The intention of memoir is to take the reader on the journey alongside the author, and without individualized motivation

for each character, it remains difficult for the reader to create that connection and emotionally invest in that journey.

Character is created in a variety of ways, as outlined by Hodgins. He writes, ‘The most vivid character takes on life not so much from an accumulation of information as from the experience of watching this person in action over a number of scenes. And even then, the most memorable characters will sometimes leap to life in a single moment that reveals a unique and peculiar detail of manner, or a unique and peculiar turn of phrase in dialogue’ (1993, p.101). In support of this assessment, the most memorable of the memoirs researched for this project were those in which character was built through dialogue and engagement with other characters in scene rather than relayed solely through the single lens of the protagonist and what the reader is told through exposition.

To that end, creation of character when the character is a real person adds another complicated layer to characterization, as most of us present, speak, and engage in different ways depending on our audience and environment. A doctor, for example, will behave differently around patients who look to him for knowledge and insight than she would at home with family. This was evident for the protagonist in *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021), as the sisterhood relationship was complicated with lies and abuse. The sisters, therefore, interacted differently with one another than they did with their shared parents. Complicating this was the reality that in the earlier scenes of the book, the protagonist and her sister have little interaction with one another, as they are estranged. Characterization and building of their relationship, then, was a literary challenge when there were few lived experiences shared between them until later adulthood.

For this reason, the concept of epistolary inclusion of letters written to Meghan after her death solved this issue, allowing the reader insight into the relationship of the sisters and the primary relationship in the book even when their initial interactions were limited. Through the letters, the reader is shown the sisterly dialogue and language unique to their relationship and able to create a deeper sense of resonance on the character’s journey.

#### Characterization and Epistolary Reference

The challenge of quality characterization, then, emerged as a key element of memoir. In literature review, epistolary collections and their connection to bereavement and loss presented as a creative manner in which to offer readers a layered element of voice, tone, and character.

Letters hold intimate insight into a personal experience or story. Further, written communication creates connection between sender and recipient, and with the inclusion of letters in memoir, that connection can be extended between the author and the reader, regardless of whether or not the reader was the intended recipient. In the study of portrayals of grief, epistolary collections held valuable insight into the intimacy of relationships and the personal anguish of the sender, the recipient, or both. Through the writing of the letters, the bereaved can relay things unsaid before death (especially if that death is sudden), and also express frustrations over arguments or matters that cannot be solved with death.

With this knowledge, the presence of letters in many of the researched memoirs for this project is worthy of closer analysis. *Dead Mom Walking* (Matlow, 2020) explores the issue of the author's mother's naturopathic and holistic approach to healing her cancer. Their mother, a teacher and counsellor, often ran workshops that encouraged women to write letters to themselves and to people who have caused them pain as a means of processing the trauma. Matlow's mother also exercises the exorcism of letter writing on her own. 'Mom was desperate to free herself from her family patterns. She would write unsent letters to her parents as well as responses from the perspective of her ideal mother or father' (Matlow, 2020, p.39). Through this process, Matlow's mother attempted to work through her grief, trauma, and pain from her childhood, allowing her to process feelings while gaining insight into loved ones through narrative distance.

In *Sister Language* (Baillie, Baillie, 2019) the sisters attempt to overcome the barriers between them (one sister's schizophrenia) by working in a shared medium of language. They fail to connect in verbal discussion but manage to make sense through written communication, which they shared through a red binder traded between them. The result of their efforts formed into the memoir/epistolary hybrid which served to highlight their bond in a creative, unique way. Not only do the sisters learn to communicate in a manner that makes sense for them, but also, the reader also is offered a voyeuristic insight into their relationship that previously was private documentation. This allows the sisters to both find a way to make themselves understood to the audience, as explained by Christina, the sister who battles schizophrenia.

With you, I can speak, because there is already a language in place. We've been speaking all our lives and have enjoyed our shared language, as sisters. I know roughly/loosely what to expect. I can manage a friendship if I have a language for it. Or rather, once I do. But with any new person there is no language. I can borrow from the language you and I speak, but that doesn't take me far, also it confuses me. With anyone new, I have to work up a language from scratch; as I've told my psychiatrist, this feels like being forced to climb a razor blade. (Baillie, 2019, p. 32).

If the book has been Christina's own attempt to make herself understood, without the 'Sister Language', as noted by Christina, she would not have felt comfortable—or rather, even have had the words—with which to make bonds with readers. Martha Baille writes, 'Is your hope that these letters, this act of communication between us, might bridge the gap separating you from your own experiences, or from the experiences of others, or both? If our exchange of letters and texts becomes a book, our letters will likely fall out of chronological order, to form a new pattern as we shape our book, rearranging its elements' (Baille, Baille, 2019, p.64). This moment captures one of the first where Martha, the sister without mental illness who has always worked as a writer, finds the moment of connection between her and her sister, a deeper understanding of her sister's mind and illness, and also a deeper understanding of language and words—the tools she employs daily. Through this, Christina is characterized and brought to life in a way only able on the page and in a space in which language to communicate previously did not exist. For this reason, inclusion of letters between sisters emerged as a sound addition to *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021).

Letters as a form of intimate communication is also evident in *Be With: Letters to a Caregiver* (Barnes, 2018), in which the author writes letters directly to the reader as a means of connecting through a shared experience of caregiving. The memoir-epistolary hybrid is comprised of letters addressed in second person narration, transporting reader into part of the story in the presumed shared role of caregiving.

The use of letters and language also applies the dying person for whom the narrator provides cares. Barnes examines, as his mother propels further towards dementia, how she clings to language, words, and stories to make sense of her experience.

Reading a passage three times, six times, a dozen times. Shortening her reading to a paragraph, a sentence. Part of a sentence. A word. Getting me to read parts out loud. That worked well for a while. The sound of the voice entrancing, even if the meanings hovered for briefer and briefer intervals before disappearing. The voice of the story remained. She was losing the story she knew. Both her main stories, which I think at their core were one. The story of books, of literature; the story of stories. The story of family, her family. Seeing these beloved stories degrade, corrupt, dissolve—un-tell themselves. It has been, perhaps, the sharpest agony of her dementia; perhaps of any dementia. Meaning is oxygen. And yet keeping her love of each story, and her faith in story itself. In the storytelling that makes story possible, that keeps cycling it up out of chaos, out of nothing. Losing your story, your place in your story, without losing story. (Barnes, 2018, p.70).

In writing his and his mother's story through letters, not only does Barnes achieve a new level of resonance with his reader through direct address to 'you', but he also commits an act of preserving the stories shared with his mother by committing them to the page. He finds a way to process his own grief and pain, by chronicling the experience through the shared medium of language and storytelling.

The same sentiment applied to *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021). The methodology of epistolary communication assists in not only cementing story for the dying and the relationship between the bereaved and the dying, but also helps the author to process the emotions that emerge in that writing. Furthermore, by chronicling the story of sisters—sisters who typically struggle to communicate—the protagonist finds a way to address that barrier and say the things unsaid (or unheard) in the letters included in the text.

Legacy and maintaining authorial voice are mentioned as motivators for many of the memoirs written by the dying. In his memoir, *A Short History of Falling* (Hammond, 2019), Hammond examines his desire to remain alive through his chosen artistic medium. Yet despite writing an entire memoir that documents his experience, he also writes letters and notes directly to his family. 'I had made this time for myself to see what it could be and to reassure myself—wandering around and imagining, leaving little notes pinned to doors and attached to lamp posts, for my older sons to find in later years. And every one—every card I doodled and wrote and painted—was just a different-coloured way of saying that I would always be there, that I had tried in every way I could, and that I was sorry' (Hammond, 2019, p.176). Hammond is aware that his family will be able to read the memoir and garner insight into his feelings throughout his life and death, but the intimacy of the notes and letters beyond the physical book bely a need to

communicate in a more intimate manner. For his family, the book was not enough, as the book was written in a language for a different intended audience.

In a like mind, in her collection of letters, *On Pain*, (Jacoby, 2019), Olga Jacoby requests that her doctor, with whom she spends most of the book corresponding, keep her letters and give them to her children. ‘They will see through them how our lives have been linked and that the motherly love I lavished on them was intense and nothing short of the real article. They will like to read how through all the years of my illness they have satisfied me with their childish affection and their sweet, loving attentions and sympathy’ (Jacoby, 2019, p.168). While Jacoby had no way of knowing her letters would later form a collection of correspondence that would serve as a legacy for her young children, it is notably that she wanted her letters to convey her deepest feelings to her children rather than being told by others (their father, grandparents, Jacoby’s doctor, etc.). *On Pain* shows the reader that Jacoby was a loving and effusive mother who often expressed her love and feelings, however, she was certain that the letters would serve as a lasting reminder and a more intimate portrait of her true self. When the doctor admits to Jacoby in a letter that he has lost some of their letters, she was upset. ‘Please bear in mind that at first they were only written to fulfil a great need I had, of expressing my thoughts; after a while the idea occurred to me that I would like them to be the means of my children knowing me. The later ones were often written with the hope of helping the dear young souls, when the greater problems of life will have to be faced’ (Jacoby, 2019, p.198).

Many authors employed epistolary format to convey intimacy between reader and author. In *The Apology* (Ensler, 2019), Ensler uses the epistolary form to tell the story of the sexual and emotional abuse she suffered at the hands of her father, although he was never charged and he died without ever issuing her an apology. Like Toews in *Swing Low* (2017), Ensler writes the book/letter from the point of view of her father as a third-person memoir. ‘This letter is an invocation, a calling up. I have tried to allow my father to speak to me as he would speak. Although I have written the words I needed my father to say to me, I had to make space for him to come through me....This letter is my attempt to endow my father with the will and the words to cross the border, and speak the languages of apology so that I can finally be free’ (Ensler, 2019).

While the letter style was a creative choice for the author, it also makes for interesting characterization. Ensler tried to write ‘as he would speak,’ and so the choice forces her to view

her father as a character, as someone with demons, as someone influenced by culture and lived experience as much as any character and living person. This act of writing a letter allows her to immerse herself in that voice.

## Results

### **Literary Craft Choices in *I Cannot Save You***

Research into current literary depictions of grief and death, combined with academic goals of understanding this representation led to a series of critical choices as they pertain to the creative portion of the project. Each choice had an impact on the telling of the story, the proposed connection with the reader, and the ability to explore the proposed themes and research questions with depth and clarity.

#### **Point of View**

As Lejeune points out in his discussion of the autobiographical pact, many memoirs are written in first person narrative, since author and protagonist are intrinsically linked, identical even. In *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021), it was evident that the story needed to be told through my personal lens of experience and knowledge in order to properly portray the complicated nature of the relationship between sisters. It was difficult to make sense of choices and motivations made by Meghan (both character and person) during her lifetime, and therefore, would be difficult to articulate those events with understanding and awareness on a page if trying to immerse myself into her direct point of view or from that of an omniscient perspective.

*I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021) is written in memoir's 'traditional' first person narration style. This decision stemmed mostly from lack of awareness of Meghan as character in the years of her addiction, making it difficult to articulate a story from her point of view. But this lack of familiarity begged further investigation into other options of point of view and how those might connect plotlines and challenges in *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021).

Use of first-person narration was common in memoir, but in *Swing Low*, (Toews, 2017) Toews writes an interesting memoir biography hybrid from the imagined first-person perspective of her father, who suffered with depression and bipolar disorder. This unique approach, still written using 'I', immerses both author and reader in her father's voice. She writes,



Two days ago I decided to test my younger brother, who runs this hospital. He sat at the foot of my bed watching me and I sat at the head of my bed watching him. (What was there to say?) Eventually I blurted out, I'm mentally ill. I said it because I wanted him to say that I wasn't or that, if I was, I would soon be fine, that life was like this for a lot of people from time to time, that I wasn't alone, that I had nothing to be ashamed of, and that I'd be just as right as rain in no time. (Toews, 2017, p. 7).

Her approach to memoir breaks from Lejeune's definition of autobiographic texts, and yet according to Lejeune (1989), memoir already lacks some criteria to be truly autobiographical. And so, if already breaking autobiographical 'rules,' first person narration from the point of view of a character other than the author is a creative choice. The effect throughout the book is one of a distanced form of compassion for Toews' father, as well as an understanding of the deep connection between father and daughter. And yet, without living the life of the character, there is no real sense of knowing innermost thoughts, even with considerable research, documents, and other forms of objective truth evidence. Toews would have been required to imagine situations she did not witness as well as the interior thoughts of her father.

The approach was intriguing and Toews handled the challenge with skill, but such a treatment would be difficult to apply to *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021) without enough insight into the experience of alternate characters—namely that of Meghan—which would necessitate a level of recreation that was ethically uncomfortable for me as practice and as a form of scholarly research. While research was undertaken to understand life from an addict's perspective, the Meghan character as an addict remained unknowable due to our lives not intersecting in those time periods, which does not support one of the most palpable themes of sisterhood and relationships. Even in interviewing her, much of those memories were no longer mentally accessible for Meghan due to medications, overdoses, and permanent damage to the brain from addiction.

There was, however, the possibility of second person narration, although literature review revealed this as uncommon in both fiction and non-fiction. Addressing the reader with 'you' phrasing draws the reader directly into the story as a character. But direct address also links to the salutation of a letter, the personal nature of communication.

This literary treatment is handled deftly in Machado's *In the Dream House* (2019). Machado details her experiences suffering domestic partner abuse at the hands of her girlfriend,

all using second person narration with the reader directly addressed as though they are experiencing the abuse.

This is not to say that you seriously considered demonic possession. You are a modern woman and you don't believe in God or any accompanying mythologies. But isn't the best part of a possession story that the inflicted can do and say horrific things for which they'll receive carte blanche forgiveness the next day?...That is what you want. You want an explanation that clears her of responsibility, that permits your relationship to continue unabated. You want to be able to explain to others what she's done without seeing horror on their faces. (Machado, 2017, p.133).

This passage immerses the reader in the text and makes the reader a character. In a similar vein, *Be With: Letters to a Caregiver* (Barnes, 2018) also employs a second person point of view, with letters and salutations to the reader. Both writers handle their point of view choice with aplomb, creating a heightened immediacy, connectedness, and visceral experience for the reader. Second person narration also has a sense of intimacy between reader and author, drawing the reader into the experience regardless of whether or not the reader can relate experientially.

The 'you,' in the letters of *I Cannot Save You* help the reader to gain insight into the intimacy of an otherwise complicated relationship between sisters, just as it did for the Baille sisters in *Sister Language* (Baille, Baille, 2019). In the second letter addressed to Meghan in *I Cannot Save You*, we read, 'Thousands. You owe me thousands of dollars. We've never really talked about the total, like saying the number out loud would summon up your addiction like an Ouija board. And it's not like Mom and Dad would foster these kumbaya chit-chats because they still can't face half the things you did' (Thompson, 2021, p.53). The language used in the letter speaks to the casual yet intimate nature of the relationship, and the 'you' address helps to bring the reader into the frame of mind of the protagonist.

While less traditional narration models were shown as successful in the hands of other authors, these memoirs differed greatly from *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021) in terms of chronology, breadth of themes examined, and structure. Also, and most importantly, the crux of the relationship between Meghan and Kelly as character would be difficult to write from a point of view that is not the author's own. For these reason, traditional, first-person 'I' narration was

determined to be the most effect choice for the creative text while also employing the use of second person narration in the direct address of the epistolary elements of the work.

### **Narrative Distance in Verb Tense**

Writing about the past precipitates writing in past tense, allowing the author to analyse emotions and conflict with the hindsight, education, and age. Contrarily, present tense can allow a reader to experience the emotions of the characters as though living it themselves, making for a visceral and immersive reading experience, as noted by Chee. He writes, ‘The writer Shelley Salamensky might be speaking of the uncertainty Gass mentioned when she says, “In writing nonfiction, present tense inherently asserts an understanding that this is a step-by-step reconstruction from memory—exploratory, tentative, hypothetical, potentially fallible”’ (Chee, 2015). Karr notes that often, especially in first draft, scenes come to her in present tense ‘as if memory’s eye suddenly flipped open. Like many such scenes, it comes to me in florid present tense’ (Karr, 2015, pp.184). In deciding on verb tense, the author must also consider the narrative distance ramifications of such a choice. In present tense, the author cannot write as though the character possesses knowledge that only comes later in life but can illicit powerful feelings of immersion within the text.

Examining narrative distance approach was vital in confirming choices made in *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021). One of the greatest challenges in this work was that as an author, the initial inclination was to write the book in present tense, partially because sections were written daily while the experience was lived. The present tense provided a powerful sense of immediacy to the text, such as, in the scene in which Meghan is dying.

Mom, ever the nurse, keeps her hand on Meghan’s wrist for a pulse while we watch her chest for breath. Has she stopped taking in air? I can’t tell, want to get close and press my cheek to her lips, feel the puff of air there, or lack of it. I want to know for myself, and more than that, I want to be the first to know because I have always read my sister’s lies, her joys, like words on a page, and our final moments together cannot be more lies and subterfuge because this is the most honest thing we will ever experience together simply because it is the last thing we will experience together. (Thompson, 2021, pp.229).

In an attempt to ensure that present tense was the best choice for the work, entire chapters were reworked in past tense but the change altered the sense of breathlessness that came with the

present. In this case, maintaining the first instinct to present tense felt like the most effective choice to tell such a story.

However, with this choice came a limitation of narrative distance, more particularly in earlier sections of the work in which many of the themes and subjects handled are largely influenced by one's education, age, and culture. In addressing, for example, Meghan's addiction in the initial chapters, Kelly as character is limited on literary commentary to what she knows and understands as a teenager, as evidenced in the section in which Kelly find's Meghan's crack cocaine pipe.

I rotate the pipe in my hand, over and over, the smell coating my fingers. I am so, fucking tired. How long has it been down here, in the basement, a balefire of evidence that my family turns a blind eye to? It isn't denial, whatever Mom and Dad are doing, but something more akin to compassion or white, middle-class politeness. The Thompsons cannot be addicts, no, because they are mowing the lawn and sanding the rough patches on the deck and driving their reliable Volkswagens. (Thompson, 2021, p.47).

Twenty-year-old Kelly cannot possibly grasp the complicated nuance of addiction, especially as someone who has not experienced addiction. For that reason, this style and tone of wording is more acceptable to a reader from a protagonist who is growing and learning with the reader.

While the initial plan was to write *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021) in present tense, exploration of other tense treatments were examined to solidify the choice. *Through the Garden* (Crozier, 2020) took a blended approach to tense and narrative distance to examine the author's relationship to Canadian poet, Patrick Lane, as he neared death. Scenes from earlier periods in their three-decade-long relationship that did not deal with Lane's illness were conveyed in past tense, allowing Crozier to look upon their relationship with the benefit of emotional distance from some of their abusive encounters. In one scene, she writes about an author friend who had also published a memoir and, after her divorce, recognized how jealous her husband had always been of her work. Crozier writes, 'It was a woman's dilemma she was talking about: if her career hadn't soared, if she'd remained the secondary figure, the housewife and mother, merely a dabbler in art, their marriage might have lasted' (Crozier, 2020, p.17). Crozier writes such an analysis with the benefit of time, a feminist break from the traditional boundaries of marriage, and career success, since she only makes this connection in more advanced age. In contrast, in

the final weeks of Lane's life, she writes of the suffering in present tense so that the reader might feel the emotion alongside her.

The darkness disappears slowly. Though I worry about what will happen next, about how many weeks we'll have before another crisis, I choose hour by hour to live with hope rather than despair, with closeness rather than distance, with the belief that if I don't risk everything, the days will be dry and shrunk, if I don't give myself over time and again, to love, I will not be worthy of the small space and span I've been allotted on this cherished patch of earth with my charming, brilliant, beloved husband. (Crozier, 2020, pp.209).

It is difficult to imagine Crozier writing such a scene in past tense precisely because she is writing about a specific instance of remaining in the present.

Acquiring memoirs relayed in present tense for research was challenging, with a limited pool of resources. In *Last Things* (Moss, 2017), a graphic memoir, present tense is effectively employed alongside graphic imagery and dialogue bubbles, which allowed the author to use past tense in the narrative content that appeared above each frame. *Dirty Work* (Maxymiw, 2019) was one of few traditionally styled memoirs researched written fully in present tense, detailing the author's experience as a housekeeper at a remote north Canadian resort. She writes,

We're so aware of the temporary nature of our work that we feel panicky and weightless in our bodies. We'll never face this dichotomy again: back in real life, brothers are sisters, sex is sex, and the two don't ever cross, and no amount of calling to one another—*Are you there? It's me*—changes that. If we feel disturbed by what we've considered and created, we never say it. This is the only place in the world where I earn an older brother who I want to kiss. I'm here. (Maxymiw, 2019, p. 228).

While Maxymiw found methods for working around the lack of reflective ability available to a character in present tense narration, including projecting into an imagined future self, the examined themes—sexuality, budding adulthood, ownership of self—might have been more effectively presented from the point of view of an older Maxymiw who could better reflect on childish behaviours for their very childishness, such as camp-based pranks and gender stereotypes. Maxymiw's work also explored a single summer, which allowed full immersion into that time period.

Powerful and eloquent past tense examples were more plentiful in the body of texts examined. In *My Father, Fortune Tellers and Me* (Fantetti, 2019), Fantetti writes a memoir about growing up with an abusive, schizophrenic mother. The author weaves considerable humour, as well as trauma, into the story with deft reflection on her childhood experiences through past tense narration.

I heard my father shouting from the garage. He came back inside and asked me to join him at the upstairs dining table. Charged with the role of mediator, marriage counsellor, and quasi-wife, I ended up as the sounding board for all my father's questions and concerns. My mother held zero interest in solving any household problems, balancing a budget or maintaining the vegetable garden. Adult conversations occurred without her input. Guidance duty exhausted me: I felt old and weary, never wise. (Fantetti, 2019, p.86).

The narrative distance provided to Fantetti through past tense allowed her to analyse childhood experiences through the lens of her adult knowledge of trauma, writing, and mental illness. Furthermore, Fantetti explores these issues extensively in therapy. But her own admission in the book, Fantetti mentally escaped to different worlds to cope with the abuse she suffered (2019, p.107), and therefore, a past tense reflection was necessary to bring the story to life as she did not possess the ability at the time the events took place. In contrast, *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021) was written during and immediately after the death of Meghan, making present tense a more attainable choice in the aftermath of grief and trauma.

After thorough research, present tense narration provided considerable challenges in *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021), namely for the earlier portions of the work in which the characters are young, uneducated, and inexperienced. The most problematic element in the work stemmed from the subject matter and themes being explored, making writing from the point of view of a teenage version challenging when, for example, discussing domestic abuse or addiction—something teenagers and those unread in this area struggle to have perspective on. Without hindsight, the protagonist is unable to reflect back with a sense of wisdom and emotional distance. Conversely, the book was originally written in present tense out of a sense of writer intuition. The story was penned during the lived experience and therefore, was written as such while providing the immediacy and the connection to the experience to readers.

While past tense might have been an easier choice for *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021), the ultimate decision was deferred to the choice that best served the story and themes hoped to resonate with readers. The main source of conflict and thematic analysis was the periods of abuse and the experience of grief and death within the fractured bonds of sisterhood. Since much of that experience was centred around a smaller and more recent time period, and because those themes were the most vital to the story and hinged on the reader connecting to those particular sections, the immediacy offered by present tense was the best choice for the creative portion of this project.

### **Content and Conflict**

Throughout the literary review, there were two major problematics discovered in contemporary memoir in reference to content; the popularity of solely positive, loving relationships absent of discord, and an avoidance of writing about the penultimate moment of death. Both of these tendencies speak to an avoidance of conflict. ‘We more often fail by omitting key scenes’ writes Karr (Karr, 2015, p.156), something she attributes to each author’s fear of sitting with the truth of their own selves. Avoidance of conflict prevents the author achieving (for themselves) and recreating (for the reader and themselves) the deeper level of understanding that comes with an examined life.

Memoirists are, of course, under no obligation to divulge their entire personal life, especially when those details are not vital to the understanding of story and plot. And as discussed, one of the choices an author makes is related to what parts of a story are included and excluded. However, withholding discerning moments relevant to theme creates distrust and skepticism for the reader.

In *The Art of Memoir*, Karr writes about Elisabeth Gilbert’s memoir, in which the author writes about her divorce without divulging the cause of the breakup. ‘She claims the reasons for the divorce are too private—drawing a curtain I respect across those events without seeming coy’ (Karr, 2015, p.155). And yet, as Karr notes, Gilbert gives other details relating to the divorce, but keeps the reader from the ultimate question of why. ‘This is a minor bump in the book’s long journey, but it proves that even the most successful of us misstep from time to time, showing what we should hide and hiding what the reader needs’ (Karr, 2015, p. 156). It’s no wonder that writers who portray grief in memoir might not want to delve into the precise moment of the

death of the person they grieve, simply for the pain it causes. And yet in doing so, the author negates the purpose of writing to better understand an experience.

Avoiding the moment of death in scene, however, coincides with societal discomfort with death. In a government whitepaper studying death and bereavement in Canadian families, Arnup examines how societal changes in death-related practices have changed our comfort levels with death.

Death was frequently a community event, with extended family, friends and neighbours attending to the dying person and then participating in rituals of visiting the family as the body lay at rest...While community support no doubt eased the burden of loss for family members, we ought not to romanticize this period, as death was often painful and abrupt. But the approach and attitudes toward dying meant that people were acquainted with death from an early age, as it was not shrouded in silence or mystery. (Arnup, 2013, p.4).

Before WWII, North Americans were more likely to be born and to die at home, and to be cared for by loved ones, but like births moving from home to the hospital, so too have deaths with the advancement of medical technology and the medicalization of these processes (Arnup, 2013). We've become, over this time, uncomfortable with the tension of death.

Conflict is as difficult to write as it is to experience, because when it is written well, the depiction will convey the same emotions felt when living it. Conflict is inherently uncomfortable, and many find myriad ways to avoid it, but conflict avoidance in prose limits the readers connection to a story. Hodgins writes of a plot's moment of self-understanding and the necessity of that moment for the reader. 'An inevitable result of all that went before, that turning point is not simply a device to release the reader from tension, but an experience that gives the reader some insight into what all this struggle has been about—what meaning the preceding sequence of events has had for the character and what significance it has had for the writer' (1993, p.137). A powerful connection is created when the reader is allowed access to these most private, interior of moments, and furthermore, when the reader is taken on the entire journey instead of a safer, more comfortable portion.

The intention in *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021) was to offer a reader a raw, visceral understanding of death, and therefore, it was vital that the penultimate death scene be depicted, especially considering the spare examples of memoirs that did so. The only found volumes that thoroughly wrote of the moment of death were *All Things Consoled* (Hay, 2018)



and *Dead Mom Walking* (Matlow, 2020). The entirety of *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021) analyses the difficulties of grieving someone with whom we share a complicated relationship, and so if the reader is not allowed access to the scene in which that death occurs, will the reader share the same insight into the ‘significance it has for the writer’, as outlined by Hodgins? Furthermore, Karr points out that memoir fails when we avoid key scenes, and in a manuscript about death and grief, the moment of death is the most pivotal.

For these reasons, in *I Cannot Save You*, the death of Meghan is the longest and most detailed chapter of the manuscript, full of details of the experience that were observed in real time and thus, presented as such. The scene does not turn focus once the character of Meghan dies, but sits with the remaining characters to witness the precise moments of grief and the complexities of that experience.

## **Structure**

Many of the researched memoir texts presented, related to, or discussed the Kübler-Ross Five Stages Theory of dying and grieving. However, as discussed, the theory does not encompass a variety of differing experiences, especially as the author’s body of this research was conducted around primarily white, Christian and middle-aged subjects (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Ultimately, the popularity of the stages of grief and the manner in which the medical, psychological and societal realms took to accepting and promulgating these stages is owed to the appeal of a simplistic, prescribed route through a messy, unrouted territory.

Despite significant evidence that the five stages do not apply to all and are rooted in a specifically educated, white, Christian lens that does not encompass the experience of a great deal of the population, still, these stages persist. As this relates to *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021), and in pursuit of answering one of this project’s main questions (are the Kübler-Ross stages a reality for the grieving and dying as presented in contemporary memoir?), the creative structure of the memoir served as the main methodology for examining other ways to grieve and die. Since the stage theory provided a structural format for doctors and society to process grief, the concept of mirroring that structure as a means to deny the existence of the five stages emerged as a literary device to be exploited in this challenge.

As discussed, the boundaries between memoir and fiction are increasingly blurry as writers explore the genre. As such, application of fictional/literary treatments, including play with structure, are now more readily evident in memoir texts.

*I Cannot Save You* was always conceptualized as being separated into parts that coincided with the five stages of grief, namely as a means of challenging the theory. The parts that were labelled as the five stages and other possible emotions/thoughts, with the scenes, plot and content of the book refuting that stage. For example, Part 1 is titled ‘Denial: Or fear, or certainty, or maturation...’ (Thompson, 2021, p.4), followed by scenes that showcase complete acceptance and awareness on the part of the protagonist, while also making evident the vacillating nature of emotions during any stage of grief or death.

In this choice as it related to creative portion this project, it was vital to explore other structural treatments within contemporary memoir. Several texts provided valuable in this research. In *In the Dream House* (Machado, 2019), the author details her survival of domestic abuse using short, one-to-two-page vignettes that explore a different literary trope, device, or mechanism. Chapters included, The ‘Dream House as Metaphor,’ ‘The Dream House as Lesbian Pulp Novel,’ ‘The Dream House as Character.’ In this structural method, the house in which the couple lived comes alive as another character of the book, an overarching narrator of sorts, while the author also exploits the trope/device/mechanism as a new way to highlight a specific experience. In the chapter, ‘Dream House as Choose Your Own Adventure,’ she writes,

When you turn over, she is staring at you. The luminous innocence of the light curdles in your stomach. You don’t remember ever going from awake to afraid so quickly.

‘You were moving all night,’ she says. ‘Your arms and elbows touched me. You kept me awake.’

If you apologize profusely, go to page 163.

If you tell her to wake you up next time your elbows touch her in your sleep, go to page 164.

If you tell her to calm down, go to page 166. (Machado, 2019, p.162).

This section highlights how structure is used as a form of the storytelling, with the options of ‘adventure choosing’ showcasing the anxiety the author felt in having to make one of those choices (which all, ultimately, end up at the same place in the text).

Other creative structural choices were evident in *Older Sister, Not Necessarily Related* (Wills, 2019) and *Dance Me to the End* (Acheson, 2019), which both employed a short, vignette approach in their memoirs, with the effect creating a poetic perspective rather than a more linear, plot-based analysis. While their chronological approaches differed, both authors employed structure that effectively gave the reader space to breathe between difficult passages and conflicts within the pages. In both books, structure was a powerful tool used to different effect.

Alternatively, there were several researched memoirs that followed a more linear and chronological approach that did not deviate into alternate structural formats, such as *Wheel of Life* (Kübler-Ross, 1977), and *We Have Always Been Here* (Habib, 2019), the author's account of growing up in a Muslim family while identifying as pansexual. *Wheel of Life* arguably belongs in the autobiography genre rather than memoir, especially by Lejeune's definition, covering the entire lifetime of the author with little conflict, plot, or thematic analysis. Overall, it lacked the insight and reflection required of an author to make meaningful connection with the reader. Conversely, Habib's chronological structure was relevant to the themes she explored in her memoir, namely that of identity and self-awareness developing with age and independence. Had it been less linear in structure, it would have been more difficult to join the protagonist on their journey of self-acceptance.

Also examined structurally were books that were sectioned into parts that served in thematic analysis. In *Dead Mom Walking* (Matlow, 2020), Matlow separates the memoir into parts that correlated with the stages of their mother's cancer progression, which was effective in building tension, giving time markers for the reader, and also, in connecting the major themes throughout the book. In *No One Ever Talks About Anything but the End* (Levine, 2020), Levine sectioned her memoir about grief into alphabetical sections that she uses as a framework for her non-linear plot. The use of the alphabet structure allows the reader to both feel unmoored by the author's depiction of grief while providing a sense of security in the form of a structure all English-speaking persons are familiar with.

In writing *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021), applying a structure that assisted in storytelling helped me, as the author, to come to firm decisions around inclusion and exclusion of lived experience, as well as to provide a sense of emotional space between the heavy, affecting content. These thematic markers also help the reader to follow the journey of dying and

grieving under a format and theory (the stage theory) that has become intrinsically linked to discussions around dying while simultaneously serving to consciously dismantle that format.

## **Characterization**

In non-fiction and memoir in particular, tone and dialogue are vital elements that help the reader gain insight into the lens through which the author experiences their life. Through that lens, the author builds resonance and a tangible connection to the reader. Thorough research indicated that letters and other forms of personal communication provided a powerful method through which to achieve that characterization, as the reader is instilled into the tone of the author of the letter as well as the relationship between the author and the recipient of that letter.

After the death of Meghan, the psychological model of narrative therapy encouraged writing letters to her, despite the knowledge they would go unsent and unread. Bringing what was once private writing to public engagement is one element of methodology rooted in narrative therapy, a psychological practice honed by Michael White and David Epston in the nineties (Margaretta, 2010, p. 55) that encourages processing traumas through epistolary practice. By writing a letter, the author can distance themselves from the event as character, taking on a deeper level of comprehension with an omniscient viewpoint in their own lived experiences (Bolton, 1999). The letters I wrote to Meghan were casual, emotion-filled, and simultaneously cathartic as process. I also received many condolence letters and wrote one such letter to my parents to express what could not be said in letters, even though we shared the experience of her death.

The concept of including these letters to set off each ‘part’ or ‘stage’ of the book was rooted in a desire to showcase the intimacy in caregiving and bereavement in this specific relationship, combined with the generalized and global experience of grief and death. Wolf speaks to the intimacy of letters in her book, *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World*, written as a series of letters addressed directly to the reader. She makes note of this choice in the introduction where she writes,

Both letters and memos are genres that bring Calvino’s emphases on “lightness” to issues whose great weight might otherwise make their discussion too heavy for many to confront. Letters allow thoughts that, even when as urgent as some of the

ones to be described, contain those ineffable aspects of lightness and connection that provide the basis of a true dialogue between author and reader—all accompanied by an impetus for new thoughts in you that will go in different directions from my own. (Wolf, 2018, p. 10).

There is, then, a relationship built between sender and recipient, even if such a connection doesn't yet exist, is fractured, or ended. That relationship could then be exploited as a literary device to connect the reader and author by creating a dialogue not only between writer and sender, but also reader and writer.

Letters also offer unique insight into the relationship between writer and recipient. The author of a letter might refer to shared personal experiences, use slang/jargon that connects writer and recipient, or allow the reader to see under the formal language of publishing and into the informal language shared between two people with intimate knowledge of one another. In this way, correspondence between two people makes the reader privy to elements of the author not typically available in traditional characterization (such as dialogue, imagery, and description), while helping the author to make sense of shared experiences, and create a new language within which to understand the meaning behind these experiences. The style and tone of letters is reminiscent of the draw and power of dialogue within a memoir or a novel: through dialogue, we come to know the characters because of their tone, their jargon, and their speech patterns. The application of letters within memoir, then, was full of potential for connection and intimacy with the reader while showcasing the inner workings of language and dialogue between sisters, further enhancing understanding of the bond between characters.

After thorough research into epistolary collections, and in considering the value of dialogue and interaction between characters to build a sense of investment for the reader, letters created a means by which the reader could witness the intimacy between the sisters in *I Cannot Save You* despite the heavy thematic analysis of the work, with the author of the letters able to say things previously unsaid or lament issues unresolved.

The idea, then, of letters as dialogue, is naturally appealing for those who have lost a loved one. What does it mean to communicate with someone once they die? Does communication have to end? Kübler-Ross addressed this concept in her work. She wrote, 'As far back as we can remember, writing has been a tool to help us say, "we were here." In a historical sense, to say who we were and what happened to us matters. Ancient writings may have been

created to communicate with others in the area and perhaps even to communicate with future generations. But they always originated with a longing to connect. That longing is never stronger than when a deep connection has been broken' (Kübler-Ross, Kessler, 2014, p.143). In letters, we are able to communicate in a way that is not possible in person, or once someone is no longer living. Bolton writes, 'People feel they can say things to others in writing which they couldn't bring themselves to say in speech. This is partly because the words can be mulled over and redrafted, partly because it is not a face-to-face communication and partly because the letter will endure with time, as spoken words cannot' (Bolton, 1999).

Since letters can convey a wealth of characterization in a page, they can be a powerful method of storytelling and communication after death and so, warranted inclusion within *I Cannot Save You*. This is evident in the history of *consolatio*, and its genre of examining death with poeticism and literary treatment. In one of his condolence letters, Rilke writes,

Time itself does not "console," as people say superficially; and at best it assigns things to their proper place and creates order. —Alas, how little the heart forgets—and how strong it would be if we did not stop it from completing its task before they have been fully and truly accomplished!—Not wanting to be consoled for such a loss: That should be our instinct. Instead, we should make it our deep and searing curiosity to explore such loss completely and to experience the particular and singular nature of this and its impact within our life. (Rilke, 2018, p.69).

In this passage, Rilke encourages the reader to sit with their grief, embrace it as one of life's experiences, and to lean into the experience with curiosity. This advice harkens to the original genre of *consolatio*, created by the stoics to examine grief and loss as necessary to life, and blends it with the more modern practice of condolence letters with an offering of sympathy. Rilke, a writer and artist, requires of the reader the same that is required of the memoirist to write quality work as it relates to storytelling. The author must sit with their sense of grief, explore it deeply, to understand the impact of loss, which was the precise effect for me, as author, in including these letters in a memoir that seeks to do the same.

## Discussion

### Telling Personal Truths and Memory

Evident in both research and practice is that writing memoir is a challenging, emotional experience for the author. Yet, dually, that practice and creation of the product—the book—is an act of gaining knowledge and understanding of lived experience and therefore, worthwhile, as noted by Boyer. ‘The truth must be written for someone, a someone who is all of us, all who exist in that push and pull of what bonds of love tie us to the earth and what suffering drives us from it’ (2019, p. 134).

While writers may feel their work is worthwhile, those outside of the field have questioned my personal motivation for such a work. Why mire oneself in the devastation rather than work towards moving forward? Is writing dwelling, or does the act help to dispel the cognitive dissonance inherent in traumatic experiences?

Despite its emotional challenges, there is, in the practice of vulnerable memoir that shows the difficulty and conflict within an experience, a way of digging deeper to the truth and heart of that experience. As Shapiro writes in *Inheritance*,

I grew up to be a storyteller. I moved from fiction to memoir, writing one, two, three, four—now five—memoirs. I captured my life, and the life of my family, between the pages of book after book and thought: There, that’s it. Now I understand. I dug until my shovel hit rock. But the truth is that I have a terrible memory. I struggled to access any of my childhood or even my teenage years. I had no collection of it as a story. And so I followed my own line of words to see where it would lead me. I understood that there were layers, striations of consciousness, inaccessible through analysis or intellect. Only in a state of half dreaming could I begin—and then only barely—to touch the truth. (Shapiro, 2019, p.165).

And so, if a writer has an opportunity to explore a difficult experience, memoir offers the opportunity to do so.

As previously examined, there is, a large pool of memoir controversy as it relates to fact and personal truth, and each writer must make peace with their own decisions as it relates to personal truth and fact. ‘Memoirists don’t tell true stories; they sell “truthy” ones. Like a film that dramatizes historical events, all memoirs should come with a standard disclaimer: “This

book is *based* on a true story” (Gottschall, 2012, p. 108). He continues, ‘A life story is a “personal myth” about who we are deep down—where we come from, how we got this way, and what it means. Our life stories are who we are. They are our identity. A life story is not, however, an objective account. A life story is a carefully shaped narrative that is replete with strategic forgetting and skillfully spun meanings’ (Gottschall, p. 127).

Scientifically, we know that the memory is not without fault and is victim to bias, trauma, age, and natural memory ability. In particular, Tavis and Aronson discovered, ‘We misremember the past in a way that allows us to maintain protagonist status in the stories of our own lives’ (2020, p.21). Memory is especially faulty as it relates to traumatic experiences and attempt to recreate them. ‘When we remember complex information, we shape it to fit into a story line. Because memory is reconstructive, it is subject to confabulation’ (Tavis, Aronson, 2020, p.9). It is, then, scientifically natural for memoir to make the protagonist the centre of the story and to have memories conform to our personal truth.

The truth debate around memoir rages in literary communities, and as discussed, authors have developed methods in which to address this potential conflict with disclaimers/author notes that acknowledge the fallibility of memory. Yet if scientific study shows that memory is prone to mistakes, and authors do the work to acknowledge that fault, then some onus must remain with the reader to eliminate some element of the cognitive dissonance surrounding memory and personal truth and fact. There is no one way to tell a story, and there are many sides to each.

### Embracing Conflict in Prose

#### (Death and Troubled Relationships)

*‘If I wrote vaguely enough, I risked nothing’ (Karr, 2015, p. 133).*

A memoir that does not delve deeper into surface-level character portrayal or conflict avoidance negates that reader’s ability to access the knowledge the author gains from the act of writing.

To watch someone scrutinize a painful history in depth—which I’ve done as a teacher and editor and while working with former drunks trying to clear up ancient crimes—is to witness not inconsiderable pain. You have to lance a boil and suffer its stench as infection drains off. Yet all the scrupulous self-examinations over time I’ve been witness to—whether on the page or off—



always ended with acceptance and relief. For the more haunted among us, only looking back at the past can permit it finally to become past. (Karr, 2015, p.12).

Grief counsellors take a similar view in sharing stories of grief. In *Anxiety: the Missing Stage of Grief*, we read, ‘Several things happen when we stifle our stories of loss. Namely, we lose the opportunity to really explore that story, to unpack it, to deeply understand it, and to give it a home outside of our bodies. When we find ways to externalize the story, we gain the opportunity to see the different ways that the story we are carrying serves us or harms us’ (Bidwell Smith, 2018, p.68). In her essay about her memoir as a product of research, Bolt details her characters’ reckoning as well as her own in the creative writing practice. ‘This empowerment may be referred to as a kind of healing, but not the kind that sweeps feelings under the carpets: rather the kind that is about living with hard scenarios’ (Bolt, Barrett, 2007, p.39).

And so, the memoirist’s job is to embrace conflict, difficult subject matter, and difficult relationships—or risk limiting the benefit of the examined life. It’s for this reason that *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021) necessitated a concerted effort to lean into conflict and portray it in a powerful, descriptive, present-tense language that conveyed the immediacy and desperation of those scenes.

Looking the available literature, it’s easy to see the power in storytelling that is complicated, nuanced, and riddled with conflict. In *Dead Mom Walking* (2020), the greatest source of conflict is the foremost centrepiece of the plot: Matlow’s mother refused to acknowledge the severity of her illness and sought a variety of wholistic treatments that ignored doctor recommendations that would have saved her life. The frustration felt by Matlow is palpable.

Mom’s avoidance was frustrating and painful to watch. She was always worried about everything except the cancer that had been slowly but determinedly killing her for the last five years. She worried about catching a cold. She worried about the mercury in her fillings. She worried about the toxins in her fish. On one level, I knew this obsession with the small stuff was her attempt to regain some control, to distract her from dealing with the real terror. But it still pissed me off. Her choosing death over life was painfully impossible to compute. She was choosing death over me. (Matlow, 2020, p.192).

Matlow allows us to connect with their mother and the journey they share because the author acknowledges their frustration and anger with their mother despite loving them. This relationship, the reader knows, is complicated, and so the reader is more willing to suspend any disbelief in Matlow's account. It is a book that shows the prismatic nature of relationships, which makes Matlow a trustworthy narrator of her own account.

Embracing conflict in scenes, too, helps to build towards that connection with the reader and allow a deeper analysis of complex experiences. Books in which the moment of death was clearly outlined, where the author did not turn the reader away from the most difficult moment in their lives, allowed a new insight into the experience of death, combined with a greater appreciation for the tenacity and beauty of man. Hay's *All Things Consoled* (2018) is a realistic depiction of the moment one dies. 'His eyes were closed, his mouth open, his head tilted a bit to the left. The sheet and a light-blue blanket covered him up to his shoulders. His skin was yellowish and marble-like. Cool when I touched his scalp, his cheek, his ear. The rest of him was still warm. Not lemon yellow or saffron, but old piano-key yellow' (Hay, 2018, p. 213). Many of the other books failed to sit with this moment and let the emotions, visuals and imagery sit with the reader.

Much like Hay, Matlow also examines the exact moment of their mother's death in *Dead Mom Walking* (Matlow, 2020).

We sat on either side of her and each took one of her hands. "I love you, Mom. Love you," we both said, over and over, as the gurgling quieted and long silences stretched between breaths. Breaths turned to gasps, then to gasping in slow motion, like a fish out of water. She took on last inhalation and then slowly exhaled, her head lowering gradually with every bit of air released, before coming to a full and complete stop. Her large hazel eyes went black. I was shocked by how totally empty they were. (Matlow, 2020, p. 268).

These palpable scenes, in which the reader is exposed to the moment of death, allows a fuller, deeper understanding of the experience, making for more meaningful resonance. The reader is shown the beauty and the ugly of this trauma. The personal impact of these texts highlighted their conflict-embracing scarcity within the genre, and further strengthened the resolve to ensure the creative portion of this work examined the moment of death in a difficult relationship in hopes of demystifying the experience around death, illness, and bereavement.

Similarly, in *Dance Me to the End* (Acheson, 2019), the author examines scenes of frustration in caregiving for her husband, who is dying of ALS. ‘The burden grew, not to allow him to see the grieving process in me. Or to see enough to know I cared. How much did he need to see? How much did I need to let him see? How much did I need to hide? I didn’t know the answers. What might be an answer could change, moment to moment’ (Acheson, 2019, p. 115). The honesty of this reveal assists in creating investment in the author’s journey, even if the experience is dramatically different from the reader’s own life.

Books in which the dead are lamented as complicated individuals with complicated relationships made for a narrator/protagonist who is instantly more trustworthy. When, as discussed previously, authors make themselves more believable in their honesty and willingness to examine their own flaws and portray realistic characters, then a spotlight on conflict-riddled relationships shows the reader the author is capable and willing to be vulnerable, to risk.

### Alternatives to the Stage Theory

For many, living an experience with dying and bereavement immediately highlights the fallacy of the five-stage theory. Overwhelmingly, it was clear through literary analysis and personal experience that the stages of grief outlined by Kübler-Ross, while part of our known narrative around grief and dying, are not indicative of a greater experience of grief or dying. Characters, no matter the genre, vacillated through a wide variety of emotions and states of being throughout their journeys. Bidwell Smith writes, ‘I do believe that there is a very real process to grief, but I think that it looks different for every individual. I think that each person must sift through their own waves of sadness and anger, anxiety and regret. And most of all, I believe that the part of the grieving process that can bring the most healing is when we can find ways to stay connected to our loved ones rather than feeling like we have to let go of them’ (2018, p.12).

An accurate portrayal of bereavement was vital for the creative success of *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021), and to do so, required showing how my personal experience and that of my family was not in line with any of the stages. Kübler-Ross states that ‘all’ patients will eventually accept their death, however, to rebut this argument, *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021) includes a scene in which Meghan is about to receive palliative sedation. ‘Meghan pauses, to what? Swallow down more tears? She rarely talks of the kids now, whether it is because it

hurts her too bad or she's too drugged or resigned, I don't know. It hasn't been acceptance, certainly. Nothing about this is something she accepts, which I can't help but wonder if serves as the reason she's still breathing—sheer determination to alter fate's course' (Thompson, 2021, p. 207). By using the phrase 'acceptance,' readers are reminded of the stage theory but immediately told how it does not apply in this instance, and therefore, does not apply to 'all.'

In writing the creative portion of this project, several other possible stages emerged. One of the common themes throughout many of the memoirs researched is confusion amongst the dying and bereaved. Navigating the health care system is often full of stress and questions that go unanswered, both for patients and their loved ones. There can also be communication barriers, terminology concerns, and misinterpretation on both parts of the patient and doctor (Graham, Brookey, 2008). The sheer amount of information available can be daunting, and deciphering medical jargon requires knowledge and education beyond the average layman. Doctors are pressed for time, with more patients and fewer resources. The confusion is a confluence of issues including time, resources, education, and more.

Another common emotion in the dying and bereaved closely linked guilt and regret—another possible stage. Guilt reveals itself in many forms. Those who live often battle 'survivor guilt' as they watch the decline or death of their loved one, knowing they will live on (Harpham, 2018). 'For whatever reasons (and the possibilities are endless), survivors may experience a disquieting sense of guilt. Even a concerted focus on gratitude may not resolve the discomfort' (Harpham, 2018). Evidence of such guilt was revealed in much of the literature analysed in this project, both experienced by the dying and the bereaved. Examples such as *Dance Me to the End* (Acheson, 2019), *H is for Hawk* (Macdonald, 2013), *A Short History of Falling* (Hammond, 2019), all discussed guilt over dying and leaving behind family, guilt in finding joy, guilt in irritation over caregiving.

In *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021), the protagonist experiences many brushes with guilt surrounding her treatment of her sister. One such instance arises after Meghan's death. 'I hung up feeling inexplicably guilty before making calls to aunts, uncles, grandparents, keen to get the process over with so I could sit with my own thoughts. And yet the hardest nugget of knowledge had laid itself bare after her death—even when it feels that everything should be different after a loved one dies, nothing actually is. The world remains unchanged while your personal world combusts' (Thompson, 2021, pp. 240).

Another relevant stage to dying and grieving is anxiety—an emotion not overtly discussed by Kübler-Ross, despite its prevalence amongst the general population, much less those who receive terminal diagnoses or those grieving the loss of a loved one. For the dying, ‘anxiety in the terminal stage of the disease stems from the prospective final analysis of one's life as well as the species survival instinct and the instinct for self-preservation that is associated with the feeling of terror’ noted grief researchers (Glińska, Adamska, Lewandowska, Kobos, 2012, pg. 2). In *Anxiety: The Missing Stage of Grief* (2018), Bidwell Smith notes that anxiety can often develop in response to pushing away a response to grief. ‘The deeper and more complex the grief, the deeper and more intense the relationship was, good or bad. And it is the exploring of that relationship, that love of that complexity, that helps us understand more about where the anxiety is coming from’ (2018, p.34).

There is also anxiety around fear that one isn't mourning ‘properly,’ an idea supported by Bidwell Smith. She writes, ‘My clients seek me out, desperate for a way to grapple with their anxieties but they also come because they are not sure how to process their grief. They arrive in my office filled with confusion about Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's famed five stages. They are worried that they have gone about the grieving process all wrong, that they haven't followed the formula correctly, or that they've skipped a stage or dwelled too long in another’ (Bidwell Smith, 2018, p.11). In Bidwell Smith's practice, she sees the five stages as creating anxiety for the bereaved based on the assumption of a prescribed route.

The dying also face a great amount of anxiety and fear. A person might be afraid about dying before their children grow, or what will happen to family members once they are gone. Furthermore, anxiety for the terminally ill does not simply revolve around issues that feel ‘unresolved,’ such as guilt or practical matters like finances, as noted by *Contemporary Oncology Journal*. Statistically, those who receive a terminal diagnosis face a drastic increase in anxiety, often for which they require or receive medication, with more than 86% of patients in a study showing symptoms (Glińska, Adamska, Lewandowska, Kobos, 2012). *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021) refers several times to Meghan medicated for anxiety as she panics about her death, or the protagonist's panic as the funeral directors arrive for Meghan's body.

I don't want my sister in this van, away from me, with strangers in a rapist van, taking her to be burnt to ash. Panic blooms, my throat tight, tears dampening my banana printed t-shirt front. In this outfit I went from a sister to a sister without a

sister and I hate this fucking t-shirt even though it was on sale and it fits perfectly and Meghan loved it. I am a thirty-four-year-old woman wearing bananas and my sister is dead and none of this makes sense. (Thompson, 2021, p.238).

## **No Stages at All**

*I Cannot Save You* was not a methodology for discovery of whether or not the Kübler-Ross stages were a prescribed grief method, as lived experience already highlighted the potential of other stages. Resources about grief, dying, and palliative care have indicated that the above-mentioned emotions could easily be stages that are experienced by the dying and grieving, further evidenced anecdotally by the corpus of memoir researched for this project. While authors and doctors search for an explanation that can offer information and guidance on these profound life experience, the variances in experience across age, ethnicity, religion, illness, relationship and myriad other factors reveal the potential of no stages at all. While some emotions and stages could be considered universal—except for those with mental health disorders that preclude it—emotions themselves are universal. Feeling, in and of itself, is the only guarantee.

By her own admission, Kübler-Ross did not intend for the five stages to be applied so literally and broadly by the medical community and her readers (Kübler-Ross, 1969). (Although, as mentioned, there are several reasons for which they were assumed as such, and Kübler-Ross did not spend much time refuting the idea.) Medical studies and practice have further revealed that the five-stage theory has not held up to scrutiny over time, and yet it remains a sort of mythological cannon within the field of grief and death.

Despite the lack of evidence to back up the Kübler-Ross stage theory of grief, its original birthplace, *On Death and Dying*, has been cited 15 509 times on Google Scholar at the time of writing. It has been applied to everything from the grief processes of those diagnosed with diseases like COPD or HIV, to the grief experienced by caregivers of those with dementia; patients who have amputations due to diabetes; doctors who receive low patient satisfaction scores or go through reduced resident work hours; even (and I am not making this up) the grief experienced by consumers after the iPhone 5 was a disappointment. (McVean, 2019).

As indicated in previous sections, the Kübler-Ross method doesn't make room for alternate experiences that go outside of her temporal jurisdiction: namely white, middle-class, Christian people in the 1960s. Emotions vary widely based on a variety of factors for which

Kübler-Ross didn't account. Literary review, as well as personal experience and medical documentation of other terminal patients has revealed that the stages do not exist, albeit, many feel a range of emotions that may encompass some of those outlined by Kübler-Ross. Grief and death are complicated.

## Closing

*'Long before there were therapists there were poets, and from time immemorial man has struggled to cope with his inevitable inner turmoil. One way of so coping has been the ballad, the song, the poem' (Bolton, 1999, p.98).*

This project began as a process to understand personal loss, and for authors and artists, producing art can have a profound psychological impact. It makes sense, then, that a memoirist like myself would turn to memoir to process their own grief, a concept supported by Bolton, who wrote;

One of the ways writing is different from talking, and similar to the plastic arts such as painting, is that a piece of writing is an object which is separate from the writer's mind. As such, it can, therefore, be related to, and worked upon, as a separate entity. Crafting the writing into a form seems to make it even more of an object, increasing its power to communicate back to the writer. The fact that poetry, fiction or autobiography might also be able to communicate to others (in a way journal writing is less likely to) is a happy by-product. (Bolton, 1999, pg 98).

Both process and product help a writer to process grief. And as Bolton says, the finished product then will take on new form in the hands of the reader.

However, bereavement is inherently complicated, no matter the relationship to the dead. The search for texts that showed the reality of death—the precise moment and coinciding emotions—was challenging, with that penultimate death scene often held back from the reader. An overwhelming majority of the literary depictions of bereavement and death on the North American market centred on healthy relationships, with the dead often held in high esteem. And while the Kübler-Ross Method is a known entity in Western culture's understanding of death and grief, it has also been debunked by scientists and those who have experienced loss, yet countless contemporary texts about death and bereavement returned to this model as the standard. Not fitting into that standard left a feeling of having not grieved properly, and so this project aimed to be a rebuttal to the typical grief and bereavement narrative.

Grief and dying are unique experiences for all, and there is no prescribed route or method through it. Not only did the memoir as a finished text produce answers to my posed research



questions, but also, assisted in finding language, words, images, and characterization that reached out to the grieved in my bereavement. Epistolary writing maintained a conversation and communication not only with my sister, a primary character in *I Cannot Save You* (Thompson, 2021), but with the reader who may or may not have a shared experience.

Grief and dying are complicated, but words help us to understand, and how we choose to tell those stories, as well as the decisions made in that process, are powerful tools for examining what it means to be human. Art may not heal painful experiences of bereavement, but it can be one of the steps towards living with it by giving it a new life on the page.

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# I Cannot Save You

A memoir of trauma and grief

by Kelly S. Thompson





Author's Note

This is a work of memoir. My memory is flawed, although extensive notes were maintained throughout this time period.

Some details have been changed to protect identities and serve in storytelling.

Part 1:

*Denial?*

*Or fear, or certainty, or maturation...*

Dear Meg,

Found a picture of you today and burst into tears, missing you or mad at you. Sometimes it's still so hard to tell.

The pic is faded, dark from crap exposure and thirty-six years of aging but also, Dad's shitty camera skills. It's your birthday, second or first (who can ever tell how old babies are?) but you're bald. That much is clear. Bald from the chemo, not just typical baby down. Dark circles under your eyes. Sallow skin. You're wearing a white and pink frilly dress, and looking at this picture now, I'm anxious for the mess I know those baby hands will make of the birthday cake in front of you on the high-chair table. I'm anxious for so many reasons.

Mom is turned into you, kissing you with her perfect pout. You both look happy, maybe a little clueless. I love this picture so much that I literally touch it—seriously, Meg—like I'm in a Hallmark commercial, and I drag my fingers across your meeting mouths and then I have to run to the bathroom to puke. You know how much I hate puke.

Holding the photo, I like to think of the love in that room, of all the people who hoped you'd be better, how close you edged towards that darkness but then performed some magic fake-out, holding onto that death reveal for another thirty-five years. I think of everyone's denial that cancer would catch up with you, combined with my weird certainty of this fact. It makes me proud, oddly, that you'd go messing with everyone's assumptions. Everyone except the person who knew you best, see?

And then I hate you. I hate you for the hope etched on Mom's face in these pictures, her belief, her stress, her motherly, martyrized love that has no idea what's coming. It's the innocence of both of you that hurts so bad.

It doesn't make sense, but I stopped trying to make sense of all this a long time ago. So, I'm writing.

I'm always fucking writing.

—Kelly

1998

“What am I going to do?” Meghan whispers into the phone, her hand cupped around the receiver. I hover outside her bedroom, careful of every squeak of the floor in our military housing at Canadian Forces Base Borden, our home the last six years since Dad rejoined the military. Meghan’s shoulders shake with tears as she plucks at a loose thread on the bedspread. “I can’t have a baby. Not now.”

A baby. My sister = a mother. The knowledge is both a kick to the gut and yet weighty with the chance to rat on her. But also, understanding that this issue is above my thirteen-year-old pay grade. This isn’t like tattling for missing curfew. Doctors said Meghan would likely never have children of her own, because of the kidney cancer she had as a toddler and all the radiation near her reproductive organs. She barely survived, so to me, it’s not a huge deal because she’s living and that should be enough. I don’t get what the big fuss is about—who wants to be a mother, anyway?—but it’s always been something my sister moaned about. She wants a family. She has always wanted a family. Until now, I have been all that she needed to fill that void, the one she cared for instead.

Meghan continues whispering and my eyes squint into her dark room, rain hammering against the windows. Her head lolls back on her floral comforter, the comforter she’s been complaining is dated because of the ruffles and matching frothy lace shams. Hatred and anger bubble up in me like vomit and I want to scream, shake her, tell her how I saw it coming with every boyfriend she proclaimed to love since she was twelve. The moment puberty hit, I’ve

become non-existent, *persona non grata*. Too young. Too everything for her to make space for me in the world we've always shared. What do boys have that I don't?

Anxiety bubbles up and I pick at my cuticles and chew off a hangnail. Most people would know I can hardly function alongside my battle with nerves because I top lists, accomplish things. Last week, I was the Valedictorian and won the Top Academic Female award at my grade eight graduation. I accepted both awards by clomping to the front of the stage with my new three-inch heels, hunched shoulders carrying the spaghetti straps of my knee-length dress. My classmates wore evening gowns that looked suited to grown women, hems dusting their ankles over heels they didn't wobble on, their arms linked lazily around dates like it was the most natural thing in the world. I have never kissed a boy. My date agreed to go with me so that he could get access to the party and make out with someone else.

Meghan sat in the audience and brought her boyfriend, Donovan, but she also brought along her boobs, which were busting out of a shirt that looked like lingerie, her skirt so short that her bum cheeks popped out. Mom kept reaching forward to tug it lower during the ceremony. Every time I made eye contact with my sister, I burned deep red with shame, or when my friends asked if I'm related to the "slut" in the back of the school gym.

"My parents are going to kill me," Meghan sobs into the phone. Her voice raises and she glances around looking for spies. I shuffle back behind the door. It's been almost four years of my sister punting me outside of our own relationship in favour of boys wearing Axe body spray, getting caught petting in bus shelters while I am relegated to lone Barbie adventures and movie nights. She used to be the greatest medicine for my late-night anxiety, my best friend, my protector. Now, what? So, I do not feel bad for Meghan. She made her bed, and now I relish for her laying in it.

I don't deny this feeling within the pages of my journal. In those pages, she is a villain. I am the heroine who makes all the right choices, gets all the good grades, says all the nice things. I have my own friends now. I don't need my sister to stand in and pretend.

"You shouldn't be in here," I say to Meghan snidely. From my hot tub perch, lined with the scum of dead skin cells from unknown users, I gesture to a sign on the wall indicating that pregnant or breastfeeding women should consult their doctor before stewing in the murky water. Smugness makes my voice too loud, echoing into the steeped recreation area of the Holiday Inn near Yorkdale Mall. A puff of chlorinated air circles my nose and I resist coughing up phlegm and adding it to the grey water.

"What does it matter?" she snaps. Her eyes glower, cheeks alight. There is a baby today that will be gone tomorrow. *Poof*. Like a mirage. Dad has been imploring Meghan to take prenatal vitamins—her health is important right now—the words uttered through pursed, angry lips. He was horrified to discover she is sexually active, no longer his baby. Meanwhile, I am his baby. I will not leave, will not have kids, will not even want men. *I want to live with you and Mom forever*, I said, sitting on the couch watching *Jeopardy* with Dad. He nodded but smiled, hearing me, but not really.

"Aren't you worried that you might, like, fry it or something?"

"It's not a piece of meat, Kelly." But her hands go to her belly protectively and she stands, sits on the edge of the water with her feet dangling in. We call the baby "it" because none of us seem capable of giving it a name, an identity beyond. But now I find myself wondering, as warm water drips from her suit, if she has given the baby a name, spoken to it at night, worried

about frying it in too hot water. To me, a thing. To my sister—who spent our childhood nursing dolls and singing them lullabies while I sat on my dollies and pretended to be a doctor—a baby.

Bubbles tickle my arms and I swat at sweat that streams down my face. Nearby, an elderly man in a too-tight Speedo lowers himself into the pool for laps and while we don't share glances, Meghan and I both squelch mutual laughter.

“You feel okay though?” My concern peeks through my anger, anger I don't understand. I've spent a lot of time imagining the potential crib down the hall from my room, the late nights, the anxious cries that won't be mine, the stories that will no longer be told to *me*. A green haze of jealousy grips my throat until I feel I cannot breathe.

“I'm fine. Sort of.” She rubs her tummy. “I know I have to get rid of it though.” This, a whisper.

Her face conveys something momentarily, a desire to savour the pregnancy that medical pros said was impossible. Until she is eighteen, the pediatric oncologists at Sick Kid's Hospital host the annual Thompson Trek to Toronto, hoping to reaffirm her remission. Mom and Dad death-grip each other's hands on these trips, placate us with smiles as Meghan and I test the strength of our legs on the subway, not holding onto the bars as the cars screech to a halt. With each appointment, the doctors draw Meghan's blood and mine, too, just to put her at ease because Meghan hates seeing blood and I am the dutiful sister. We still request matching stickers to cover the Band-Aid even as we hit teenagerhood, raising our fists in the air with accomplishment post-draw.

This trip to Sick Kids, of course, has been different. Yesterday, sitting with the doctors in the Sick Kids offices, Meghan had turned her head away from the ultrasound tech and tried to ignore the beating heart. I could not have a matching scan to ease her fears. Instead, I sat pouting

in the waiting room, stupidly angry at my sister for ending life in a place where so many people came to try to spare it. I don't want to admit I don't understand any of this, that it's so much to take in, that I love her but hate her, too.

"You don't have to do something you don't want to do," I say. I'm not even sure what I mean. Am I say she can have a baby? She can't of course. It's a moot discussion. Meghan regards me with skepticism before her face changes to compassion. Then she shakes her head like trying to rid herself of a dream.

"You're such a kid. You don't understand."

Later that night, Dad snores alongside Mom in the double bed next to the one my sister and I share. The curtains don't close properly, so bright lights from highway 401 stream in, lighting diamonds on the beige walls.

Meghan reaches out for me, the scratchy polyester coverlet grating between us. "Kell, I'm scared." She didn't need to tell me. I can tell by her rigid body, her inability to sleep, her raw cuticles from where she's been pick, pick, picking. I know her, know she is terrified, know she is stupid, know she is still my sister and still a teen. I know all of this.

"I don't care."

I dramatically flop a pillow down on the floor, curl into a ball with a blanket I source from the closet. I tell myself, hours later when I finally fall asleep, when my sister is finished crying, that the greatest betrayal is that she is ridding herself of a baby, of a mistake that she caused. This lie I tell myself is easier than the truth.



2001

The house is perched on a hill overlooking the tired hamlet of Cookstown. From this angle, the town appears even smaller than it already is, full of antique shops and large animal feed co-ops to serve the surrounding farmland. Fields left barren over the winter show rows of harvested cornhusks peeking out from melting snow. March is an ugly time in southern Ontario, when the snow sticks to the side of the road in salty crust and winter boots are swathed in mud. The house rises out of the muck like an apparition, a perfect replica of a Disney haunted house, on-the-nose in its ominousness.

I pull into the gravel driveway, feeling scared and sick to my stomach, partially because I am perpetually uneasy, with a constant ripple of anxiety that oozes through my pores since what, birth? But also, here, this house, these people. I park my red Toyota Tercel underneath a sparse maple, taking a moment to smooth my hand across the faded paint and kick the lawn mower-sized tires. I could leave, right now, spare us the anguish.

I tuck a strand of short, blonde hair behind my ear and walk assertively to the front door and knock. No answer. I knock again and pull my winter coat tighter around my neck, although I've been trying to leave it loose, just a little bit, because that's what cool people do. The trick is to never let anyone know you're freezing.

The door flings open and Glen greets me with a wash of familiarity, leaning against the doorjamb with forced casualness. Glen is good looking, except for the unibrow that clings to his forehead like a wriggling annelid. He's kind too, always opening car doors and full of wide, toothy smiles. Glen has crush on me, which should be exciting because he's three years older—

Meghan's age—and he has a cool car. One time, he took me out to play an overpriced game of golf at the Nottawasaga Inn. He hovered over me at the ninth hole, his arm looped around the pin. I made par but didn't let him kiss me.

“Hey,” Glen says, the centipede bouncing.

“Hi. Do you live here too?”

“Naw, just hanging out with the guys.” He leans in closer and the sharp smell of his cologne stings my nostrils.

“My sister around?”

“Meg? Yeah, she's in the back.” Glen nods in the direction of the living room. From the front step, I see people lounging on furniture that looks like it wouldn't even sell at the Salvation Army. Then again, I'm not sure what I expected, with five twenty-year-old guys and my sister all living in the same house.

“So, can I see her? Can I come in?”

“Oh, yeah!” Glen stands to one side. I pause to take off my shoes but upon examination of the carpet, and Glen's brownish-white sport socks, decide against it. Meghan bounces in from the living room and throws her arms around my waist. I am tall enough to rest my chin on her head.

“It's good to see you,” she says, as if it has been years and not a few months, her voice catching.

“Good to see you too.”

“Man, hard to believe you two are even related,” Glen says, shaking his head.

It isn't the first time that someone has looked at us both and questioned our lineage. Me, tall and blonde, quick to tan whereas Meghan is short, brunette, and singses red and freckled at

the slightest hint of sun. Today, her curvy frame disappears under a man's sweatshirt and loose-fitting pants. She smells like Herbal Essences shampoo and the cheap body spray she buys at Shoppers Drug Mart. It's hard to survey her in the dim light but her eyes are rimmed with red and her face is swollen and blotchy. Thompson women are hideous criers.

"You been crying?"

"No." She wipes at her face even though nothing is there. "I'm fine. Come say hi to Tony." She pulls me into the living room.

When I was a kid, wide awake and caught up in the complexities of obsessive compulsive disorder and perpetual anxiety, Meghan was the only person who could soothe me. After listening to my unsettled sobs from down the hall, she would creep into my room, her flannel nightgown swishing around her feet, then crawl into bed with me, grip my tiny hand in hers and make up stories of magic carpets and sand dunes, lands that sprouted from her imagination. *Shh. It's okay. I'm here.* She would stroke my hair until I fell asleep and I would drift off, surrounded by the smell of that same Herbal Essences shampoo.

In the living room with the crowd of men, the dank smell is stifling—a mixture of spilled beer, stale cigarette smoke, and a whiff of weed. The end tables, the mantle and the coffee table all look like they have never met with a rag. I hover awkwardly in the entryway while Meghan flops on the couch next to her latest boyfriend, one of a horrifyingly long list. He has a wide face and a brutish body, although everyone looks imposing next to my petite sister, and his hair the colour of espresso.

"Kelly, you remember Tony, eh?"

"Hi," I say, waving limply.

"What the fuck man! You've got to watch my back."

Tony is engaged in a full-blown attack in some war simulating video game. My presence, it seems, does not offer cause to break his concentration.

“And this is everyone else,” Meghan says, sweeping her arm around the room. I wave and the four guys grunt in return, then refocus on their game that blazes on an imposing television screen, which of course, is impeccably clean. Glen places a drink in my hand, red and fizzing. I take a sip before I realize it is heavy with vodka.

I don't have the capacity for being a laid back, party-hearty teenager. Not while I worry about germs on errant beer bottles and the lack of sanitary toilet facilities. And the puke. Parties mean someone upchucking multicoloured, booze-fueled barf. I keep waiting for adulthood to kick in, for the school of life to showcase the futility of my fears. Meghan, however, seems to revel in partydom, which means rumours were whispered throughout the school hallways the moment I entered the double doors. The more brazen ones take to leaning me against lockers, asking if I'm as fun as my sister, sometimes winking, lusty breath stagnant on my neck.

“I'm driving,” I say, dangling the cup as though it's on fire.

“Oh, it's fine,” Meghan say, the fact that I am two years from drinking age apparently not registering with her. “You can just stay longer. Right, Tony?”

Tony doesn't acknowledge me. In fact, he couldn't look less interested as he punches buttons on his controller. His annihilation of his friends is celebrated with a loud whoop and he throws the controller to the next contender.

“Beat THAT.”

He drapes a hairy arm across the back of the sofa, resting a football-sized hand on my sister's shoulder.

I take a sip of my drink, desperate to assimilate. It is my first taste of alcohol.

“You want to see the place?” Meghan asks, her voice high and tight.

I bob my head up and down, excited for an excuse to leave the room of imagined war.

“The kitchen, obviously,” she says as we pass through a tight entryway and into a kitchen straight out of the 1970s. The cupboards flake brown stain onto the countertop and the linoleum peels up at the corners. In another life, perhaps the room hosted cozy roast dinners and steel cut oats laid out on china with linen tablecloths. Now, all that remains is congealed Kraft Dinner crusted onto the stove, which I suspect has been lingering a day or two.

I follow Meghan up the steps to the second floor, the only part of the house with newer Berber carpeting.

“And upstairs,” she says grandly, with a flourish of her palm, “We all have our own bedroom. But this is me and Tony’s room. We get the master.”

“The other guys don’t mind Tony having the biggest room?”

Meghan shrugs. She opens the door to the bedroom, revealing exactly what I expected; piles of clothes everywhere, half-eaten food on moldy plates, sheets a haphazard mess and curtains drawn so tight it looks like a tomb. What I don’t see is a candle, a girly figurine, or a stitch of her clothing. Nothing that says Meghan lives there too.

“Where’s all your stuff?”

“It’s laundry day,” she says, as though this is all the explanation I need. “I have to pee.”

She enters the bathroom just as Glen comes upstairs and gestures towards the door.

“Meghan’s in there.”

“Someone’s always in there when you need it. Five people in the house and one bathroom. Stupid,” Glen says, sucking his teeth. “Kinda sad around here, eh?” He raises the tail end of his eyebrow-come-caterpillar.

“Sad?”

“You know,” Glen motions around him with his pointer finger, “The house.”

I shrug. “Somewhere to live, I guess.”

“Did Meghan get a drawer yet?” He registers my puzzled face. “Like, to put her stuff in.”

“She’s been here for two months,” I say, peering into the dark room, eyeing a stack of clothes that look like the body in them vanished into thin air. “Of course she has drawers.”

I resist the urge to step inside and make room for Meghan in the filthy shithole. Instead, I hover on the edge of benevolence and heroism. I plant my feet and commit to ambivalence.

“Naw, Tony makes her keep all her stuff in clothes hampers. That way, when they fight, he can throw it all out into the hallway.”

Glen’s voice is filled with what, acquiescence? I resist asking questions when I knew the answer will make my stomach ache, so we stand in silence. Meghan exits the bathroom wiping her hands on her pants. Apparently, there is no hand towel to be found in hell. I hope my bladder holds.

“Quit creeping on my sister, Glen,” she says as she passes, elbowing him in the ribs.

“I was just waiting for the bathroom, man.” His face turns crimson before he ducks into the bathroom, locking the door with a click. Meghan takes me downstairs and back to the kitchen, where she makes a sandwich with a single slice of ham slapped between two slices of WonderBread.

“Want one?”

I shake my head and sit gingerly on one of the vinyl chairs, hesitantly placing my purse on the adjacent seat.

“So, almost high school grad time,” Meghan says, her mouth full of food, “And I heard you got into the university you wanted.”

“Yeah. I’m excited.”

“You living in res?”

“Commuting.”

A pause hangs in the air like a thick cloud. Since she moved out two years ago, I barely know my sister and yet simultaneously know everything there is to know.

“Lots of driving for you then.”

“I’ll live.”

“Have you been watching the news?” she says as she cracks a beer open. Are we there, already? Talking about the damn news? “It’s crazy, eh? Can you believe we’re at war?”

The September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks are still fresh in our minds, the image of burning towers, ash and death blared on tube televisions that had been rolled into our classrooms, then repeated like fiery flashbacks on the news. Typical army brat, I fret about if Dad will have to deploy to Afghanistan. Another deployment, scattering our family to the wind like dandelion puffs.

“Yeah, it’s crazy.”

“All those poor people,” Meghan says between bites, staring down at her feet. “No one to protect them. No options.”

Tony struts in, scratching his belly and stretching his arms wide like a character from *Trailer Park Boys*.

“You didn’t make me one?” he asks sternly, gesturing at the last bite of her sandwich. She offers the doughy mess up to his mouth and he eats it off her fingers. Her plate sits white and empty, just a smear of mustard stain.

“I’m still hungry.”

Meghan hurries to prepare Tony a sandwich of his own. A sweep of mayo on one side, Dijon mustard on the other, lettuce that she runs under the running tap then shakes dry before patting with a paper towel, and lastly, ham stacked an inch thick.

For a moment, Meghan appears before me as a Betty Crocker replica. I imagine an apron, pleated and ruffled and her hair bound in a hairspray-stiff bouffant. I picture her in a pair of simple black pumps and lips traced with that perfect red that you can never seem to find for yourself. For a second, Meghan is something other than a college dropout making a sandwich for her overbearing boyfriend.

She wanted to be an early childhood educator but quit because she missed this boyfriend or that boyfriend. I say she dropped out, but really, she just stopped going to class, her name remaining on the roster and our parents left holding the bill.

Meghan cuts the bread in a diagonal line and arranges the sandwich on a white plate, angling the slices just so. She carries it into the living room where Tony has retreated to his game. He yells at her for getting in the way of the screen, his gaming character lifeless and clutching a handgun. I watch my sister, now a woman, confused about how we got here, to the house on the hill. She is a stranger as much as she is the most familiar thing in the world.

“I have to go,” I say when she returns to the kitchen, snatching my purse and moving towards the front door, “Forgot I have some homework.”

“Aww, really? I thought you were staying for a while.” Meghan follows and we stand awkwardly in the foyer. She picks some fluff off my sweater and pulls me into a tight hug. “I’m happy. You know that, right?” Her voice cracks with denial as she buries her face in my chest, as though she hopes I’ll believe the lie too.



I peel her freckled arms from my waist and jog to my car before I have to watch her cry. The engine chortles and spits when I turn the ignition and I pull an expert three-point turn before crunching away on the gravel.

As I drive towards town, I crank Madonna's "Like a Prayer" into my static speakers. Meghan waves from the front step, her face red and blotchy. From my rearview mirror, she morphs into a tiny female effigy before disappearing through the white door from where she came.

2003

My hand rests on the Bible, a book I've never read and only studied as an object of paper and ink, the morality behind it something I can't quite connect with. Still, for Dad's sake, I've elected to join the Canadian Forces with the religious vow instead of the solemn. Still, I feel like a prized pig at the fair as I blink under fluorescent lights, Dad's mouth moving to the words I am meant to parrot back while my life spins in slow motion.

From the outside, Toronto's recruiting centre doesn't look like the military buildings I was surrounded by while growing up on bases. This one is relatively modern, tucked amongst civilian businesses and non-profits on bustling Yonge street. But inside this conference room, the flags and banners, the familiar army stink, I realize the Forces assimilates everywhere it goes, just as I will learn to do.

I swallow hard between verbatim words. *I. Do. Not. Belong. Here.* I am artsy and girly and a teenager a year into a degree in Professional Writing at York University. I like lipstick and hate running and yet I've somehow arrived amongst the flag-draped backgrounds and stiff recruiting posters to live a life I thought I despised. No, I don't belong in the military, and any moment, someone will notice it. Even my outfit is all wrong, low cut black Lycra dress that at home made me feel grown up but here, surrounded by the other recruits, all of them male, I feel judging eyes lingering on the curves and seams.

Dad stands in front of me at attention, reading from the enrollment script with his red eyes cast downwards, not wanting to make eye contact in case emotion bubbles over. His

uniform is prim and perfect, as usual, and his Major stripes loop around his wrist in a series of golden circlets. Soon, I will have my own rank, Officer Cadet, with my own single thin golden stripe circling my arm like a wedding band. And I'll have a free education and a pension and all these other grown-up things that at eighteen, feel intangible and unimportant but also necessary.

It was the free education that won me over and swung my vote into the military. Meghan is on her second or third college dropout and, so Mom and Dad tell me, no savings remain. For me, obtaining a degree is not a question mark, but a period. *We can't afford to help out with your schooling*, Dad said last year, hands in his lap with resignation. Mom sat nearby, saying nothing. They were fresh out of financial support after three years of funding Meghan's career aspirations, which, with each false start, have failed to result in a diploma, certificate, or degree. I nodded, not wanting to make them feel bad because I hadn't expected a full free ride—I planned to work, of course—but anger reared when I'd catch Meghan sitting in a local McDonald's in the middle of the day, slurping thick vanilla milkshakes with her cheeks concave, tilting the straw towards some unknown partner. She looked carefree, lost in new love. I would watch from my own car, stuff greasy fries into my mouth, and burn with hate for the choice she forced me into.

There is another part of me that craves conversation with my sister, even though I barely know her these days. But I've heard from friends of friends, connected dots until an image of Meghan's life begins to form like faint constellations in the sky.

*Have you heard Meghan lives with a convict now?*

*Meghan's been partying pretty hard. She better slow down.*

*Your sister plays it kind of loose, eh?*—that last one always said with raised eyebrows and a wink, as if testing the waters of my complicity.

Hating Meghan is a relatively new sensation, like an unwanted guest. But more than hating her actions, I hate this new unfamiliarity more, the secrets not whispered to me in moments of sisterly collusion. That hate renews when the government denied me a student loan because my parents make too much money, making the military option a little shinier. And I'm surprised to find that there is a tug of something else, too, a feeling of wanting to do something greater than myself, of knowing the complicated nature of sacrifice, especially in 9/11's wake. Four generations of Thompsons have felt that same pull.

"I, Kelly Sara Thompson, do swear that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second..." The vow spills from my mouth and I look to the audience—mostly family members and spouses of the other new soldiers, a few spotty teenage partners lingering with lack of interest. Mom smiles back, beautiful in a slimming dress. Meghan is noticeably absent. I squeeze my fist tight as I repeat Dad's words but I'm here making this gigantic life decision and my sister is elsewhere, if I expected her at all. "...so help me God." I pull my hand from the book as though it's burnt my hand, eyes to the empty seat beside Mom.

The room erupts into snapping photos, bulbs flashing like lighthouse beams. The twenty other recruits high-five one another as we amble into a group shot, their male camaraderie already a palpable thing. I stand to the side and tug down the slit hem of my dress.

"All done, Mooster!" Mom appears at my side and gives me a kiss on the cheek.  
"Congrats!"

I wish I was alone at home with a book and a blanket over my head. Not surrounded by strangers and wavering Canada flags and the sheepy smell of wool uniforms that has been familiar since childhood. It is both a comforting yet nauseating smell.

“Thanks.” I muster a half-hearted smile out the corner of my mouth. Just hours prior, a table had stood where I stand now, and atop it, we signed our contracts, wills, and security documents. I’d autographed every crisp piece of paper with the flourish of one condemning a life sentence, trying hard not to cry about my uncertainty. Seven years of my life is now promised to soldierhood, not the writer life I always dreamed of.

I swallow hard as I receive and give hugs I barely feel. Dad pats my arm awkwardly like he is tapping Morse code. “Bright future ahead of you, Moo,” he says. “Bright.”

I imagine my military career—months of basic training in sweltering Quebec, multiple moves, deployments, constant change, evitable pain, anxiety, lack of family nearby—a repetition of my childhood. When I graduate university in three years, I will be posted to my first unit, twenty-one-years old and green with inexperience, holding a pathetic writing degree that will make my soldier peers scoff.

“We should call your sister. She’ll be so proud,” Mom says, breaking my mental spell. But she does not reach into her purse for her cell as Dad and I exchange looks. None of us know Meghan’s current phone number. We only see her sporadically when her mood suits.

“She knows where we are,” I say, picking up my stack of paperwork. My signature looks foreign, written by a different hand, and I resist the urge to crumple the sheets in my hands like a bastardized bouquet. I tuck the papers neatly into a folder and tuck it under my arm.

“You think Meghan would ever consider joining the Forces?” Dad asks as we move towards the exit. “She could be good at it.”

My teeth gnash into a tight line. Meghan’s failures always trump my accomplishments and because of her I am here in this black dress, scared and trapped. Scared to go to war, to shoot people, to be responsible for another’s death. I’m offering myself up like a sacrifice and Meghan

cannot, would not be good at this because she is only loyal to herself. Why, above all else, am I the only one who ever sees this?

“You think Meghan would be a good soldier?” I spit the words in a burst of laughter.

“Dad, she can barely follow through with a college course, much less basic training.”

“You’re always so hard on her, you know?”

I’ve heard this before. Hard on her because I voice the truth. Then again, she might make the perfect addition to the Forces; she’s already so good at taking orders from men.

2005

Mom, Dad, Meghan and my boyfriend, Trevor, unfold themselves from the car and stretch their limbs in the oppressive Quebec sun, having arrived for my basic training graduation. I haven't seen my sister since last summer when I returned from my first phase of training, thin and tired from nine weeks of military life lessons and constant physical exertion. We'd said polite hellos when passing one another in the kitchen but mostly, she was stewing in anger because I inquired if she was paying some kind of rent, being twenty-two and all. She stormed out of the room with such ferocity that I was left holding a glass of milk, spilling everywhere as my hand shook.

Emerging from the car, Meghan stares glassy eyed into the sunlight that shimmers in the maples. I can tell from a hundred metres away that she is stoned out of her mind. Either no one else in the car noticed or they knew the conversation was pointless. My family approaches, and I take in Meghan's too-tight capris and strappy tank top, her hollow face masking something darker that Mom and Dad are so keen to ignore.

"Hey, guys." I wrap everyone in successive hugs.

"God, you're so thin," Mom says. "And oh, your knee." She holds a hand to her lips, pointing at my blackened joint, swollen to the size of my head. It was damaged somewhere in the depths of the Forces training area while lugging my rucksack around, compounded by countless loops around the asphalt as we practiced for our graduation parade. *It's tendonitis. Get over it*, my course warrant screamed, his voice echoing through the cavernous drill hall. At each call to

attention, my right leg would perform the required snap to the ground and bursts of pain shot bile up my throat.

“It’s okay. Sore.”

When I pull away from Dad, my calloused hands catch on his clothing. “Getting some real work in, eh?” he says, examining my fingers up close.

I’m wearing gym shorts and a t-shirt, long hair dampening my shoulders after a shower. Trevor offers an awkward squeeze and a kiss on my unadorned cheek. No blush. Foundation long since tossed in the garbage.

“We miss you so much,” Meghan squeals as she squeezes air from my ribs while my arms hang slack at my sides. She’s thinner than usual, hair dark and long in a way that swallows her tiny face. Meghan is a pale canvas swathed in freckles while I am tanned, she is short while I am tall—and yet we sport blue-green eyes that go a matching shade of red upon crying. Our eyes are the way everyone can tell we are related. I long for sunglasses to mask the sun and this shared feature.

“I am so proud of you,” Meghan says, leaning her head against my chest, her quick tears dampening my shirt front, making me look like I’ve been lactating. Over her head, I roll my eyes at my parents who give me a stern look, encouraging me to play nice without a word. Why is she even here?

“Thanks.” I wriggle from her grasp like I’m shaking off an excitable puppy. “You guys should head back to the hotel. Not much going on here until tomorrow.” I shuffle back and forth in my shower sandals, oddly nervous to have them in this space that until tomorrow’s impending graduation parade, has been an unshared life. My professional arena is a house of cards and Meghan is a tornado.



“Hotel? Not yet,” Meghan says, spinning around to take in the training complex. “Show us around this place. What do they call it again? The Monster?”

“The Mega. And I’m not supposed to have you in the building. Rules.” Meghan has never been one for rules. Breaking them, yes.

“Oh, come on,” she says conspiratorially, as though we’ll be sharing something special. Trevor watches us, unwilling to press. If there’s anyone I want to be alone in my room with, it’s him. “It’ll be fun. Mom and Dad can pick me up later.”

“That’s good by us, girls,” Mom says as she guides Dad and Trevor towards the car. Mom’s always giddy when she imagines sisterly bond knitting into the family tapestry. “Have some sister time.” Mom and Dad talk a lot about “sister time,”—how we need more of it, we aren’t having it, there’s no reason to be missing out on it. Mom has two brothers with the affable personalities of golden retrievers, and Dad’s siblings are upstanding citizens of the world. What would they know?

“Fine.” I am too tired to argue. Meghan throws her arm around my shoulders and waves with her other hand as we watch them drive away. I am a tableau of anger. My fingers ache from polishing my parade boots and my arms are streaked with carbon from cleaning my rifle, even post-shower. “You have to be quiet, okay? I’m in some temporary quarters for the night, without anyone else in my pod, so we should be okay.”

“Your pod? Sounds cool.”

“It’s not the body snatchers for Christ’s sake. It’s like a dorm, with a common room and a bunch of bedrooms.” We enter through blue doors at the end of the Mega, a lightning bolt-shaped grey structure that is twelve stories high and houses most of the Canadian Forces’

training establishment. Our footsteps echo in the hallway as I cast my eyes about like a burglar, sneaking towards the stairs that will take us to the twelfth floor.

“Where’s the elevator?” Meghan’s voice reverberates off the walls of the Mega.

“Shh! We’re not allowed to take it.”

Meghan stoops low as though a helicopter is overhead. “What do you mean you can’t take it? What floor are you on?” We start up the metal stairs. *Boom. Boom. Boom.* Her sneakered feet smack on the metal and a chill simmers up my spine when her footsteps echo my own.

“It’s basic training, Meghan. We’re never allowed to use the elevators.”

“God,” she says in a huff. She is out of breath after the first floor. “I’d never make it.”

She can’t see, but a smile creeps across my face. I like it, this acceptance that she can’t do this thing that I have done. “Try going up these stairs a million times a day on a fucked knee.”

We arrive on the twelfth floor, Meghan heaving for breath. The hallways are empty. The rest of my platoon scattered to their own temporary lodgings to make room for the next round of officer cadets in training. We will disperse in the morning to our different corners of the country, forever changed, waiting to finish our final year of university before being posted to our first unit.

“You do that how many times a day?” she gasps, staggering through the hall, gasping for air. “That’s insane.”

“I’m in here.” I tug a key from a loop around my neck and push through the fire door with a whoosh, wandering down the hall to my new pod. The remaining rooms are empty, each with a twin bed, desk, and closet. Nothing more. It is as sparse as one could imagine basic training being. Meghan flops onto my bed, her skin greenish under the fluorescent light.

“Oof. This thing doesn’t have much bounce to it.”

“No springs. Basically, it’s a shit piece of foam.” I fuss with my uniform hanging in the closet and dab at it with a band of masking tape wrapped around my fingers. Perfect deportment is vital for when on parade. The rest of my luggage is lined up in an orderly fashion, mostly packed for the trip back to Ontario, to my final year at York University, to student life. Civilian clothing has been mostly abandoned, cast aside for socks rolled into smiling faces, T-shirts folded to perfect seven-by-seven squares, toiletries arranged as though ready for inspection. I will not have another inspection in St. Jean, and yet I can’t allow myself to abandon the new sense of order.

“How did you sleep on it, though?”

“You don’t really care how comfy it is when you barely get to sleep and do nothing but workout and learn all day. You could fall sleep on a rock.” I cannot look at her. Cannot make eye contact. Anger simmers under everything. I hate her stupid questions, reaching for connection that isn’t there.

“What’s this for?” She holds up my clear plastic ruler that sits on the fold of my scratchy wool blanket, slapping the plastic against the material with a sharp snap.

“To measure the perfect sheet length for inspection.”

“That’s stupid. Why?”

“Because that’s how it’s done.” I spit the words. There had been a time where I also considered the measuring of beds stupid, right? And yet somehow that ruler is as much a part of me as my service rifle, my uniform, my Velcroed Thompson nametag. She doesn’t understand at all. Meghan bends and folds the pliable plastic like a Slinky until it cracks in half, the two pieces held aloft like wands. She glances back and forth between each hand and then me and I snatch the pieces from her, annoyed over a broken plastic ruler that cost less than a dollar and I know

I'll never have use for again. "What the fuck, Meg?" I huff air between my teeth. "Why would you come here high?"

Her face goes red. "I'm not on anything."

"Ever since you got with that new guy..." I leave a pregnant pause, wait for her to fill in space, but she doesn't. Just sits on my bed with her face turned down, hands now empty in her lap, turned upwards like waiting vessels. "It used to be alcohol and then pot and now what? What are you using?"

"Listen to you," she snaps. "Using." She flicks angry air quotes with tiny fingers. "Like you're a druggie natural."

"Pardon my fucking French that I don't know all the terms of your new shit-ass lifestyle."

"Speaking of change, what's with you and all the profanity? You're like a sailor or something."

"That could be because I'm in the military, Meg, and surrounded by actual sailors."

"You used to be sweet. Innocent."

"Oh, you'd know all about innocence, eh?"

"Bite me."

When was the last time we spoke without yelling? I try to think as her face pinkens, but I can't remember. "I worry, you know." This, I say gently, quietly. Playing my irritation as concern will make her trust me to spill the truth. Or less angry. Or this whole moment won't explode. I've spent a summer learning to be brave and yet proximity to Meghan always reveals my weakness, sloughing off all the dead cells to make me a rosy newborn again.

"You worry about everything. No wonder you're so fucking boring." Her words are a harsh slap. Sisters have a way of sussing out the tenderest of bruises and then press, press,

pressing until the bruise becomes a wound, prone to reinjury. Meghan, who isn't capable or aware enough to sort out her shit, is smart enough to know this. She understands people, though, which is why everyone flocks to her effervescence. She has always wielded authoritative power over me simply in her knowledge of how my anxiety renders me useless, a power she enjoys more now that she's soon keen to bring me down. I stand in front of her now, hands on my hips, angry and authoritative in my own right—an officer in the Forces, for God's sake.

I shake my head at her, something I've seen Mom and Dad do, an action I hope conveys my shame and dismay. Meghan's wisdom of the world is through experiences I'll never understand. And I don't want to understand the chemical clouds of uplifting make-believe, which crash down when the drugs run out and reveal nothing but bad choices and an endless string of loosely committed partners. I do not want to be the older sister, yet here I am, pretending.

My nostrils flare while down the hall, a soft whoosh of the fire door slops air through my blue curtains. "MALE ON THE FLOOR!" The Duty Officer calls, his voice echoing into the expanse of the hallway. I hear footsteps slap the linoleum.

"Shit! Duty O." I look frantically to the door then the window on the twelfth floor. The only way out means potentially crossing paths with the impending inspection.

"Who is that?" Meghan looks unconcerned, picking lint from my scratchy wool blanket, relieved our conversation has been interrupted.

"You have to get out of here," I whisper. "They're doing rounds to make sure everything is, you know, as it should be. They can't find you here. I'm not allowed guests." *They*. Who is this, they?

“I don’t care if I get in trouble. What are they going to do? Make me join the military?”

She snorts with laughter and I press my hand to her mouth to silence her. She sticks her tongue between the space of my fingers, a dribble of saliva seeping until I wipe my hand on my shorts.

“This isn’t about you, Meg. You might not be able to get in shit, but I sure as hell can. Do you want me charged?” I have her by the shoulders now, my grip sharp. I run through the possible ramifications. A write up, maybe. A fine. Extra duties. But my greatest fear of all is somehow not being allowed to go home tomorrow after the parade, having passed basic training with an impossibly narrow margin. Rules—their orderly nature, their rigidity, their simplicity—give me comfort. Rules are part of the reason I have come to cherish the military more than I thought possible, and I want to obey them. “You have to go. Now.” She nods senselessly, her eyes still large glossy orbs. Looking at her dilated eyes, goofy grin, I have limited confidence she can manage stealth.

I peek around my door as the Duty O makes his way down the hall, pausing in front of each empty room and poking his head in, sometimes taking the extra step to move inside and peer into the closets. Once he enters a new room, I usher Meghan down the hall, jogging behind her in hopes that my size will overshadow her. I chase her all the way out to the front of the Mega where I call her a cab and we both pretend our conversation wasn’t blessedly interrupted. When I fold her into the car and wave limply, my sister presses her face to the glass, leaving a greasy smeared imprint of herself, a skin-coloured stain that will remain long after she is gone.

The next morning, much like the rest of the summer, it is impossibly, disgustingly hot. In my starched wool uniform along with over two hundred of my peers, I wiggle my toes in my boots

to prevent fainting from heat stroke. The parade has been going on for nearly an hour as they read out our hundreds of graduating names over the staticky intercom system, which does nothing but echo back in the drill hall.

Because of Dad's rank, Mom and Dad have been seated in the VIP viewing section of the parade, which provides cushioned chairs for the dignitaries. Meghan and Trevor are in the wooden stands directly in front of me, their youth evident amongst a crowd of proud parents all sporting khakis and blazers, dignified summer dresses with sleeves or light cardigans.

Meghan is easy to find in the stands, sticking out in a way that sings me with shame. She wears a spaghetti-strapped sundress, bright blue with a Harley Davidson pattern. When "O Canada" plays and my arm bends into a sharp salute, Meghan grabs the hem of her dress and sways from side to side as though she were at a rave, hips sweeping into exaggerated figure eights. *We stand on guard for thee!* I half expect her to produce a lighter from her pocket—she has one, I'm sure of it, one she uses to smoke whatever the hell it is that she smokes—sparking it as a tribute to the band.

At the reception, I deflect questions as my fellow cadets hypothesize about the woman in the Harley dress.

"What the fuck was that chick wearing?"

"She knows she's at a military event, right? Ha!"

"Jesus, and did you see her dancing to fucking 'O Canada?'"

From across the room, as far as I can place myself, I watch my oblivious sister pose for photos with my new professional friends, her cheeks are rosy and white sunglasses perched on her head, acting like it is she who sweated and fired weapons and executed missions in the field these past weeks. She who became an adult over the course of a summer.

She catches my eye and waves at me. I turn away to my drink and pretend I did not see.



2007

Christmas season looms, my first since graduating university and being posted to Kingston, Ontario, three hours from my family. I return to Barrie often to visit my parents, partly out of obligation and partly due to loneliness in the new city I call now home, albeit, friendless. For the officers, my low rank means I'm less than worthy of association and for the non-commissioned members at my unit, having to call me "Ma'am" gets in the way of many of potential connections. I have a perpetual, uneasy feeling of not belonging for age, artiness, and interests, and returning home to childhood friendships is a salve.

Today, however, is all business. Meghan promised to meet at the mall to execute my plan for the perfect Christmas gift for Mom and Dad; an adult Santa snapshot, daughters grown and at least in one case, effectively independent.

In our childhood Santa photo, Meghan's bald chemo head is stark and white against the red background, her knee-length plaid skirt wrinkled and her usually cheery face marred with tears. I look angry, my newborn face twisted and bunched in fear while Santa smiles kindly, his head tilted towards Meghan in a conveyance of sympathy. A toddler with cancer seems worthy of a Christmas miracle.

The photo is now an emblem to suffering and sadness, tucked in with the Christmas decorations but never displayed. New memories, I tell myself, is what we all need.

Meghan now approaches wearing a baggy pair of jeans and a zip up sweater, one of those sporty polyester numbers from the seventies, although she's never played a sport in all of her life.

She hesitates when she sees me then advances, fidgeting with her upper lip, picking and tugging at the tender skin there until blood stains the tips of her fingers—a nervous tick.

Georgian Mall bustles with last-minute Christmas shoppers and people mill around us. I stand to greet my sister, uncomfortable as she hugs me with arms like overcooked spaghetti and I uncomfortably pat her on the back as I would a stranger.

"Hi," I say, stepping back.

"Hey."

"Thanks for meeting me."

"No problem."

It's been eight months since we saw each other, when she moved to the other side of town from our parents. Lately, there is always a reason that she's busy when I ask to see her. Out with friends. Working. She already ate. No, she doesn't need a coffee so please don't come over. Meghan is fine. Meghan is always fine. I am constantly torn between continuing the effort and no longer caring. Meghan makes it so hard to care.

She gathers her sheet of brown hair into a ponytail, wisps of grey sneaking through the box dye she's had to resort to since early tide to grey at sixteen. It's only then that I take stock of her tiny five-foot-one body, her cheeks sunken in, skin the colour of an elephant's. Her gentle curves have given way to jutting hip bones attached to a skeletal frame.

"You're crazy thin," I say, reaching out to tug at the loose waistband of her jeans. She swats me away.

"I'm fine," she barks, spittle gathering at the corner of her mouth. Her brows furrow into creases and her blue eyes turn stormy and dark. And then, as though the hurricane has passed, the veil of anger lifts and she adjusts her sweatshirt, a veritable Jekyll and Hyde. I don't know what

to do with her anger each time it implodes on our short and rare visits, confused as to why she feels so damn entitled to it, yet can't understand the root of my upset. It's exhausting, this constant metering of emotions, tiptoeing around Meghan's precarious apple cart.

"We better line up," she says, moving towards the throng of children in line for Santa.

"Want to walk through the Bay first?" I'm keen to keep her in sight, because if we retreat to our corners, I have no idea when I'll see her again. And I'm not sure why I want to see her again, angry with myself for this tug of connection to the past. "There's this perfume. Thought we could get it for Mom for Christmas. Split the price."

She shrugs and we walk towards the store in silence, at least two feet apart until we hit a floral wall of odours that reminds me of how my sister smells of nothing natural; only chemicals and wrongness. The scent of a life collapsing. The store buzzes with activity, allowing Meghan to move through the shoppers under the harsh lights, unnoticed except by me, her body hollow and fingers blackened like they've been dipped in ink. I move to the Chanel counter while Meghan meanders to the edge of the accessories area, fingering some gaudy earrings. A salesperson hovers around me and taps a polished fingernail on the glass case, plumes of scented air lofting. A headache blooms behind my eyes.

"This one here," I call out to Meghan, holding the pink bottle aloft. I have to yell because she's moved so far away that all I can see are is the top of her head. I cup my hands around my mouth to holler. "What do you think?"

She doesn't even look in my direction. Instead, I watch as she slips the rhinestone earrings into her purse, patting the bag when she feels them reach the bottom. Next, she lingers over a brown belt, letting the leather slide between her middle and pointer fingers. I feel sick to my stomach and turn to the clerk, who hasn't noticed, her eyes trained on the debit machine

where she hopes to make a sale. She is blind to all she doesn't want to see, doesn't need to see, just like my parents. Only I see the darkness lurking in the accessory aisle, and I can't tell if that makes me better or worse as a person, as a sister. Is this version of Meghan the real one, or is her formerly caring self hiding somewhere under the grey skin? I feel lied to, not because of the many lies Meghan tells, but because of the ones I tell myself—that I am good, I am better, I am kinder. Watching her, hating her now in the Bay, I am none of these things, which only makes me hate her more. It's her fault. She makes me this way with her addiction, her neediness, the roiling guilt she imposes.

Anxiety pricks as I pay the bubbly cashier, who asks three times if I want gift wrap, if I need a gift receipt. Meghan busies herself near the cosmetics as I take the bag, give the cashier a wan smile and grab Meghan by the elbow before anything else slips into her bag. Once outside the store, I wait for the backlash of her emotional violence that seeps like an oil spill, staining everything it touches. Our eyes connect, hers wide and knowing. I grit my teeth and drop her arm.

“We should get the photo done. I have other shit to do today,” I say, my voice strained. I could ask why she's stealing, although I suspect there is no reason other than plain want and entitlement. I could yell. Call the fucking cops. I could do all of these pointless, bitter things.

“Fine.” Her eyes challenge me. *Say it. I dare you. I double-dog dare you.*

We join the line that curls around Santa's workshop. Christmas carols echo overhead while busy customers hustle back and forth with lists and overstuffed shopping bags. Kids rally around us from every angle, dragging their parents to coloured toys that have been enticingly placed in shop windows. Their excited energy makes me nervous while Meghan revels in it. She coos at a pair of twin boys in a stroller in front of us, their matching blonde curls twirling around

their ears. It's the first smile I've seen all day and her teeth look as though she hasn't brushed them in weeks. All that money on braces, gone to waste.

"SANTA!" a little girl screams at the top of her lungs while jumping up and down in line. She clings to a ragged looking Barbie while wiping snot onto the sleeve of her velvet dress. Her mother rushes over with a tissue and dabs ineffectively at the stain.

"She's beautiful," Meghan says to the mother, who regards my sister—the sunken skin, the stained teeth, those hideous black fingers—like she's wielding a knife. Meghan steps back, affronted but silenced, and shame blooms on both our faces like pearls of green tea. Meghan is just straight enough to feel the burn.

The workshop hovers in front of us, pieced together out of painted wood and cardboard additions that look polished when topped with their fake cotton snow. A small gingerbread house is perched next to wooden elves that mechanically nod their heads back and forth while Rudolph's nose shines tomato-tinged light on the painted sky ahead of him. The queue inches forward, photo after photo snapped as kids whisper their dreams of dollhouses and Nerf guns. The eighty-year-old Santa smiles happily into the camera for each shot. His motorized scooter, the reminder of real life, is tucked inconspicuously behind the giant present display. His yellow-white beard is real, although he lacks the belly paunch, and he heartily waves at the kids who walk by. Even teenagers can't resist a half-hearted flop of their hand in return.

Meghan alternates between picking her lip and scratching at invisible, nonexistent bumps on her arm. I repeatedly check my BlackBerry for messages that need tending to and texts that must be answered.

"Busy with work?" she asks.

"Super busy." I click a few more words before dropping the phone into my purse.

"Headed to Vancouver next week then Ottawa after that." Meghan rarely asks about my work. Has no idea what I do, really. My job as a Logistics Officer might as well be rocket science for her comprehension of it, but then she has never taken a moment to ask about my platoon or my training, upcoming postings and promotions. "What about you?"

"It's okay. Busy, I guess."

Last week, I went to the tanning salon where Meghan said she was working as a receptionist.

*Not here*, the clerk said, snapping her gum in a series of machine gun pops while she sprayed the counter with disinfectant. *Fired her ass. Sick of her coming in here high as shit. Freaks out the customers.*

Meghan looks at me nervously, picking and picking until I feel like I might slap her. We've spent the last few years like this. Meghan lies. I know it. Secrets are kept. We're essentially the FBI of sisterhood, stuck between the horrible irony of knowing one another better than anyone else in the world and yet not knowing each other at all.

"Ho, Ho, Ho!" Santa says, grabbing his belly and shaking what little is there, waving us over with his gloved hand.

"Hi Santa." Meghan stares at her feet as though he'll really determine if she's been good or bad this year.

"Come tell me what you girls would like for Christmas!" His voice echoes and the waiting mothers glare at us angrily, two adults wasting time like this. "Tell me, what brings you ladies here? What can I get you for Christmas?"

Meghan and I each hover over one of his knees, aware of his aged frailty, our thigh muscles shaking under our weight, and I fluster at her ability to turn on the charm, reserved for strangers. I adjust myself uncomfortably, try to lean against the arm rest.

"We're redoing our Christmas photo for our parents," I say through clenched teeth, sounding more irritated than I expected.

"And what was wrong with the last one?"

Meghan's bottom lip quivers and then her whole body shakes. She tucks her chin to her chest and leans into the kind, waiting shoulder of Santa.

"Whoa, hey now, it's okay," Santa says, rubbing her arm kindly. He keeps looking at the elves, his wranglers, then back to Meghan, then at me, as if I can assuage the situation and make it all disappear. I shrug my shoulders, assuring Santa that I too am powerless.

"We weren't really happy in our last photo," I say. I cough gently, trying to keep unexpected tears at the back of my throat. "She had cancer and I was a screaming newborn." Santa says nothing. Just blinks back at me with warm eyes. "It's not a very happy picture for our parents."

"Well then, let's create a new memory," Santa says, as though scripted from a Hallmark commercial. He squeezes our arms as his eyes dart to the fifty-odd children waiting for his time.

Meghan sniffles and snorts. Thompson Crying Face takes mere moments to bring to fruition and hours to dissipate, skin all blotchy, eyes swollen red. This photo doesn't stand a chance in hell. I pass Meghan a tissue and she honks and blows. The waiting mothers seem equally divided between compassion and irritation, some tapping their toes in annoyance while others cock their heads to one side in sympathy.

"Ready girls?" Santa asks, a bony arm wrapped around each of us.

Just as quick as the tears arrived, Meghan plasters on a plastic smile that is frightening in its suggestion of happiness. I almost believe it myself. As she tucks the tissue into her pocket and finally makes eye contact with me, I notice her glassy eyes and dilated pupils, wide and black like the big prized marble we used to fight over as kids. My face goes prickly and hot. I hate her. Or I want to hate her. Or maybe I want to save her. Tuck her tiny body into my arms and keep her safe.

"Say Christmas!" says the camera operator, dressed as an elf. Her finger hovers over the shutter button while she waves a stuffed reindeer like we are babies to be appeased, or the same sick, teary toddler and her towheaded little sister that we were more than two decades ago. I hear the jingling of bells somewhere distant, or close by, I can't be sure. The flash snaps and for a moment, I am blind to everything. We are ushered off of Santa's lap while my eyes struggle to focus, a shiny orb following my line of sight.

Later, when Meghan asks me why I'm crying, I explain that it's just allergies. My eyes are watering from the flash, of course. I'll lie. Meghan will know it. Another secret kept.



2007

The house is quiet as Mom and I sit in the living room with some movie on mute, the dog snoring softly between us on the couch. Now that both parents have retired, Dad seems to go to bed earlier each day.

“When was the last time you saw her?” I ask Mom gently as I fiddle with the afghan, the one grandma crocheted years ago but is now a pilled mess of scratchy wool holes.

“A month ago, maybe?” Mom’s eyes are swollen, her birthday cake going stale on the kitchen counter. I baked the cake myself from the family cookbook, slopping the icing messily with a piping bag I fashioned from a snipped-off Ziploc, the M in “mom” now a gooey mauve blob. Dad and I have spent months planning Mom’s birthday surprise—transforming the upstairs guest room into an art space for her retirement. Forced retirement, Mom calls it, because of her advancing illness.

We haven’t really discussed her Multiple Sclerosis diagnosis since she announced it last year. They had gathered Meghan and I into this same room for a family meeting. We’ve always known when the news is bad; our parents are bad at hiding it. Meghan, ghostly and thin, pouted on the far end of the couch while I sat on the other side, sitting slow and purposeful with eyes cast about. Meghan buried her hands in the crooks of her elbows, the body language meant to push us away. Keep us from asking questions.

Mom melted into the blue leather LaZ-Boy, her eyes already rimmed red. Still, she was stunning. Mom is beautiful by any standard; a petite size two her entire life, with a stylish chocolate-toned pixie cut.

“We have something to tell you.” It was all Mom could say before she cried too hard to speak. I shuffled to the end of my couch cushion, uncertain if I should offer to do something—hold a hand, provide a Kleenex. Meghan’s eyes were glassy and unassuming, and I wanted to pluck them out like melon balls and slap them on the coffee table. *Are you even really here?*

Dad filled us in with the diagnosis. Mom’s lifelong battle with carpal tunnel was not, in fact, carpal tunnel.

“MS is a chronic disease.”

*But can she walk? For how long?*

“Currently your mother is at the relapsing-remitting stage, which means there are flare ups followed by periods without symptoms.”

*How will we take care of her? Meghan, will you help?*

“There are a bunch of different symptoms, like altered brain function, difficulty walking, pain.”

*Mom’s a nurse. Shouldn’t she have known?*

Meghan muttered something to Mom and gave her a hug before leaving. The rest of the family sat together long into the evening, ordering in greasy Chinese food to ease our growing resentment.

Dad and I decided returning Mom to her love of art was the solution. A Band-Aid solution, but still. I sourced all the antiques, including an architect’s drafting table, a comfy chair with proper lighting, an easel, a slew of paints, and art to hang. Then we sent her on a weekend getaway with a friend and then set to work on our reveal. Meghan promised to come, promised she would be there on time. But today, when Mom returned, Dad and I were covered in paint and dust, still shuffling the last piece of furniture into place, Meghan didn’t show. Mom’s face

reflected that failure even as I swam around the room like Vanna White, showcasing the various features of our work. Mom cried, played it off as emotion over this gift. My sister wrecks everything.

“It’s been months for me,” I say to Mom, snapping back from the memory. “Not sure I remember when I last saw her. March, maybe?”

Meghan lives minutes away, in a new house I’ve never visited. But as I see her about town, she gets smaller and darker in hollows of her skin. If we see each other, we say nothing, keep moving. Sometimes Meghan will wave, even with the knowledge I might pretend I haven’t seen her. She is slight enough to miss.

“She’ll come this weekend, I’m sure. She knows it’s my birthday”

“Mom, hate to break it to you, but if she didn’t come today, she’s not coming at any time. And if she does, she’ll be bringing that asshole along with her.” Meghan’s latest love interest has a bad reputation, one my parents routinely discuss as the person who has led their innocent daughter into a life of debauchery. They do not discuss the name their daughter has made for herself long before he was in the picture. Thief. Addict. Easy.

“Why do you always have to spew such hate towards her?” Mom asks, her voice bitter. I can’t tell, exactly, who the tone is meant for. “Always looking for the worst in her.”

“Does it ever occur to anyone that I don’t look for the worst in her, just that it’s easy to find?” I look to the cake, likely dry now because I haven’t bothered to cover it in Saran. We ate it earlier as though we didn’t even taste the vanilla bean I’d carefully scraped with the paring knife. I crave a slice the size of my head, drenched in ice cream, eaten in bed far away from this conversation, back in my drama-free Kingston home.

Mom flings her hands in the air. “I’m going to bed.” The dog looks up from his cozy perch, annoyed to be woken.

“Me too.” The anger in our voices hurts my teeth with the saccharine whitewashing of Meghan’s actions. How hard I have tried to be the daughter who doesn’t cause a fuss, raise worries, stir nightmares. I disappear to my basement bedroom, a shell of my teenage life since I moved out. Wisps of illustrated cloud line the blue room, which Mom and I painted together. *You can have the double door room*, Meghan had said when we moved in. *I won’t be here long anyways*. She was seventeen then. On her way to college, we thought. And yet she can’t seem to leave and stay gone, always returning with her belongings in garbage bags when this job fails or that boyfriend leaves. I wonder when her current partner will tire of Meghan’s constant needs, or when she will realize his needs don’t include her.

Down the hall from my space is Meghan’s bedroom, a hovel with dark furniture and dark bedding and dark carpeting, the effect like a hobbit hole. I survey from the doorway, the room that she never really left, complete with childhood stuffed animal perched on the pillow, his nubby fur matted with wear. On her bedside table is a teddy bear I knitted for her when I was ten, still wearing his plaid ribbon bow tie, next to a trio of framed photos capturing our smiling faces. Sisters turned into one another, sharing a secret. The last one picture is from almost a decade ago. Before the pregnancy. Before addiction. Before the military. Before adulthood.

I stalk into the room like a panther, swinging open the mirrored sliding doors of her closet. I plunge in, search, dig, pulling out stretched sweatshirts circa 1990 and orange platform shoes covered in peace signs and flowers. I find clear candy wrappers from restaurant mints, cheap white tank tops that can be bought in bulk at Wal-Mart, and the faint essence of cigarette smoke. In her bedside table I find scraps of paper with phone numbers and pens without ink,

stickers from skateboarding companies that come tucked in shoeboxes. I find no evidence. Nothing of value to prove I'm the good one in the family and she is bad.

The storage closet is my next chosen target. It's a tiny space under the stairs, so I stoop to root around amongst the collection of empty bags, shoes and childhood toys abandoned in Rubbermaid containers. I find her red Roots duffle and sit on the floor in the hallway with the bag in my lap. I have one just like it but mine is blue and well-used from regular travel, another example of matching gifts we were given, never one sister with more than the other. I feel around inside the bag, peer into pockets, digging blindly until my fingernail catches on something hard, bending backwards, and I curse into the musty air.

My hand circles a tube of glass like a magic wand, and I bring my hand into the air with a mixture of triumph and devastation. I hold the crack pipe up to the light, the inside cloudy with residue, open on each end. Just a simple, glass tube. I don't really know what I'm looking at, exactly, and yet I do know. I bring it to my nose and breathe in the stink of plastic and other chemicals, like a cheap nail salon at the mall.

I rotate the pipe in my hand, over and over, the smell coating my fingers. I am so, fucking tired. How long has it been down here, in the basement, a balefire of evidence that my family turns a blind eye to? It isn't denial, whatever Mom and Dad are doing, but something more akin to compassion or white, middle-class politeness. The Thompsons cannot be addicts, no, because they are mowing the lawn and sanding the rough patches on the deck and driving their reliable Volkswagens.

I rush up the two flights of stairs to the top floor of the house before I can think otherwise and push open the door to my parents' bedroom. "Mom?" I whisper into the dark. Dad will sleep on thanks to a litany of medications. "Mom, wake up."

“Hmm?” Sheets rustle. Mom’s mussed hair rises like an apparition from the pile of blankets. The room smells of stale breath and laundry detergent.

“I need you.” I beckon with my hand. Mom holds a single finger in the air—*gimme a minute*—and I shut the door, giving her privacy to get dressed. When she emerges and joins me downstairs in the kitchen, she is dishevelled, blinking into the light as she tucks her fluffy pink robe around her waist. She finds me sitting at the kitchen table and once she sits, I thrust the pipe into her hand, pressing my fingers around hers to know she really feels it there; this cold, hard thing.

“Meghan is smoking crack, Mom. An addict. Here is proof. But I always think the worst of her, right?” My own self-righteous is sickening but I am fuelled by something past anger and love. This is all frustration and exhaustion coming to a literal smoking point.

“How do you know what this is?” Mom asks, incredulous, accusatory. Her eyes dart to the fruit border that lines the kitchen, the sage green walls that were thought to be a soothing, peaceful colour, then back to the tool in her hands.

“Seriously, Mom? Weren’t you in the drug program at school too? When the cops came to class with little samples in baggies on a board? This is a crack pipe.” I watch recognition wash over her, feeling both guilty yet horrifyingly gleeful. I wanted to be right, and I am.

“I’ll speak to your sister about it when she gets home. She said she’d be spending the night.” Mom is certain, her hands folded neatly in front of her.

“Mom, seriously. She needs more than a speaking to.” But what, exactly? What does she need when she is no longer a child who can be reprimanded? I can’t pinpoint it. Wouldn’t even know where to begin, even at twenty-three-years-old myself. What I want is action, not the chronic family ostriching that serves no one.

“I said I’ll handle it, Kelly.”

“Like you always handle it? By pretending ‘it’ isn’t a thing? This denial you and dad have, is reaching a new level, Mom. Why am I the only one who accepts that Meghan is an addict?” Tears threaten both of us, but I throw my arms in the air and run downstairs, hovering on the bottom step, my ears pricked like a cat. I want to help. I am helping, I think. But I know something else too—that I am kind of, sort of, horrifyingly enjoying this.

It is hours or minutes, but eventually, I hear a key engage with the front door lock, the clack of the dog’s toenails as he greets Meghan. She tiptoes initially, until she realizes Mom is awake. They murmur, voices slightly raised. Terse but quiet.

I creep up the stairs like a ghost, careful on every step that creaks and settle on the top stair. I want to see her get in trouble. I want my sister to feel consequence, even though this want makes me shameful and childish. A crack in the basement door reveals a perfect view of Meghan, a wisp in a pair of ratty jeans, sitting in the warm light of the living room, Mom invisible in some other part of the room.

“Mom, I’m telling you, it’s not mine. It belongs to my friend.”

A burp of laughter emerges, outing my hiding spot. I’d made the same excuse years ago when Dad found condoms in my backpack. For a friend. *I was holding them for a friend*, the golden foil wrapper crinkling in his hand.

“Are you kidding me? Do you think we’re idiots? Are you still fifteen years old?”

“Mind your own business,” Meghan snaps her voice a sharp sneer. She does not swear in front of Mom and Dad, but can tell she wants to, can see the ‘f’ form, upper teeth capping her bottom lip. But she stops herself. That would push our parents over some unspoken edge. Drug use, sure. But profanity and rudeness? Not acceptable.

“You’re my sister. You are my business.” Mom blinks back at us, looking tired and resigned. If I hope to find backup in my argument, I know I will not find it in my mother. Traditionally, our family divides down two lines: Mom and Meghan, the emotive tender hearts on one side, and Dad and I, the practical professionals on the other. “But you’re also doing some serious drugs here. Don’t you understand how worried we all are?” Mom’s eyes offer me encouragement and I’m angry to be doing this job for her. Angry to be the voice of reason. Angry to have her sitting in a chair, wanting me to be wrong even when she knows I’m not.

“Oh, you’re worried, is it?” Meghan’s voice is a hiss. “You just love it when you feel like I’ve messed up, don’t you?”

“Meghan says that the pipe belongs to someone else,” Mom says, leaning forward to place herself between our view. Her voice wavers, hinting at her desire to believe the lie.

I roll my eyes dramatically. “Mom, come on!”

“I’m a good person!” Meghan sobs, hands to her face.

“Of course you are,” Mom agrees soothingly. She rubs Meghan’s back.

It starts as a prickle on my skin, the injustice, the jealousy, the complete one-sidedness. The charming kitchen—its antique dining set that we hunted for online, the lovingly restored cheese box that Mom and I found in a barn, the almond-tinted appliances that I helped scrub to newness—blurs. I am everywhere in this room, evident in every corner, but Meghan takes up all the space.

“You don’t get to be horrible to everyone, do drugs, steal from us and everyone else around you, and still get to say you’re a good person, Meghan. Eventually, you have to actually *be* a good person.” Her eyes burn into mine, hatred steaming in my direction like a cartoon devil. I imagine purple-blue flames spilling from her mouth, connecting us like tethers. “Sometimes,



Meghan..." I pause, knowing I am a step too far, but still. "Sometimes, you are so hard to love."

It is mean. Harsh. But true.

Meghan flings hate like an automatic tennis ball server, words I've heard before.

*You think I'm unlovable?*

*You think you're so great, don't you?*

*You're such a self-righteous cow.*

She misses the subtext, the hidden meaning I've been trying to work into my short stories that I try desperately to write but always abandon because the military does not leave space for my art. Hard to love doesn't mean unloved. It means loved, despite all the other emotions that get in the way, even as she storms out the door, the handle rattling in her wake.

Part 2

*Anger?*

*Or love, or exhaustion, or frustration...*

Dear Meghan,

Thousands. You owe me thousands of dollars. We've never really talked about the total, like saying the number out loud would summon up your addiction like an Ouija board. And it's not like Mom and Dad would foster these kumbaya chit-chats because they still can't face half the things you did. But yeah, you stole so much more than dollars but it's that round number that makes me grit my teeth. Sometimes I complain about it and Joe will make some joke like, well, you won't be getting it back now. And then we laugh and I feel sorta weird about laughing but you're dead so...yeah, definitely not getting paid back. I think he keeps up the macabre humour because you're not here anymore to share it with. It's weird to miss joking about death, right?

That's sorta what I mean here. Even now that you're gone, there's this anger that lingers, because there's been this family taboo in talking about all the ways you've screwed us over. I want to shake those misdeeds like a maraca, make some noise about it, because to me, never holding you accountable meant you got away with it. And then if you were held accountable, I could finally be absolved of being the family asshole. Your behaviour was chalked up to addiction. Mine? Just old-school bitterness. Both are true.

It's weirdly hard to hear people talk about how wonderful you were, because now that you're gone you were "so thoughtful" and did "so much for others." And yet jeez, you really weren't. You really didn't, unless you saved up all that goodness for people who weren't us. You were selfish and sharp, but also funny and big-hearted. That advent calendar I made—the one that had 24 days of 24 nice things about you on little gift tags—it was really hard to come up with 24 things because you have been such an impossible asshole so much of your life. Then again, so have I.

But man, I still miss you. I still love you. I still would kick anyone in the face who dared to say these things to you because they aren't your sister. They don't get you in the way I do. They aren't allowed to hate you and love you at the same time.

—Kelly

2008

My knee gives way, and I stumble while maneuvering the rolling pin. I wipe flour from my hands, then rub at my sore leg. I'd broken my tibia in basic training right at the knee joint, been told it was just tendonitis and to soldier on and shut up, so I had. The resulting three years have been full of medical procedures and pain blockers, prescriptions and physiotherapy, meaning my military career hangs off a precarious edge. If the injury can't be healed, I'm destined for a medical release.

After analyzing my MRI, the orthopedic surgeon claimed surgery was the only option, so he shot me up with syringes of local anesthetic and I laid awake on the table, watching the scalpel slice at my knee like a chef carving roast beef. The inside of the joint appeared on the overhead screen like a snow squall in an underground tunnel, and while the surgery revealed some issues, the doctor remained unconvinced that it would ever heal well, that I will ever become the soldier I'd imagined.

So, I bake. I'm shit at making pie but am desperate for distraction because even though the surgeon promised less pain, my knee still feels like mealy pulp, a pinched pain and constant ache. Following a recipe calms me—measuring, kneading—even if the end result isn't edible.

The phone bleats a shrill twang and I wipe pastry dough across my "Kell's Kitchen" apron, bright red with white lettering now a dust of white. A gift from military friends, who I am rapidly assimilating into the family I want instead of the one I was given. I don't recognize the number on the call display, consider not picking up. "Hello?"

"Hey," a voice croaks. "It's me."

I run my goopy fingertips under the tap while cradling the phone in the crook of my shoulder. Meghan always announces, *It's me*, as though she's the only person with whom I could have such intimacy, although I almost never recognize her voice, despite it being so like my own. Often, it's only her slurred speech that gives her identity away. For the most part, I've cut Meghan from my life as cleanly as my operation sliced at my flesh, because she has been increasingly erratic, progressing into behaviour that downright frightens me. Her latest drama was a massive car crash while buying drugs in Toronto, the car without valid plates or insurance, despite our parent's having co-signed on the loan. Mom and Dad will have to add the lawsuit and balance of the car debt to their long list of financial obligations racked up by their eldest daughter.

"What do you want?" I bark. No niceties remain. When did we last speak? Most of her calls come in the middle of the night, and I wake in the morning unsure if we've actually spoken or if it's been a dream. *Why are you calling me?* I snap, my throat tight with exhaustion, blinking back at my digital alarm clock. 2:21 am. 4:02 am. 3:37 am. Her words are usually garbled, and I let her ramble for a moment or two, just long enough to discern if there is a point to the exchange before hanging up angry that I have to wake early the next morning, contractually obligated to a job. In fact, hanging up before she begins is my new go-to solution for when Meghan can't abide by the set boundaries I cling to, which all the books and shows and support groups insisted were vital to my mental health. Steeped in Meghan's addiction without the acknowledgement of our parents, I watch Dr. Phil, read literature recommended by the gruff man who runs the Al Anon support group. No more contact, I'd told her, unless she could reach out at a reasonable time, for reasons that didn't include demands for money.

“Still there?” I ask snarkily, while digging at the clumps of flour and butter underneath my fingernails. Her breath rustles like wind and I picture Meghan thinner, darker, a monster taking shape. I try to visualize the place she’s calling from—a crack house littered with needles and lighters or a pay phone on an unlit street corner. Maybe some guy’s place, or a friend’s, someone who has agreed to put up with her for a few days. Or maybe her life isn’t as seedy as I imagine. Maybe this phone call is a hopeful step to warmth and safety and sisterhood.

“Jesus. Hello to you too.” She sniffles. “I miss you, Kell.”

Her tears tug at my nerves like marionette strings. “What’s up, Meg.” Softer this time. The words, *I miss you too*, will not form, even though they hang back, anticipatory, a second line for the next offensive. “Is it money?”

Money. Always money. A few months ago, I watched from Mom and Dad’s living room window as my sister stalked through the backyard in the dark. At first, I considered the cordless phone, 911 in one hand with my midnight snack gripped in my other hand. But there was something knowable about the figure. Even depleted by time and bad habits, I recognized her. Meghan slipped through the patio doors and crept across the floor of the kitchen like a cat. Although part of me longed for confrontation, I didn’t challenge her, inexplicably ashamed to meet her face to face, choosing instead to hide in the shadows and say nothing with my ginger molasses cookie still clutched in my hand. Up close, she looked worse than I remembered, pocked and twitchy even in the diffuse yellow streaks of moonlight. I’d heard she’d moved on to opiates, crack all but forgotten, her cravings more urgent—so desperately middle-class white girl. Her delicate fingers worked a wad of twenties from Dad’s wallet, then she tucked them into the back pocket of her pants. Did Mom and Dad wonder about how she robbed us while we slept? I’ve suspected her, of course, when cash, electronics, clothing items were suddenly absent

from my room whenever I visited. But voicing that concern had only resulted in Mom and Dad's dismissal followed by annoyance that I should think such horrible things of my sister.

"I broke up with my boyfriend," Meghan blurts. She's proud of this, like a child showcasing a C+ after a schoolyear of Ds.

"I heard. And already with someone else, I hear." This conversation is making me hate myself, poking the bear. I have made mistakes, bad ones, including sleeping with the wrong people, but none—I'm certain—as horrible as Meghan's countless crimes of morality and the Criminal Code for Christ's sake. I must cling to the fallacy of my higher virtue in order to breathe.

"Don't be like that."

Sustaining my one-woman show of bitterness is exhausting, and I am surrounded by the aftereffects—a fractured relationship with my parents, a career that is making me miserable, a lonely, quiet house. My kitchen looks like it hosted a baking explosion, my kitchen that I own, with cupboards I painted myself, not knowing that oil was different from latex and with oil you have to sand and wash and use spirits for clean-up. Frustrated with the delayed drying, I'd painted all over the hinges and the result was a sticky mess that was peeling off like glue on skin, but it is mine and I am a grownup and why can't she see? The middle of the family is an impossible and exhausting place to be.

I sigh, let the air puff noisily into the receiver. "How's your cashier job going?" Until a few months ago, Meghan was employed as a personal support worker, although I've never known her to show interest in healthcare. It wasn't long before she started stealing from her patients while she bathed them, changed their incontinence briefs, or fed them their meals. It was inevitable that the daughter of Barrie's former police chief would notice cash disappearing from

her father's home. Once she set up the secret camera, she discovered it wasn't her father's advancing Alzheimer's that was the cause for the missing money but rather, the sweet new PSW with the short brown ponytail and charming smile. Mom and Dad paid the family back in full and begged them not to press charges. Now Meghan works at the local No Frills grocery store. But she's running out of workplace options in town. What is it like to be fired from five, ten, twenty jobs, without worrying about the future?

She clears her throat. Doesn't answer.

"What is it, Meghan?"

"I'm in trouble."

"What a non-existent surprise. What kind of trouble?"

"Like, going to jail trouble."

I half smirk, half sob, shaking my head at the route I'd anticipatorily mapped years ago. "Maybe you deserve to be in trouble." Some disgusting part of me relishes her need for something I have the power to deny.

"I'm being charged." She coughs a little, dainty and hopeful that it will distract from what comes next. "With theft."

"Right." I dump cherry filling into the pie shell and fuss with a self-made tinfoil guard on the crust, the clatter of thin metal drowning out some of Meghan's tears. A sluice of blood dribbles from my thumb when I rake it across the jagged metal teeth of the foil box, and I suck at the wound until the taste of O positive fills my mouth. My knee is throbbing, a consistent ache but sharper somehow, a pervasive reminder. Meghan knows nothing of this injury, much less about me in general. Does she even know I had surgery? That my career might end? That I own



my own home? That I have friends outside our childhood field? Does she know anything about me at all? “What did you do?”

“Well, you know I’ve been working at No Frills. The grocery store.” Silence.

“I know what No Frills is. And?”

“They caught me on the security camera stealing money. For food though. I swear it was for food. And they called the cops and hauled me out of the storeroom and literally cuffed me in front of everyone and dragged me out of there. Handcuffed. It was so embarrassing Kelly. So embarrassing.” Meghan puts the phone down and I hear the rustle of something against the receiver and then the thwack of snot meeting tissue. Otherwise, silence hangs between us like a damp towel.

“How much?”

“How much what?”

“Did you steal?”

“Ten dollars.”

“You’re willing to go to jail for ten dollars? You’re not a teenager stealing lipstick, for Christ’s sake.” I scream down the line, my face hot. My pie bubbles, the filling triumphantly splattering across the insides of the oven because I didn’t turn the heat down like the recipe said. It will burn, create a cloud of smoke in my kitchen that I will be forced to fan out with a cloth if I don’t take it out right now. The acrid smell is already making me sick.

“I was hungry, Kelly! Do you know what it feels like to have to go to the food bank, for Christ’s sake? Or not have enough money for toilet paper?” I eye my oven, stressed over the amount of money I’d forked out for cherries and real butter, having maxed myself out on taxes

and plumbers and furnace repair, along with consistently doling out money to my twenty-six-year-old sister or having her take it without consent. I know what it is to be hungry.

“You wouldn’t have to go to the food bank if you spent your money on food and not shit to snort. You know that, right?” I say this like it is all so easy. To me, it is. Black and white. Good and Bad.

“This is why I never call! Always some lecture from you and Mom and Dad. Don’t you guys get how hard this is for me?”

“Hard for you?” I pace my smoking kitchen, waving the end of my apron in the air like a red bullring cape. “What about us? What about the endless fights you create between Mom, Dad, and I? What about all the money we give you, or come to think of it, the money you just take? You tear us apart, Meg. And you’re mad that I actually say something about it once in a while? I’m so sorry that you’re so hard done by in this.” Dad and I—borderline pushy, sticklers for rules, organized—always focus on life’s hard edges and slippery sloped pitfalls. Like addiction. Ask Dad about drug control laws and those who break them, and he will happily, assuredly insist the criminal deserved the harshest of punishments. But ask him about his daughter and he excuses everything under the shadow of addiction, partly because it is what he needs to believe and partly because disagreeing with Mom on how to handle their adult daughter has become a wedge rapidly expanding into a crevasse. And me, well, I can’t temper my anger over the confines of that tightening space and my place in it—the caregiving, the emotion easing, the seconding of my own sadness. I am an only child without any of the benefits.

“Why does everyone’s help always have to come at a cost?” She sniffles, indignant.

“So, what is it that you want from me exactly?”

“Okay, well.” The line goes fuzzy and Meghan blows her nose again, then drops the phone entirely. More nose blowing. “I need you to speak to my defense as a character witness. In court. Or give a statement or something to the judge.”

“Are you kidding?” I snort an inappropriate giggle. “You want me to speak for you? In court? As in, positively?”

“I really don’t want to have to tell Mom and Dad. It would kill them. You’re the only one who can do it. I don’t exactly have, you know, friends who are...”

“Good societal examples of behaviour?”

“Why are you making this so hard?”

“Because I’m always the one cleaning up your mess. Because Mom and Dad always think I’m a prick when really, it’s you. Because it’s been ten years of this shit, Meg.”

“I don’t want to have to tell Mom and Dad,” she says, choking back another sob. “They’d be devastated.”

“Oh, of course. Because how your actions affect Mom and Dad is really a high item on your priority list right now. You just plain old don’t want them to know. Fuck, Meghan. You’re putting me in an awkward position. You know that, right?” I hold my sister’s life like a lawyer’s scale, the weights balancing unevenly. Seal her fate or save her. I’m not sure the two options can independently exist.

“It’s just that the judge will actually listen to you because you’re my sister.” Her voice turns up at the end, all hopeful like she’s telling a fairy tale. She might as well have be. “Like, it would really sell it that you think I deserve a second chance.”

“That’s the thing, Meg. I don’t think you deserve a second chance. You’ve had a million second chances.”

“But you’re an officer in the Canadian Forces. Someone respectable in my life.”

“That’s exactly the thing, Meghan. You want me to testify to something I don’t believe. You want me to perjure myself.”

“For your sister. To help your sister. You don’t see anything redeeming in me?”

It is a question I’ve asked myself often, always without an answer. I envision giving false evidence and my uniform on the witness stand, disintegrating like my integrity. The fabric will fall away into threads, someone that once was put together and orderly, now a useless pile of material. But what of the dresses Meghan and I wore as kids, determining fashion quality through “spinnability,” hands held as we swirled? Those weaves, too, feel tattered.

I stare out the window where neighbourhood children slap a hockey puck back and forth between parked vehicles, the rubber disc bouncing off the traffic control humps and launches into the air. Their faces turn to the sky and wait for its return before they descend upon the puck with whoops of laughter, the sound mixing with that of wooden sticks on asphalt. Their ease is so tangible I can taste it. “What’s the number?”

“What number?”

“For the judge, for fuck’s sake.”

She rattles the number at me, her voice giddy with hope. I write it down on a military field notes pad I keep in the foyer, pen pressing into the paper until it tears. And then I hang up and lay by the toilet for an hour, heaving and gobbling glasses of water as I press my face to the cool toilet bowl, my body in a full sweat. The bowl smells and my bathroom is tiny and the linoleum is a faded layer of plastic that sticks to my legs. But I stay there against the porcelain and don’t get up for an hour. Silence fills my house.

As the nausea subsides, I stuff a folded towel under my head and stare up to the slightly mouldy ceiling, taking deep breaths. As kids, Meghan and I used to play WrestleMania on our parents' bed, reenacting all the belly bumps and arm clotheslines we saw on the television, our scrawny limbs poor substitutes for the muscled bravado we admired in our favourite stars. Miraculously, neither of us was ever hurt, always careful of where we fell so that we landed in giggling heaps of spin-skirted dresses and Rainbow Bright dolls. Despite being three years younger, I was Queen of the Body Slam, bouncing Meghan's frame into the mattress, finally feeling my own strength and my sister's potential weakness. And then we would lay there, clutching our stomachs in laughter. I knew she wouldn't hurt me on purpose. She knew the same.

From my position on the floor, I can see the wall of photos I've posted in a path up my flight of stairs. None of the pictures are of my sister. I have effectively erased her from my life, willed her into non-existence. And now, my bile floating next to me in the toilet bowl, I don't know if that eradication of being was because it is one of the tenets I learned in Al Anon, or if I prefer it this way, because witnessing her suffering is my own undoing. I don't want to hurt my sister on purpose.

When I return to the kitchen and sit on the tiled floor with my pie burnt to cinders, the whole house reeks of ash. I talk to the judge for more than an hour.

"Well, this is all very interesting news, Ms. Thompson," the judge says. I can hear his pen etching back and forth. "Your sister was certainly less than upfront about her previous actions." The Alzheimer's patient. The tanning salon. The cocaine. The lack of insurance, the car crash, the absent license. I tell the judge the entire story, the one Meghan couldn't tell herself.

"My sister is never really upfront about anything, I'm afraid."

I hang up and flatten myself to the kitchen floor with my shittily painted cabinets, the burnt air, the dankness of absent air conditioning, and hope for a day where my sister will see my actions as a kindness.

2010 – 2011

My alarm shrieks and once I rouse, I realize it has been alerting for more than forty minutes while I remained a comatose, oblivious lump. I roll over to face the row of dresses I've been stockpiling in anticipation of my new publishing job out in Vancouver. Civilian life is just a few weeks away, my military uniform soon moot.

A year ago, a second knee surgery proved useless and caused early onset arthritis in my twenty-six-year-old body. My military doctor told me that my broken leg would never heal, and within twelve months, I would be medically released from the military. My career, over, but my future wide and sparkly.

I slap the alarm off and groan, flushed and sweating. Always sweating lately, it seems, amongst other symptoms that are getting harder to ignore. In the bathroom, I fumble for the light, blinking into the 100-watt bulbs I'd bought to shock me awake. It is the harsh vanity lights that reveal a fleshy lump on my neck, which I cup in my palm. It looks like I've swallowed an orange or am soon welcoming the birth of a parasitic twin.

"Probably nothing," the doctor assures me when I return to her office for my military release medical. I had relayed my symptoms; constant sweating, twenty-pound weight loss, nails painfully ebbing away from my nailbed, hair falling out in fistfuls, a heart that beats so rapidly that the surgeon had questioned the safety of my last knee surgery before chalking it up to my historical anxiety. Most unmanageable of all is my mood. I'm used to run-of-the-mill anxiousness, the luggage I've carried since childhood, but this heightened panic and constant

sadness felt different, more extreme. My life is veering into the direction I've always wanted—to be a writer—and yet I can't muster any joy, can barely wake from bed.

The medical appointment is my last stop before I begin the 4500-kilometre drive to my new home in British Columbia. The doctor motions for the medic to take my blood, and he stabs at my inner arm six times before the doctor takes over, drawing several tubes of O positive into vials. “We'll just run a few tests to make sure. When you think about it, your whole life is changing. Releasing from the Forces soon, moving across the country, leaving behind everything you know. It's likely just all the stress of that compounding.”

“So, I'm okay to move next week?”

“Definitely.” She nods at the medic who slaps sticky labels onto the tubes of blood and shuttles out of the room.

The diagnosis comes back the next day. Graves' disease—an autoimmune disorder that affects the thyroid—a rather nasty case, the doctor claims. “Not a big deal,” she says over the phone. “Just make sure you follow up with a doctor in BC.” I lean back into my office chair, the space where I am Captain Thompson, not just Kelly. I pretend to take it all in, to assess what this diagnosis means for my future, not thinking of how I have never, as an adult, lived within the parameters of the civilian health care system, much less in an entirely different province. I don't even have a Health Card, much less know the process of acquiring one, because the military has its own doctors and priority access to medical services. Approaching twenty-seven, I am a bouncing, baby civilian.

But I will be fine. I am always fine.



At St. Paul's Hospital, I sit in the stark nuclear medicine waiting room, preparing for my radioactive iodine treatment that will kill my overactive thyroid and leave me reliant on medication for life—relatively minor in the grand scheme of things but a terrifying prospect as a young woman five provinces away from family. One man taps his foot rhythmically to the ambient elevator music and an elderly woman repeatedly smacks her lips together as if she's just taken a sip of something tart. We all sit alone, unable to bring anyone with us to our radiation doses. No hands of comfort. No loved ones to rub backs.

I'd managed to plod through a few months of my publishing internship before the doctor ordered me on sick leave. My heart rate continued to increase, I was constantly dizzy and disoriented, and at night, I didn't bother to unbutton my jeans when it was time for bed. They slipped right over my hips as though I was shedding another layer of myself, another identity exoskeleton. In the mirror, all I saw was my addicted sister staring back at me, emaciated and angry. Lonely and lost, most of all.

*You should be home, with family to help you right now*, the civilian endocrinologist said. Where was home? I had cried, uncertain how to respond to someone who didn't understand that technically, I remained an officer in the Forces on loan to civilian world. My internship was funded by the government so I had no choice; I legally could not return home without military medical permission. More frustrating than the doctor's response is that lack of sympathy conveyed by my family, who give me a spare complaint window before returning to family dinners with Meghan, dinners that I am both angry to be missing and pleased to avoid. She is attending a methadone clinic with diligence, Meghan has moved back in with our parents, is working a steady job at a coffeehouse. Despite all this, I still left Ontario filled with anger at the many ways she hurt me and all the reasons I can't forgive.

“Kelly Thompson?” A voice calls out into the waiting room and I snap to.

I follow the technician with the clipboard, who wears scrubs the colour of pea soup. Once inside another sterile room, she smiles warmly and plunks down on a wheeled stool. She is covered in freckles, short with brown hair. She looks so much like Meghan that I do a double take, choking back awkward and unexpected tears. She wouldn't be here though, my sister, because we barely speak, avoid interaction as though one of us might combust in conversation. If I call Mom and Dad and she happens to answer, the phone is handed off with deft ease, usually without so much as a *How are you?* It is easier apart, because if we don't have to face one another, we don't have to acknowledge the roles we both played in the decline of our sisterhood.

“Nice to meet you, Kelly. How're you doing today?”

“I'm okay. Nervous.”

“Totally normal.” She assesses my file, which is shockingly thick considering I've only been in Vancouver for a few months. “So, I hear you've got a wonky thyroid we need to blast away to space. Anyone in your family have a history of Graves?”

“My aunt. Paternal.”

“Ah, those aunts, get you every time.” She laughs as she continues through my medical history. “Wow, quite the cancer history in your family, eh?”

“We are a family of disease, yeah. My sister had it the worst. Kidney cancer. Almost killed her.”

“How old was she?”

“Young. A toddler.”

The technician shakes her head. “Well, this radiation, you'll be pleased to know, is nothing like what she had, especially in what, the eighties? Gosh. Anyways, it's all pretty easy

peasy, lemon squeezy. I'll come in with the vial, drop in a straw and you'll drink all the liquid. I'll refill the vial twice with water," she holds up two fingers in a "v" shape, "to ensure you get every last drop and then you get to go home. Questions?" The information is relayed easily, and I imagine she's doled it out thousands of times.

"What does it taste like?" I sit on my hands to keep from fidgeting.

"Absolutely nothing," she says. "Or at least, that's what I'm told. Never had the stuff." She punches a few things into a computer and produces a sheet of paper. "You'll need this if you're travelling across any borders or to any airports in the next three months. It's a number for the authorities to call so they can verify you received nuclear medical treatment because you know, you'll set off border radiation alarms."

"Seriously?" I'm planning a trip home to Ontario for Christmas, just three months away, and imagine my arrival at the airport involving bells, whistles, and strip searches. I laugh in spite of myself.

"And then there's this." She hands me a pamphlet.

The literature outlines the precautions I am meant to take after receiving the radioactive iodine treatment that will turn my thyroid to dust. To prevent the same happening to anyone in my vicinity, immediately after consuming the drink I am to get my nuclear ass home for five days of seclusion. I am not to make meals for others, sleep next to a partner, and must flush the toilet three times since the radiation will be expelled through urine. My brain whirls with the instructions and the finality of treatment, medication, and illness. Technician/Meghan blinked back at me with compassion. I am so dizzy and hot and goddamn emotional.

"Can I keep this?" I ask, waving the pamphlet like a white flag. "I'm worried I'll forget some of the rules." The urge to cry tugs at every part of me.

“Of course, honey. You keep it.”

Tears spill out onto my cheeks, burning hot on my fiery skin. “I’m sorry,” I gasp, feeling low on air because my thyroid is an asshole and my sister is too and all of it is happening before I can catch my breath.

“Hey, hey, don’t worry,” Tech/Meghan says, folding me into her arms as I shake with sobs. She even smells like Meghan, and as I lean into the pea soup scrubs, I can’t stop the tide of longing for my sister combined with the lack of understanding for that wish. The air is air stuffy and oppressive. “You’ll feel so much better in a few months that you’ll be thanking the gods for the day you met me.”

I give my head a few shakes, a shiver passing through. “Yes, of course. I’m ready. Thank you.” I blow my nose on some scratchy hospital-grade tissues and extricate myself from her arms.

“Alrighty, good to go, yeah? Let’s get you fixed up.” She leaves the room and returns donning arm-length gloves and carrying a tray with a tiny bottle balanced on top, marked with the nuclear warning sign. I am struck with the thought that I am about to ingest something that she has to protect herself from. “I’ll hold the straw and at no time are you to touch the straw. Okay?”

“How come?” Like the kid told not to push the big red button.

“Radiation. Can’t have it on your skin.” It is the first time she seems serious and the gravity finally settles in—I am killing a part of myself to hopefully reclaim the other parts I’ve lost. It is an easy enough choice, and recovery won’t be too horrible. I choke back tears and hover nervously over the straw, my lips pursed but unable to move forward and sip.

“Pretend it’s a martini,” Tech/Meghan says winking. It is exactly what my sister would say.

I drink until I am sucking on air. She refills the vial twice with water and I drink that too, as ordered.

“Well, that’s it! Now go on home because we don’t want you here.” She moves away from me, making me suddenly aware of my own radioactivity, the power to hurt others by my mere presence. “It was really nice to meet you. Take care, Kell, okay?” Meghan is the only one who ever calls me Kell. I hate having my name shortened otherwise. Hate it from my own sister, even, but coming from Tech/Meghan, the sentiment freezes me in place until she shoos me out with a sweeping motion of her rubbery gloves.

A month later, Mom’s fingers lightly drum the steering wheel as we putter up Highway 400 towards Barrie. Others drive by and give us the finger, shake their fists from rolled down windows. As usual, Mom is going twenty kilometres under the speed limit, charmingly oblivious. “It’s good to see you, Mooster.” Whenever she stops speaking, her lips press into a point of concentration.

“Didn’t make much of a lasting escape, did I?” My breath makes condensation clouds on the window and I trace my initials in the damp.

“You had to escape us?”

“I didn’t mean it like that. I just meant, I tried to start a new life and now I’m back. Sick.”

“You’ll be back to Vancouver in no time. We don’t mind having you for a while.”

*Don't mind. For a while.* The terms make my jaw ache. Mom and Dad hadn't really offered for me to come stay with them while I recuperated, per se, but rather, acquiesced. *Sure, sure, you can stay with us, if you want.* I pick at the tint film in the corner of the window where it has peeled on Mom and Dad's fancy new Mercedes. So much has changed in the months since I left.

"It's a good thing you waited until your sister got out on her own, though," Mom says. The comment suggests I have the capacity to coordinate my thyroid's need, its care, its urgent wants until my thirty-year-old sister moves out. Mom bobs her head as she talks, like she's convincing herself. "It would have been tight in the house, with the two of you."

It feels pointless to mention that their home has two guest rooms, each with their own bathroom. Their new home, in fact, is three-thousand square feet of suburbia in which we could all retreat to our own separate corners if we wanted the space. But is not square footage she is referring, and it feels pointless to mention that, too.

"Your sister has been doing so well," Mom continues. "A year sober now. And Bernard just bought her a car just so she can move out there to live with him."

"Bernard." I test the word out loud. "Stupid name." It isn't stupid, particularly, but I feel better for having made the slight.

Mom shakes her head at me, the problem child, always stirring the pot. "It's French."

"Does he speak French?"

"I don't think so."

I raise my eyebrows, feeling validated. "So, he bought her a car just so she could move in?"

“Well he lives outside the city, so she could never get to his house on the bus.” Mom puts her signal on to gracefully ease off the highway while a transport truck bleats his horn and gestures profanely. “They found a safe car and now she can live there.”

“Aren’t you supposed to stay on your own a while?” Meghan has never gone, what, a month without a boyfriend, a partner, a quick lay in a basement apartment? She has a consistent, desperate need to be desired. Staring at my mom in her jeans and t-shirt, her careful makeup, I wonder if I don’t feel the same, just with different methods of achieving it. “When you’re in recovery, I mean?” Meghan had taken to owning the bed she made for herself, one dosed with the cough-syrupy flavour of methadone, is cold and lonely by design.

“You can’t help when you meet your person, and Meghan has met her person. Why don’t we stop in to see her before we go home? Get some nachos while we’re at it?”

Every guy Meghan has met since she was twelve has been “her person.” “Not right now, Mom. I’m tired from the flight.” Sun blazes on my lap, highlighting all the leg hair I haven’t bothered to shave through the summer. The three-hour time change sweeps over me like a blanket, Vancouver to Barrie feeling as starkly separate as Dubai and Tokyo.

“You said Graves’ means you’re always hungry. We’ll just pop in real quick.” Mom says steers the car into the Mucho Burrito parking lot, decision made. Waves of heat warble in our vision, making the stationary vehicles look like apparitions. I follow dutifully into the restaurant where Spanish music filters through tinny speakers and bright windows reveal benches and bistro-height tables. The smell of grease and spices tickles my nostrils. I want everything on the menu, which I am still staring at when a familiar voice chirps, “Welcome to Mucho Burrito. What can I get you today?”

My sister beams a radiant smile, her dark hair captured in a hairnet, a lame themed visor clapped on top. The uniform is all black to cover splatters of tomato salsa and black beans like simmering ink in the warmer. She is tiny—that has not changed—barely able to see over the glass counter that protects the flour tortillas and shredded pots of cheese from sneezing customers. She is exactly the same, but entirely different at once.

“Ta da! What do you think?” She spins, modelling the clothes, parading back and forth between her busy coworkers. A customer at the other end of the counter barks that no, she does not want the ninety-nine-cent guacamole, thank you very much, and when the hell did avocados become so damn expensive?—she’ll add it on at home, thank you very much. The teenager serving her gives a curt nod, like he’s heard this all before, and with the speed of a well-trained superhero, whips her burrito into a smooth aluminum bullet. “Kell?” Meghan is still waiting for me to look at her, shaking jazz hands this way and that.

“Great. It’s great.” I can’t manage anything else as my sister beams radiantly. She looks clean, rounder. Happier. Mom stands to the side with a smile so wide I think her face might crack, her connection to Meghan an invisible rope. I look between them, agony sweeping and also, ambivalence. For years, Meghan has been on the fringes of our familyhood and now, living on the other side of the country, it is me.

She dashes from corner to corner of the restaurant, corralling coworkers like a sheepdog. “This is my sister! Come meet my sister!” Staff rush to shake my hand, some taking a moment to wash their hands first. They give Meghan’s arm congratulatory squeezes, knowing eyes of kindness. She is clearly well-liked, working hard. Meghan always has been easy to like, from the outside at least, which is why I imagined her as a teacher or nurse, a job with kids, perhaps. But I



am ashamed of her, the way she glows under the tube lighting, the way she acts like we have some special connection that doesn't exist, the stupid damn hat. I am ashamed to be ashamed.

"I'll have to hug you later," she says, pointing to a camera that is trained on the stainless-steel counters. "Our boss watches everything." She rolls her eyes and winks. I have never seen my sister wink. "So, what can I get you? I'll make it special."

Special? Is that code for something? Is this like a pot brownie? Or is she going to spit in it, mix it in with my dollar worth of guac? "I'll have a Mucho size beef burrito, please."

Her eyes go wide. "It's really, really big. Like, I've never seen anyone manage it and I've been here a year. Sam, you ever seen someone finish a Mucho?"

The woman operating the quesadilla press holds up her pointer finger. "Just once."

"I can do it," I say, pointlessly annoyed. "Beef please."

Mom doesn't order anything, which seems to disappoint Meghan. She goes down the line of fillings and at my command, sprinkles in beans, rice, scoops of overcooked meat that look exactly the same as the other pots of protein. She slaps a dollop of guacamole onto the centre of the tortilla and spreads it loosely around. "This is usually extra." Another wink. She hands over the burrito with shaking hands, an obscene thing the size of a newborn. "Do you think that it'll be good?" She raises her eyebrows and presses her lips together. Hopeful. Nervous.

"It's great, thanks." I wave the burrito in the air and nearly give my wrist a cramp with its heft.

"We'll see you later, okay, Meggie?" Mom waves as Meghan drops a packet of nacho chips into a to-go bag.

"Hey, Kell, now that you're home, we can hang out a bit. Maybe. If you want."

My head nods of its own accord as we leave but all I can think of is the burrito and how when I finish it, I'll be that much closer to sleep.

"Your poor sister," Mom says as she starts the ignition. Air conditioning wafts noisily through the vents. "Stuck in a job like this because she has a record."

Mom does not say, *Because of you*, but she might as well. My testimony to the judge meant Meghan was forced into treatment to avoid a stiffer penalty. My testimony is the reason she is clean, too.

There are many things we do not say. To keep the words tucked safe, I launch into my burrito. I eat the entire thing.

A groan emits as I languidly roll onto my side, Ontario humidity permeating everything, even in autumn. I periodically reach up to press on the goiter, smaller and less significant as the radiation continues its effect. My hormones have been throwing themselves into emotional cartwheels—elated one minute, hysterical tears the next. Once my body regulates itself, purges the butterfly illness, my mood will go back to normal—so says the doctor—but it feels bigger than that, the newfound sadness that clings at my throat like cat claws on a scratch post. I try to journal when tears sneak into my soup or anger flares hot at another pair of loose-fitting jeans, but I always circle back to the military—missing it, oddly—the starch in my uniform, the crisp swing of an arm in salute. Depression tugs at my limbs, like a child pulling at their parent's sleeve.

"This is horrible," I croak from the couch. Mom is at the stove stirring a hefty metal pot in the open concept kitchen. I don't have the energy to get up and help.

Only two weeks in and evidently, my planned, parent-supported recuperation was misguided in its ideal that I would be even remotely pitied.

“I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

*You’ll be fine*, is Mom’s favourite mantra. She insisted, even when I got a flu right after I arrived, which required rounds of antibiotics when it turned into an infection. And later, when I vibrated on the living room floor with a Graves’-induced tremor. Or when my teeth ached so badly that I couldn’t chew, so everything that passed my lips had to be pureed. Or when, while preparing a roasted chicken dinner, I left several full nails behind, pressed into the flesh of the bird because my body is caving in on itself like an imploded building.

“Shit, Mom, would it kill you to have some compassion?” I swipe sweat from my forehead with my forearm in the fall heatwave. My parents refuse to put on the air conditioning—hydro is expensive!—so I routinely lay on the bathroom floor in the basement where the cool tile makes me shiver but does not ease the persistence of my overly exerted heart.

Mom awkwardly steps towards me, her MS throwing off her balance. She wobbles in place but rights herself as she holds the wooden spoon aloft. “Kelly, have you ever considered you aren’t the only one who suffers with things? Look at everything your sister has overcome.” Red sauce smatters across the black splash and down her shirt as she whips the spoon about. There is always another Thompson who has it worse off than me, and even though it is true, it is not what I want to hear.

We say nothing, eyes locked on one another. I huff air between my lips and run my hands through my hair, disengaging several tufts that materialize in my hand. My hair will grow back. My fingernails will reemerge while my goiter withers and dies. Eventually, I will write a sentence without pausing, then two sentences, then whole paragraphs, leaving my brain fog to

evaporate like the other symptoms. I will find another job and for now, I have a pension to support me and this privilege is more than I can stand. But. *The autoimmune aspect of the disease will always remain*, the doctor warned. *Finding the right medication balance often takes a few years.*

“I sure hope you’re referring to Meghan’s cancer, Mom, and not the fact that she was addicted to drugs because she **CHOSE TO DO DRUGS.**” I never yell at my mom but everything I do these days is an overreaction, an angry snipe. “I didn’t choose this.” I flop my hand across my sweaty body in demonstration. “You didn’t choose MS. It’s different.”

“You don’t understand addiction,” Mom snaps, filling a pot of water for noodles. She slams it onto the gas stove, which clicks and whirs into action. I suck my teeth and snatch the remote to turn up the volume.

There is a gentle tap at the front door before it gently pushes open, a vacuum of air sucking my hair towards the front hall. “Hello? Mom? Dad?” Meghan comes into the kitchen smelling of grilled chicken and Cajun spices, her hair still in its net.

“Hi Meggie.” Mom gives her a kiss on the cheek as Dad comes upstairs, armed with china from the basement hutch. China. For spaghetti. On a Wednesday. Meghan let herself in with a key. I don’t even have a key and I’m staying here.

“Hi, Ma. Hi, Dad.”

Dad hugs Meghan brusquely, keen to finish setting the table. There are even placemats and wine glasses set. Despite our ages, it feels weird to drink in front of my parents.

“Kell!” She rushes towards my spot on the couch and hugs me so tightly that I can barely breathe. Stubbornly, I let my arms hang dead at their sides as though I am at attention, but Meghan doesn’t seem to notice as she nestles into my chest, her head tucking perfectly under my

tall chin. “I’ve missed you so much.” I wrestle free to lean back against the couch and cough twice, unable to shake my headache. This familiarity feels all wrong without all the steps that seem to need to take place in between. “How much time do you have left in Ontario?” She takes up residence beside me, the cushion depressing until I lean into her slightly. I don’t have the energy to wrestle myself further away.

“I’ll go back in a few weeks. When I’m doing a little better.”

“Oh Kelly, I’m sorry you’re not feeling well.” Meghan coos, her eyes welled with compassion. I shift uncomfortably, unsure how to respond to tears that aren’t meant to absolve her of something, save her from some punishment. Watching her, I’m uncertain if I am looking at a stranger or the most recognizable face I know.

“Dinner’s up, girls.” Dad fills everyone’s glass to the tip top of their wedding crystal. I sit at the bistro height table, my bum sticking to the microfibre because I am always, perpetually sweating. “Fuck,” I whisper under my breath as I wrestle myself between the chair and the glass top.

“Language!” Dad snaps as he doles out the pasta.

“I was in the military, remember?” I throw my arms in the air, exasperated. “I’ve been swearing for a few years. The jig is up.”

“Yeah, Dad. And she’s a grown woman.” I cannot help but feel the tug of a smile at the corner of my mouth—my older sister rising to my defense. It is uncomfortable but also, somehow, not.

“You’re still Bill’s Broads,” Dad responds.

Dad used to announce us as Bill’s Broads and Meghan and I would pretend to hate it, plaintively rolling our eyes at his outdated patriarchal ways. But we had liked it, this label,

because it made us a team of women on the same side, something we sensed didn't always exist outside of family. We were, are, Bill Broads, smiling like idiots as sauce is plopped onto plates and noodles are wiggled loose from their starchy mates.

“You know, I could always take some time off work,” Meghan says as she digs through the mound of grated parmesan. “Help you out for a while?”

“Meg, you can't afford that, but I appreciate the offer.” Do I appreciate the offer? I can't tell if my own words are lip service, anger still simmering in every cell because I am still waiting for something she seems unable to give. But her cheeks are not sunken in and her hair no longer swallows her whole and she is rosy and vibrant. She is Meghan, again, I think. Or I want to think it, and that wanting will screw me over again when it all goes to shit.

“I would find a way to make it happen, if you needed me.” She reaches over for my hand but I occupy it with my utensils. I take a bite of pasta and wash it down with a gulp of wine, emptying half the glass.

I believe her. I don't know what to do with that feeling so instead, I eat. Mouthful after mouthful until I feel nothing at all.

Part 3

*Bargaining?*

*Or embracing, or loving, or living...*

Dear Meghan,

Not sure how it happened, but you've always treated love like something out of a Nicholas Sparks novel. Candlelight and candy. Some Great Challenge to be overcome by Great Gestures. Ideally, some spicy lust in there. Everyone tanned and healthy. Even when you were too old for fairytales, you believed.

So I feel guilty for finding something close to your dream when I could have given a shit less about marriage.

But at the same time, it feels like your fault that you didn't.

And, I mean, it's not like we didn't have perfect examples of what love actually is. Mom and Dad showed us every day. It was doing the ironing while the other cleaned house or making a packed lunch for the one working back-to-back shifts. It was small daily stuff. And it was taking those hard moments and turning them into places for growth. I know. Corny. You love corny more than anyone else I know.

I feel all of this in my cells, but I know it's ignorance talking. I've tried so damn hard to understand what let you think men could mould you however they liked, bend you to their desires even when that flex broke you in two. Honestly? Domestic violence confuses me, no matter how much I read, how hard I try to be a better person who makes emotional space for this sort of understanding.

You were loved.

You just didn't see it for all the assholes who stood in the way, blocking your view.

—Kelly



2013

The cursor on my screen blinks a rhythm as though my MFA thesis is bleating its deadline, halfway into my two-week writing retreat. In a few months, I graduate from the University of British Columbia—studying fiction and non fiction, screenwriting and poetry—absorbing writing skills like water drops in sand. It has been within UBC’s stuffy hallways that I have found belonging since leaving the Forces. My home is with the artists, in Vancouver, with my husband, Joe.

We’d met in basic training, where he carried me for three kilometres after I broke my leg. We’d reconnected a decade later, married, and each time I rolled towards him in bed, I wondered how I got here, in a marriage I didn’t think I wanted but now couldn’t survive without.

The Henriquez Studio at the Banff Centre for the Arts is a cocoon of well-worn oak in the boat-turned-writing retreat, complete with galley, toilet, and even a seating area to serve as my workspace. November’s snowy mountains peek through the coniferous trees, as do the eight other cabins that surround me, allotted to different artists.

I stretch my slippered feet and lean back into my office chair. 5:45 pm. It’s been three hours since I looked at a clock, locked into my process of writing, devoid of time and other senses, apparently. It’s cold in the small fishing vessel and I crank the heat, place my feet against the electric baseboard feeling pleased with my progress.

Outside the boat’s snugly interior, a deer struts by, sniffs at the snow and continues to traipse through the woods towards the town of Banff, eventually invisible from my post tucked

in the trees. Moments later, a fawn stumbles into view in search of its mother, its spotted flank a blur of tan as it dashes back and forth, making a guttural plea for its family that strikes me immobile. A lump forms in my throat, a burl of panic and worry, as the fawn shivers in place before bursting into the direction of the deer. Gone, as quickly as it came into sight.

A blue text bubble appears on my computer screen, Meghan's photo next to it.

*Meg: You busy?*

I no longer cringe upon seeing her name in my email inbox or on my call display. Sometimes, the contact is even welcomed as we ease into an unreliable friendship. But not today. Not while I'm writing and on deadline and away in the mountains.

*Me: I'm still on my writing retreat.* Permanently busy for two weeks, as I'd informed everyone in the family, Joe included. *But what's up?*

*Meg: I don't want to bother you.*

My family's lack of understanding about my new work-from-home freelance writer life only intensifies my irritation when they routinely interrupt. *But you're home*, Dad moaned once, annoyed at my annoyance when he called for the sixth time in one day, this time to assess the value of upgrading his iPhone. He called again an hour later so I could help him figure out the process of downloading an attachment.

*Me: I'm already officially bothered. What's up, Meg?*

*Meg: Maybe I should call.*

*Me: Don't have great reception out here in the woods. In and out.* It's a good lie. One I think will stave off a long conversation that eats into my precious time. Upon completion of my residency, I should have a well-drafted version of my thesis prepared for my second reader. My novel, sitting with that damn blinking cursor on the screen.

*Meg: I have some news.*

An ellipsis indicates she's typing, but it takes forever.

*Meg: Bernard and I are expecting...*

I stare at the words for a long time. Too long.

*Meg: You there?*

Emotions crash into one another as I read the text over and over, unable to process. Still a newlywed, edging towards my thirties, desire for a child is a new sensation that has been spreading within me like spilled milk. Sometimes, Joe and I lay away at night and think of the names we'll give our children—Huck for a boy, Gwen for a girl. Yet my doctor indicates Graves' disease will prove a serious hurdle, especially since my hormones keep raging in wild directions barely contained by laboratory charts. *Best to not try yet*, she said. *Best to wait*, although I worry about when late becomes too late.

I open the boat's porthole windows to the wintery November air, lean my head into the breeze that nips through the glass and gobble chilly gulps of it. No sign of the fawn or doe, now just a trace of two-pronged tracks in stretches of crusty snow. I push back from my seat and stumble towards the bathroom, take longer than necessary going pee, blowing my nose, washing my hands for the entire length of "Happy Birthday." I have done so many right things. Got an education. Married Mr. Right. Had a respectable career. Donated money to charities. Meghan has been an addict, a horrible sister, a thief, a shit person. This does not compute.

And with Bernard. Four years together, and he's never once bought her a card, given her a gift, complimented her. In fact, I have never witnessed him express affection, give a kiss, say something sweet, or even offer to clean up after a meal. Bernard. A father. I take a sip of cold coffee from my desk and inhale half the liquid at the thought.

My fingers hover over the screen. *Me: Wow. Congratulations, Meg. You guys plan this?*

*Meg: No! Total surprise.*

Somehow, this feels worse than the pregnancy itself, that Meghan is getting what she wants when she has never earned a thing in her life, never had to work for it from what I can see. Worse is the sick pit I have even considering a family is something to be earned. Meghan deserves happiness. Meghan has turned her life around and what the fuck do I know of her struggles? I've been as absent a witness to her suffering as she has been to mine.

I toss the coffee mug into the sink with a clatter, breaking it. My anger doesn't even make sense because for most of my life, I couldn't understand why anyone would commit themselves a life of such drudgery; of picking up, of homework, of vomit and snot, of no time to oneself. But the emotional tide has turned. Lately, I roam our Vancouver-area neighbourhood and stare with longing while mothers push overpriced strollers, bouncing their organic-cotton-swathed children who wield phthalate-free rattles. I want that, with my partner. A family only we can make.

*Me: When are you due?*

*Meg: July. A cancer baby, just like us!* Her responses fire back with instant speed. She is waiting for me. Waiting for me to say it is okay. Waiting to know that I really am proud and happy.

*Me: Exciting*

My phone chirps, echoing through the boat's tiny wooden structure. Meghan's face lights up my screen, a shot from my wedding where she brims with emotion, brown curls loose around her cheeks.

"Hi."

“I just wanted to call. Kind of follow up, I guess. If we lose connection I won’t call back and bother you again.” She sounds sheepish, tentative. “I wanted to make sure you were okay. Considering, you know.”

“Considering I might be barren?” I scoff, make a joke of this stark fact. My hormones, even now that my thyroid is dead, are erratic and hard to control, making motherhood one thing I cannot achieve by sheer persistence and will. The endocrinologist said my early onset Graves’ disease might hamper my chances at children. *Most women start to see Graves symptoms in their thirties, and by that time, they’ve usually already had children*, the doctor said flippantly, like it was my fault for waiting. *But who knows? Some women go on to have normal pregnancies.* Somewhere inside myself, I know I will be one of those unlucky percent who know nothing of normalcy.

“Yeah. That.” Meghan is the only one in the family who doesn’t challenge me on the term; barren. Mom thinks it sounds like something out of a Victorian novel, overly dramatic.

“I can be a bit sad about that and still be happy for you.” If I say it out loud, I might make the feelings ring true, like forcing a smile until happiness emerges. But all I find is anger. Frustration. Desperation. A bargain I hope to make with myself. Meghan is having her dream realized and I have mine, here at the Banff Centre. So why this cement weight in my gut? “You’ve always wanted a family, Meg.” I close my eyes with the phone to my ear, imaging Meghan rubbing her belly absentmindedly, barely the size of what—an acorn?

“I’m so relieved you’re not upset,” she says. “You’ll be an auntie!”

“Auntie Kelly. Sounds good.” The words are sour on my tongue, and I hate myself for it, this assholery. Jealousy sits on my shoulder like the fire-breathing monster that it is. *You have other things.* I write this on a loose piece of paper nearby, scrap I will throw out later and never

have to atone for. I have my writing, and a master's, and a good pension, and a great husband and a new car. I have things.

“Okay, well I should get back to work.” I hear her rustle with paperwork, whether for effect or not, I can't be sure. Her new job at a community college, a job she is proud of, is heralded throughout the family like she's won Olympic gold. I'm proud too, but that feeling is clouded with soupy bitterness. “I love you so much, Kell.” Her voice is so damn earnest. She means every word.

“Love you too.” I swallow the baseball in my throat. “I'm so happy for you.” The lie seeps through my teeth and sounds unconvincing.

I write a short story that evening in a fifty-minute whirl. It is about an overachieving bitch who cannot have children with her perfect, kind husband. The protagonist's sister has a child on her very first attempt. I title it “Barren.”

October, 2015

Meghan is wearing the flimsy, silvery sash I forced her into, emblazoned with the word “Bride.” There’s a little crown, too, which sits cocked to one side of her brunette bob, the plastic pink jewels embedded with too much glue. Bachelorette party for two.

Meghan leans back into her seat and puffs out her rosy cheeks with air. “Won’t be able to fit into my wedding dress at this point.” There’s chili sauce stuck to her chin in a reddish glob, glimmering in the overhead lights of the dim bar. She’s on her third drink, having made an earlier claim that she’ll pump and dump her breastmilk later that night. Dinner at five in the evening was as wild as she could manage with a one-year-old and a fiancé back home. A fiancé who complains every time he must care for his own child. But Meghan rarely complains about his complaints because she has what she always wanted—a family. The pain to get there is routinely forgotten.

“Thank God for corset laces. Keeps everything tucked in.” I hold my club soda in the air as if to cheers, then sip.

“No kidding!” She clinks her glass with mine, too jubilant, so it spills across her ample chest. I feign a smile, struggling to celebrate the countdown to her wedding, which I’ve come to dread. I nibble at our platter of deep-fried appetizers, now gone cold and clammy. Meghan plucks a battered pickle from the plate, watches as it hangs limp, then pops it in her mouth. “Can you believe I’m getting married? Eek!” She claps greasy hands together then wipes them on her napkin. She has always been a fun drunk.

“I definitely know you’re getting married since I’m the one who basically planned the entire thing, made the centrepieces, created invitations. I think that if I have to hear about it one more time, I might lose my mind.”

“Hey,” she says, faking a frown and a childish pout. “Have I talked about my wedding too much?”

“I think you’ve been talking about it since you were five.”

“That’s an exaggeration.” She takes a large slurp of her daiquiri. “Since I was twelve, maybe.” She laughs hard then, beautiful and happy. When we smile, it is one of the only ways people can tell we are related. The same teeth, same unsymmetrical lips.

“You’re right. The veil talk definitely upped its game when puberty hit.”

She grins wide, turning to face the room. The same teeth, yes, but Meghan’s are stained with splotches of brown from some of her cancer treatments. *I hate seeing that reminder, every time I look in the mirror*, she told me once. But Meghan rarely focuses on her past. “I’m just so glad Joe got posted closer to home so you guys can be around more. Sam likes having you around.”

Joe received a military posting back to Ontario a few months prior, placing us in Trenton, about two and a half hours from my parents, Meghan, and my new nephew, Sam. When I met my sister’s son for the first time, I’d burst into uncontrollable tears and laughter and a cascade of other feelings. *Come to your auntie!* I screeched, scooping his round body into my arms. I didn’t recognize myself, this woman who squealed over a baby’s floppy appendages and pinkened skin, a face that is practically my own staring back. I held him aloft as his body went rigid and he laughed wildly. I brought him close, sniffed his head. Baby. Sister, and family. I had lived provinces away for five years, but I knew the smell of home.



“You just want access to nearby willing babysitters. That’s the joy of having the auntie around.” I bite into my lime wedge and squint at its sourness.

“Ha. That too. But he lights up when you’re around. You’re cooler than me. He’ll realize that when he’s older especially.”

“Well, it’s taken all of my thirty-odd years of existence for you to appreciate my coolness level.”

“Not me.” Her eyes brim. “I’ve always known. I don’t worry about anything you set your mind to, Kelly. I’m not saying that because I’m drunk. You know that, right?”

I roll my eyes and laugh. “That’s what everyone says when they’re drunk.”

“I mean it.” She leans across the table and takes my hand. “I think you’re amazing. I’m your biggest fan. Everything you’ve done for me, with the wedding especially. Even after all the things I’ve done *to* you.”

A silence hangs between us, even as the rest of the patrons hum with chatter and drinks, chewing and screaming at the overhead televisions as a hockey team wages war on the ice. Familiar tears sit weighty and glistening, but there is something different there behind the matching greenish-blue shade of my own irises. Something that is not a request for pity.

The waitress comes to the table and delivers the cheque without a word, her ambivalence something I hope to showcase in her tip but know I will still guiltily leave twenty per cent. Meghan fakes a motion for the bill, knowing she can’t and won’t pay for it—can barely put gas in her car because Bernard insists on keeping their finances separate, even though Meghan stays home raising their son. “I’ve got this, Meg. It’s your bachelorette. Not that it’s much of one.”

“It’s all I wanted. Drinks with my sister. You know that.” She starts putting on her coat, tugging the light canvas around her waist. “I didn’t do anything for you for your bachelorette party.”

“You lived on the other side of the country. It’s fine.” I count twenties into the billfold and toss on my own coat.

“Well, and I wasn’t your maid of honour, so the bachelorette wasn’t really my job.” She hangs her head at this as we leave, our breath evident in the air for the first time that year. October chill nestles into my bones and I shiver in the dark as we approach my Volkswagen. I hope the short walk will prevent me having to have this conversation, this late at night, while I am so very tired, but she continues.

“I deserved it, you know. I deserved to be second, the way I treated you.” We climb into the car and I start the ignition. She quickly snaps off the radio to fill the car with silence, nothing but the whirl of the heating fan. “I was so horrible to you. To Mom and Dad. I missed out on so much with you guys. All the drugs.”

“You were sick, right?” This is the party line we’ve all been toting for years, whatever it takes to make Meghan feel better and us feel worse, choking on unsaid frustrations. No matter the research I’ve done, the label of illness makes me angry for the fact that it erases the moment in which she decided to bring the crack pipe to her mouth in the first place, or crush the opioid into dust and snort it up her nose. And yet, of course, its not that easy. Some moments, I feel deep compassion. Other times, it seems disingenuous to pretend Meghan didn’t choose the life she’s led.

I click on my signal light in the direction of Mom and Dad’s where we’ll spend the night, crank the heat in the car so I’ll stop shaking.

“That’s not an excuse though. For the way I treated everyone. I’m sorry, about everything I did to you most of all. And just so you know, I’m clean because of you, because of what you told the judge. Otherwise, I just would have kept going.”

I want to cry, I think, or laugh, or pull over and give her a hug, or shake her by the shoulders and ask where in the fuck this has been for the last twenty years of shit she’s put us all through because I needed this, an apology that is not predicated on a want or request. And here, a week before her wedding, in a Volkswagen Golf, all I’ve ever wanted exists in the car with me, silent and accepting. Without explanations. Without emphasis on her depression or her lack of self-esteem or lack of luck. Just, *sorry*.

I say nothing. I cannot speak. Instead, I reach over and give her arm a squeeze. We ride like that the entire way home, clutching one another for safety.

2016

Joe and I walk through our new Trenton subdivision, mid December eerily mild for Ontario. Our Bull Terrier, Pot Roast, skips between us, triangle eyes pointed upwards, vacillating his adoration between us. Me. Joe. Me. Joe. He chases our shadows highlighted on the pavement and barrels towards Joe's silhouetted head, barking and scampering.

"Our dog is demented."

"Tell me about it."

"So," Joe says with a nervous laugh. He swings our entwined hands back and forth, frosty air circulating between our gloved fingers. "Career manager called me today."

I stop walking. Pot Roast takes the opportunity to sniff at a lamppost and drizzle it with a line of pale urine. "I take it we're posted," I say, tugging my cap lower on my ears. We've been in Trenton for six months. Our brand new house—the backsplash installed, the carpet selected—all pointless. Again.

"It's not that bad." Joe's smile says otherwise. "So, good news is I'm promoted. Major Shorrocks. Sounds nice, eh?"

"That's great news, hon," I say, not at all congratulatory, waiting for the other shoe to drop. The driveway asphalt is still curing. I've planted lavender that will only start to bloom in the spring. My home office was only just completed with the framing of artwork. And my family is nearby, something I didn't think I'd care about after years spent away. "What's the bad news?"

Joe clears his throat. "Egypt."

"Pardon?"

“A tour to Egypt. One year. Unaccompanied.”

Year-long deployments are relatively unusual in the Canadian Armed Forces, the bureaucrats having recognized that long separations aren't an ingredient for a happy family.

A year. Apart. And besides, I'm the one in this marriage who has dreamed of seeing King Tut's tomb and the pyramids—on my life To Do list for two decades. But ISIS and the devastation in Syria mean Egypt is no longer encouraged for camel expeditions or floating in coastal waters off Sharm el-Sheikh. Travel Canada says to avoid all unnecessary travel, and yet they want my husband there. Without me. For a year.

“It wouldn't be that bad,” Joe says, as though it isn't inevitable. As though we have a choice. “We'd get two, two-week breaks in that year, and we could meet up in Europe somewhere and make a trip out of it. You've always wanted to go to Greece. We could see the Mediterranean, eat too much souvlaki.” Our eyes jointly water from what we will assure each other is only the wind. Not sadness or longing. Not the foreshadowing of separation. Not the imagined dog walks alone.

“Right.”

“Plus, you have family around right now, which might not always be the case. People to support you.” Mom, Dad, Meghan and my nephew, Sam, are two-and-a-half hours away. Lately, returning to visit my sister and parents feels less like a chore and more like a comfort—home to my otherwise nomadic military existence. So, there's that. “You had a nice time last week at home with them, right?”

“A nice time?” I sputter. “Consoling Meghan and pretending everything's fine for Sam?” She wouldn't say why, but Meghan recently stayed with Mom and Dad for a week, showing up on the doorstep with Sam on her hip and a week's worth of luggage. Then she called and asked

me to come too. *Bernard and I just need some time apart*, she'd insisted. When I arrived, I dutifully played with Sam, knocked over towers of blocks and scribbled on scrap paper with chubby markers, while Meghan cornered me and begged for two hundred dollars. Bernard had taken her debit card from her wallet, leaving her without a way to buy diapers or groceries. I felt the heat of her desperation, the shame in her hung head, the urgency in her wide, open eyes. I gave her the money, only to have her return to Bernard days later without an explanation. My sister chosen to separate from her husband, while I cling to the chance to be with mine.

Ahead of us, hot on the trail of an errant tennis ball in the storm gutter, Pot Roast snatches the ball and hurries to take his place between us again. Eyes to me. Joe. Me. Joe. We trudge forward, a depressing trio, spring robbed from everyone's step.

"When do you leave?"

"It's not for sure yet. They're giving me the option of saying no."

I scoff and walk faster. We both know there is no such option.

"We signed up for this, remember?" Joe nudges my hand back into his. "Military life. We come and we go."

I let my silence serve as acquiescence, tighten my collar around my neck as an excuse to free my hand from his, pointlessly angry with Joe for a situation he can't control. "So, when are you leaving?"

"Early July sometime."

He hangs his head. "No" is not in the cards.

Fall leaves crunch under my feet as Pot Roast tugs on a branch—a branch so big it’s a tree, really—knocked to the ground during last week’s windstorm. It dangles like a loose tooth and he is determined to free it, whimpering when it will not disengage, a sound I hear over the beat of music that pipes through my headphones. I try and grin at him but stop short, my face unable to engage.

Sunlight breaks through the trees, filtering along the forest walking path. It is one of those fall days that epitomizes my favourite season: crisp, bright, the air smelling of pine and dirt. But I barely register it, only able to focus on the hum of despair that circulates around me.

Pot Roast barks at the tree as he pounces on his front legs, then points his bum to the air. Barks some more. I should be laughing but instead I reach up and my face is wet with tears. I shake my head as though I can shake the feeling and plunge further into the forest, uneasiness making my legs feel leaden.

I press the home button on my iPhone. “Siri.” The sniffles start immediately. “Call Meghan Thompson.” For the last six months, we’ve spoken daily, sometimes twice since Joe deployed early in the summer. I try to calm my breath. In, out. In, out. *Ground yourself when your emotions get out of control*, my therapist said. *Notice things*.

“Morning, Kell,” Meghan chirps over the sounds of Sam playing in the background, his coos breaking the air waves. “Yes! Mommy sees your truck! Sorry. I’m meant to be Thomas the train this morning. How’re you doing?” Her voice is compassionate, turned up at the end like she’s talking to a grieving wife.

“I don’t know.” A sob escapes and I swat at my face blankly, my voice monotone.

“What’s wrong?” Her voice is serious, assertive, Little Miss Fix-It style.

“I don’t know what in the hell my problem is. It might not be any one thing.” Pot Roast has caught up, the prized branch clutched between his jaws, making him stumble awkwardly as it clacks between the trees. His beady eyes assess me, and he drops the stick, puts his ears back and wags his tail while licking gently at my sleeve. Even the dog knows I’m messed up.

“I get it. Sometimes with depression, you just can’t pinpoint what the problem is.”

*Breathe. In, out, in out.* “Yeah. I mean, what the hell am I even depressed about? I have a good life.”

“Jeez, Kell, you know mental health is more complicated than that. Have you been writing much lately? That usually helps you.”

I blink into the sunlight, hands on my hips. So much fresh air and birds and no one around to observe my pain. “That’s about the one thing that is going well. Book is off to my agent now.” Yes, yes. That is a good thing to focus on. I’ve just been welcomed to one of Canada’s biggest literary agencies, signing the contact with a flourish of my fancy fountain pen. A military memoir is in the works, which both terrifies me and excites me, because fiction feels safer, more creative, full of possible choices that are not the real life mistakes I’ve made. A book will force me to own my truths, lay my mistakes bare. I have been so good at pointing out my sister’s errors that my own have been graciously ignored.

“Stressed about the book then?” Meghan asks. I hear the whirl of her Keurig as it sputters steaming water into her cup.

“Not really. Tried talking to Mom and Dad about how I was feeling. No joy there.”

“Jesus, for sympathy? That’s where you went wrong. Not their strong suit. Should have come to me first.”



I muster a small laugh, pet the dog's head and throw a small stick behind us, watching him bound towards it with joy. "I'm being ridiculous. I shouldn't have bugged you."

"From what? Wiping snot from my toddler? You're not bugging me. Are you missing Joe?"

He has been gone precisely ninety-six days. Two hundred and eighty-nine days to go. "Maybe." I trip on a tree root and fall to the ground, earth crusted on my hands, my pants a smear of filth. Something deep inside aches. "Fuck. Sorry, I fell." I close my eyes, pick at the dirt but it will never come off, not like this, with my methodical, dirty hands plucking at the mess. Everything hurts, every cell, every eyelash, every fingernail. "I feel like I'm drowning."

How long since I tried to go off my depression meds? A few months? It's been a slow titrate that has left me raw and worthless, and now, all I can think of is what it would be like to not be here, on earth, in the sun on the path with my dog and loved ones on the phone? What is the point, really, of getting up and repeating it all over again come morning? I shake my head over and over, the tears dripping wet streaks on my trail boots.

"I need you, Meg." The words shock me, even mid-sentence. Since childhood, have these words left my lips? But here it is, this stark truth in the woods: In absence of my husband, I need the other person who knows me best.

"I'll be there tomorrow, okay? Don't worry. First thing in the morning."

And she is. She arrives by nine am, arms outstretched but empty. She is exactly what I need.

2016

A month later, the scent of heating pumpkin pie fills my home with warmth. Meghan breathes in a deep sniff and closes her eyes dreamily. Bernard, sitting to her right, slurps at a beer while staring at the television with longing, and Sam happily mucks in acrylic paint, his hands smearing green and yellow across the pumpkin I set out for him. He's wearing one of my aprons and Meghan fusses over his wayward, messy fingers.

"Watch out for Auntie's chairs, Sammy."

"He's fine, Meg. I have soap. Soap that washes things if they get dirty. He's having fun. Aren't you, my piggy?"

He beams a non-verbal smile. Two and a half and not speaking, just squawks and squeals that convey his emotion. Meghan watches her son, looks to her husband who is mentally somewhere else. Always somewhere else. Still, she seems happy in a way I don't want to upset, especially when she is three months pregnant after a succession of miscarriages.

"Well," I hold my wine glass up to clink glasses with Meghan's water, "Thanks for celebrating Thanksgiving with the lonely military wife."

"It's our first holiday together as grown-ups!" Meghan says with an ear-to-ear grin. Her new passion for family holidays is oddly infectious. For his part, Bernard has remained half engaged the entire weekend and I've spent forty-eight hours trying to suss out minor life details to make things less awkward. *How's work, Bernard? What kind of music are you into?* The answers are monosyllabic and questions are never returned.

Underneath the table, Pot Roast scuttles for Thanksgiving dinner scraps, his head clunking into obstacles with wild abandon.

“Whoa!” Meghan leaps in her seat. “Watch it, Roast!”

“What the hell is he doing?” I look under the table to find the dog absconding with her napkin, the cloth clutched in his teeth. He wags his tail, proud of himself, while Meghan and I snicker. “Watch out,” I say. “Don’t want bully snout wrecking your vagina before you give birth.” Roast tilts his football shaped head, one so blunt and bony that it once broke my nose when our heads connected.

“Trust me, it’s been fucking wrecked for years,” Bernard mutters, returning from his reverie to drain the last of his beer. He claps the bottle onto the table with a satisfied smack.

My dining room spins into a state of tableau, even Sam pausing with his paint-smeared hands to absorb the tension in the room. Meghan’s eyes well, Bernard oblivious, his brown ringlets falling into his face. My eyes widen, turn from Meghan to my brother-in-law, trying to discern if this is some kind of inside joke or if the words that came from his mouth are as hurtful as he’d intended.

“Are you kidding me, Bernard?” I cannot keep the rage from my voice, hoping it is measured enough to not upset Sam.

“What? What?” He looks to her and me, a repulsive smirk on his face, holding his hands up in mock defeat.

Meghan pushes out her chair out and rushes down to the basement guest bedroom while Sam sits innocently, slapping paint on the pumpkin. I look down at my plate, swimming in a pool of uneaten gravy, my appetite gone. I carry my nephew to the sink and wash his hands then set

him down gently, watching as he disappears to the basement, one slow step at a time, to find his mom. Bernard stares at his beer bottle.

“What’d I say,” he asks, although his tone does not convey a question.

“Well, Bernard, why don’t we discuss how small your dick is?” I say quietly as I pass. “And then you can ask if my pregnant sister is offended by being told her vagina is broken at a time where she’s feeling impossibly vulnerable.”

Bernard retreats to the guest bedroom without a word later that evening. I say nothing when Meghan and her son appear in the living room, my childhood doll clutched in Sam’s doughy hand. Only once we bathe Sam, put him to bed and set to clean up the meal does she lean into me with the dishcloth in hand and cry.

I wake at six in the morning to the rustle of voices in the basement guest suite below my own bedroom, Sam making soft sounds of play. I find Meghan and my nephew in the den, Sam snuggling one of several stuffed animals that I piled into the fold-out bed he slept in. He leaps from the mattress and throws himself in my arms and I flop with him on the springs, burrowing us underneath a pile of blankets. “Morning you two. How’s my piggy?” My nephew snuggles into my neck.

“Morning.” Meghan smiles wanly, tired.

“You get any sleep?”

“Some.”

“Been up a while, I take it?”

“Someone didn’t feel like sleeping much, did you, Sammy?” She pinches Sam’s tush and he laughs alongside the beak of a penguin stuffy.

“I take it his highness hasn’t graced us with his presence yet?” I nod towards the bedroom door where Bernard sleeps. Snoring gives him away.

She rolls her eyes. “Six beers will do that to a guy.”

“Coffee. You need coffee. Piggy, want to come upstairs and watch Treehouse with Auntie?”

“Mmm!” He grabs my hand and once upstairs, I settle him onto the couch with a show while Meghan joins me in the kitchen. Over the sound of the kettle, we whisper to one another, eyes darting between Sam and the bean grinder.

“So, did you talk to him?” I try to hide my judgement, but Sam’s blonde head bounces to the theme song of his cartoon and my insides flop. Soon there will be two. Two small faces who won’t understand any better than I do.

“Hard to talk to someone when they’re in an alcohol coma.”

“He was being an asshole before the alcohol,” I snap. She gives me a look of warning and I change my tone. Supportive, not righteous. “Does he drink like that all the time?” I know the answer because I know Meghan’s practiced phone silences. She blames Bernard’s drinking for the fact that he is rude, checked out, mean. These characteristics are more present as the blood alcohol level increases, sure, but really, the familiar emotions are the story’s underlying theme. Dad and I seem to be the only family members willing to acknowledge the pink elephant in the room.

“Mostly.” She sighs, pours two large teaspoons of sugar into her coffee and stirs absentmindedly. “But he promised he wouldn’t this weekend.” Her baby bump looks rounder

this morning. Is that possible? Why another child? It is the question we—Mom, Dad, her friends and I—ask of the air before sleep.

Sam jumps up and down on the cushions, grunting in semi-tune with the song bleating onscreen, in which adults in floppy foam costumes clunk into one another like a slapstick Stooge routine. “How are his therapies going?”

Meghan sheepishly stares into her mug, her eyes not meeting mine. “The lady at Autism Canada says it’s a long waitlist for most services, but he’s in some speech therapy and play classes with other kids.”

“That’s great. Will help him communicate more.” How long have I been begging her to take Sam for an assessment, sending her articles on how early intervention and treatment could help him thrive? My gentle suggestions are always met with anger, insistence that he is fine, fine, fine. But the real reason slipped after a few glasses of red sangria when she last came for a visit; Bernard doesn’t want his child “labelled.” So, it is she who drives Sam to the appointments, works with the flash cards, encourages speech. Alone. Always alone.

“Bernard will get on board when he realizes what a difference it’s making.” There is a childish hope in her voice that I am both desperate to rob from her and yet simultaneously want to allow her to maintain; Bernard can change, and she will have the family she has dreamed of. A Norman Rockwell.

“It must be tiring. Halving to always protect him like that.” I leave this statement in the open, hoping she’ll cling to it like a life raft.

“I don’t always have to,” she snaps. “You’re exaggerating.”

“Who needs to exaggerate? You’re pregnant with his second child and he treats you like this? He can’t even fake kindness for a fucking weekend.” I’ve pushed too far, can feel her anger flaring, her jaw set into a firm line.

“Not everyone has what you do, Kelly.” She gestures to my fancy coffee grinder, the large television, the leather furniture, but also, to the happy wedding photo tacked onto the wall, my mouth wide in laughter, Joe’s gazing at me with unabashed love. Joy unfaked for the camera. “You’re basically marital martyrs.”

“I’m not saying Bernard should be buying you flowers every week, but common decency and even a little kindness wouldn’t hurt.”

Sam squeals, pouting as he slams the remote on the couch and points wildly to the screen. Meghan rushes to his side, happy for the distraction. “What is it, Sammy? Oh, you want a movie?” He nods, holding out the remote now that his show has ended. “Oh, look! It’s your favourite!” She pops on a film, colourful cartoon characters dancing as though their limbs are made of rubber. Sam claps, bounces in place.

As I pour my own coffee, Bernard emerges from the basement, rubbing his eyes and stumbling into the living room. Iciness spreads like spilled milk. Sam does not look from the television to say hello or to reach for a hug from his father.

“What the hell is this garbage?” he asks, snatching the remote. Sam’s eyebrow furrows and he begins to snifle while Meghan puts herself between them. I approach my nephew, standing behind the couch with my hands on his tiny shoulders. His hands snake up to mine and hold them there.

“Well, good morning to you too, Bernard. And Happy Thanksgiving.” My saccharine tone doesn’t seem to register. The dark cloud of gloom lingers as he wildly punches buttons on the remote.

“We’re watching a kid’s show, in case you can’t tell,” Meghan says, her voice dripping with disdain. “You’re upsetting Sam.”

“I don’t want to watch this.” He fumbles with the controls. “I want to watch that Pixar one. The one about the girl who has bi-polar or something. Was on the news.” He starts flipping through the Netflix cover images, the digital *boop* sound filling the room. “It’s on Netflix, right?” Sam’s wails reach a fever pitch, but Bernard doesn’t seem to notice. Doesn’t even look.

“Bernard.” Meghan’s voice is stern, defensive, a gentle warning.

“It’ll teach him about his feelings, or whatever.” He gestures loosely with his head towards his son but does not look at him.

“Hey, you two,” I say, my voice nearing a sing-song. “Why don’t you sort yourselves out because your son is watching.” I stress those last words, eke out every consonant.

“Yeah, Bernard.” Meghan’s voice is snide and the decibel rises. “Maybe what you want to watch doesn’t matter.”

“I DON’T FUCKING CARE!” he yells. He slams the table, waking the dog from his bed by the window.

“Sweetie,” I say, leaning into Sam’s ear. “Why don’t you go to Auntie’s office and find her doll. You can show Pot Roast how baby has breakfast? Then maybe we can feed Pot Roast his breakfast together, okay?” He looks up at me—with Meghan’s eyes, my eyes—and nods. Pot Roast stumbles to follow Sam like a loyal babysitter. My dog is as gentle as a bulldozer, and he



will probably knock the child over with excitement and a tongue bath, but this feels like a better alternative than this room.

“You scared your son,” Meghan snaps at Bernard.

“No, you did,” he snarks back.

“Oh, real mature.”

“Fuck you.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake.”

They continue back and forth while I stand there like an idiot. The room is hot. Too bright and sunny for the gloom. I grab the remote and click off the television. Everything is silent and noisy all at once.

“Children.” I clap my hands in the air to get their attention like a Kindergarten teacher. “If you two can’t get your shit together and realize you’ve just scared your child, then you’re both failing here. Both of you.” My pointer finger aims at their heads. “Go get ready for the day and I’ll watch Sam.” They lock into a stare down. “Go. Now.”

Once I hear their murmurs in the basement bedroom, I guide Sam from my office and make us hot chocolate on the stove, setting up a stool to help him stir. When I turn, Meghan and Bernard are shuffling their belongings into the foyer and begin loading the car.

“Kell,” Meghan calls out. “I think we’ll head home now.”

I bring Sam to the foyer entry on my hip. Meghan stands surrounded by a pile of bags, items dangling from stuffed pockets and cords snaking out from her duffle like tentacles. I should tell her not to go. I should offer to take Sam for a few days while they cool off. I should do so many things, but they all feel fruitless. There has never been any point in standing between Meghan and what she feels she deserves.

“You don’t want breakfast?”

“We’re fine, don’t worry. We’ll stop at McDonald’s for a muffin, eh, Sammy?” Meghan says, squeezing Sam’s chubby thigh.

“Pass him to me,” Bernard says to no one in particular.

Sam wipes his chocolate milk moustache on my shoulder. “Auntie loves you, Piggy.” I nuzzle into his neck and pass him over. Bernard storms outside while Meghan and I watch from the door window.

“Thanks for a great weekend,” she says, hugging me tightly. She looks exhausted, eyes burning red.

The last bag is thrown into the car and Bernard plops Sam into the back before slinging himself into the driver’s seat of his ridiculous car, the one with a trunk full of speakers and room for nothing else. The one he had to have despite also owning a work truck and a low-rider Chevy more befitting a teenager than a thirty-four-year-old father, complete with hydraulics that bump the vehicle up and down like a rap music video. Without use of a trunk, my nephew disappears amongst their things, just a human addition to their heap. Bernard drums his fingers on the steering wheel, Sam’s door wide open, waiting for Meghan to do up the buckles on the car seat.

“A great weekend? Where the hell were you? Because this was not a good weekend.” I take a deep breath. “Meghan, I love you.” I hold her by the shoulders so I can look into her eyes. “But he’s not welcome in my house again. If he’s going to treat you like that in front of Sam, I don’t want him here and I won’t watch him treat you and your kids like that. You get to make a choice to put up with this. Sam doesn’t.”

She presses her lips together, angry, slaps her hands against her thighs. “Oh, that’s great, Kell. What am I supposed to do with that?”

“You’re supposed to recognize that I can’t handle seeing you be treated this way. That I’m worried about your kid. Kids.” I nod to the belly between us, the little orb of cells and flesh that is the future of this mess.

“You’re making me choose between my husband and my family.”

My body hurts. A migraine coming on, maybe, or a giving over to this problem that never seems to go away. “No, I’m putting up a damn boundary, and you might consider doing the same in your marriage.” I point to the outdoors, the waiting car, where Bernard eyes my finger with hate, his lower lip pushed into an angry grimace. “I’m not making you choose a damn thing. It’s his behaviour that is making you choose.”

She leaves without another word, stopping to buckle Sam before climbing silently into the passenger side. When Bernard drives away, her hand lifts limply to wave goodbye while Sam’s arm pumps back and forth with glee that only childhood allows.

2017

Sam peers into the glass case, his breath fogging up the pane. “Mmm.” He points at a single rose accompanied by baby’s breath. I hate baby’s breath.

“That one, Piggy?”

“Mmm hmm.”

“Excuse me?” I call. An elderly volunteer looks up from the cash register and smiles at Sam, smoothing her blue Royal Victoria Hospital smock as she approaches. “Can we have that one there?”

“Sure you can, dearie. Your son is adorable.” She touches Sam’s cheek with a veined hand, the bluish tracks making his skin appear whiter by comparison. He leans into her touch like a kitten, always easing into affection from whoever is willing to give it.

“We do look alike, don’t we, Piggy?” I kiss his other cheek and give him a squeeze. “But he’s my nephew. We’re here to see Mommy, aren’t we?”

“Oh, you must miss her!” The woman takes the vase from the refrigerated case and passes it to us while pushing a pen across the counter. “Do you want to sign a card?” She gestures at the stack sitting near the register. *Get Well Soon! Congrats! It’s A Boy!* On the back of each one is the hospital stamp, a reminder of where we find ourselves.

“Thanks.” I pick *We love you* because there will soon be a baby girl, yes, but all of these hurdles first. Sam has wiggled from my arms and in the corner of the gift shop, holds a stuffed pig aloft, squishing into its silly pink fur.

“Should we get that for Mommy too? A pig for my Piggy?” I snatch the animal from him and make oinking sounds, snuffle the stuffie into his armpit until his laughter echoes into the atrium. “This too, please.”

The volunteer waves us out and we approach the elevator hand-in-hand, the car zipping us into the air. Once buzzed into the maternity ward through an alarmed door, we wheel into the first room on the left. Sam approaches timidly, taking tiny steps into the fluorescent space. “It’s okay. Mommy’s in here, bud.”

We find Meghan sitting propped, folding the worn sheets across her belly. She doesn’t look like she belongs in the maternity ward—her face gaunt and white, her small protrusion that could just as well be post lunch bloat. A white haze filters in from the north-facing room, which is dark and devoid of comfort. She sits a little straighter as we approach and plasters on a smile.

“Hey, Meggie.” I kiss her cheek. “Brought a little visitor.”

“Sammy!” Meghan swoops her son into her arms and tries to haul him and his stuffed pig into the hospital bed with her, but her weak body fails. Instead, Sam holds the animal to her as an offering. “For me?”

“To keep Mommy company, right, buddy?” I linger in the dark hoping my teary eyes will go unseen. If she sees me cry, she won’t be able to stop herself.

“Mmm hmm.”

“He picked these out too,” I say, arranging the vase on her crowded wheeled tray. There is also tissue, five lip balms, books in a haphazard stack, and a slew of other junk. Meghan manages untidiness no matter where she finds herself.

“I bet you loved the baby’s breath,” she responds, smirking as she tickles Sam into a fit of laughter.

“I can’t help that I have taste. Your son clearly needs a floral education.”

Sam snags the television remote from the tray and Meghan sets him up with a show. He nestles back into the crook of her arm, his head resting on her slight stomach, and sighs contentedly while I sit on the nearby chair.

“He’s missed you.”

Meghan doesn’t answer, stifles tears. She looks to the window, her view shrouded by the curtain separating her and another patient, waiting for the moment to pass, then back at me. “You’re such a drama queen. You and your complicated little lady in there.” She laughs, brings my hand to her stomach and holds it there until I rub back and forth. I’ve never felt a pregnant belly before and a burst of emotion rushes through me when my niece kicks against my pressure, the movement like an air bubble trapped under ice.

“Well, isn’t she getting saucy.”

“Just saying hello to her auntie, aren’t you little girl?” Meghan kisses Sam’s forehead.

“Well, if we’re looking for comic relief, you’re the only person I know who gets hospitalized because they are actually full of shit.” We laugh so loud that Sam shushes us. Doctors say her bowel obstruction is a result of the baby pressing against the scar tissue in her abdomen; a booby prize from her childhood nephrectomy, where surgeons opened her up from belly button to the middle of her back. The following two years of chemotherapy and radiation turned her abdomen into a fibrous maze, the fetus without a map.

“I guess I thought I’d be out of here sooner. Like I was with Sam.” She pats his head. She’d had a bowel obstruction with that pregnancy, too, but had left hospital after a week-long stint. But this time, the pain was unmanageable, she couldn’t keep food down, and the baby wasn’t growing as she should. Intervention was the only solution. She’d called my parents in the

middle of the night and Dad rushed her to emerge. Bernard had to work in the morning, Meghan said, so she didn't want to wake him.

"Well for now, you're where you need to be."

"They're moving me to Mount Sinai this week. They specialize in high-risk pregnancies."

"That's good. You'll be with the best in the baby business, right?"

"They want to put me on a feeding tube or something. IV nutrition until she's born. Four more months laying around like this." She gestures to the air, annoyed but resigned.

"Please, you love lazing around and doing nothing. And Christ knows you could use some nutrition. Look at it as a vacation for momma before you're chasing two little ones around the house."

"I know." She squeezes Sam's knee. "I'm worried about her in there. Like, she'll be sick because I couldn't keep her fed. And I hate knowing Sam misses me and stuff." Tears slip down her cheeks silently, some landing on Sam's head. He takes no notice as the television screams. My attention strains to several medical alarms alerting, the lights too bright, the stench of overcooked food and unwashed bodies. How does anyone rest in here?

"Meg." I take her hand. "You aren't doing anything to her. It's happening to both of you. Besides," I thwack her thin thigh with my hand, "looks like she'll be plenty fed considering she's like a parasite eating you alive. And Sam has me to keep him entertained."

"And his father. He has his father." She's insistent on this.

I plaster a smile and nod. "Of course. Oodles of love from oodles of people."

"Yeah. You're right, I'm being silly. Mommy will be home soon, right, Sammy?" Then to me: "How do you have time to be here again? Aren't you under a deadline?"

“If my publisher doesn’t understand that my sister is in the hospital, then they aren’t the right publisher for me.” My editor and I are in full editing mode, revising versions of my military memoir so many times that it already feels like a different book. A better book. Still, the publisher told me to take all the time I need. Family first.

“Good point. But you’re sure you won’t lose your contract? This is your dream. I don’t want to get in the way.”

“Meg, trust me. It’s fine. Writing life is a relatively flexible life.”

“Well in that case, hurry up and produce it already so I have something to read. I’m bored as...” she points at Sam, mouths *fuck*, then flops back into her pillow. “It’ll be juicy. And I can catch up on all the history of you I missed when I was on drugs. I can see it now.” Meghan swipes her hands like she’s outlining a movie marquee. “My sister, the famous published author. Line ups around the block for signings.”

“You’re ridiculous. But I love it.”

“I’m just your biggest fan.” That smile again, a wobble close to tears. She has always been the biggest cheerleader of my writing. Every story I ever wrote was, Meghan insisted, worthy of publication, prizes, lauding. I’d always assumed the way she fawned was simply manipulation of emotion to get what she wanted, never once considering she was just a proud sister.

“Stop sapping. We can’t both be emotional puddles at the same time.”

“Well then as a distraction, can you go find me a Popsicle? And one for him?”

“Sure. Like from the food court or something?”

“I’ll show you,” a voice says from the other side of the curtain. A pregnant woman appears, wavy hair tucked behind her ears, in her late thirties. Something about her body says



she's bordering on birth, and yet she's small, too. Weak looking, dark around the eyes. "I'm waddling that way."

"Kelly, this is Michelle, my roommate."

"Oh," Michelle says, pumping my hand up and down. "I've heard lots about you. The writer, yeah? She never stops talking about you."

"That's me," I say, rolling my eyes at Meghan.

"What?" Meghan holds her hands in the air like she's been caught doing something forbidden. "I'm proud of you."

I laugh. "You really working it for that Popsicle, eh? Be right back."

I follow Michelle towards the nursing station. "Are you sure you're okay to walk?" I gesture at Michelle's belly, leaving out the obvious that she is in a maternity ward, not in active labour.

"Oh ya. I'm on bed rest but allowed to shower, get something to eat, that kind of thing." She leads me to the lounge, which holds a fridge, coffee machine, kettle, plastic cutlery, and cups. She pulls back the freezer door and I pick frozen banana-flavoured sugar from the pile. "I'm glad to catch you alone, actually. I always try to talk with your parents but it's awkward."

"Oh?" I hold both Popsicles in the air like lit safety batons. There is a big sign on the fridge in bold, large font. *PATIENTS ONLY*.

"Your sister's husband," she whispers, as though Meghan might pop out from behind the door. "What's his name?"

She knows his name, likely because Meghan says it a million times a day, but Michelle is testing something here. I don't answer, nervous to fan flames. Instead, I raise a single eyebrow in encouragement, a hint at my role as her ally.

“He just, well, he’s not really been here. The whole month. She’s been asking to see Sam on the phone but then I ask her about it and she kind of brushes it off. He stopped in once for like, two minutes.”

“That’s kind of par for the course for their entire relationship.” I tear open the package and bite the Popsicle until a frozen jolt of pain shoots up my neck. “Sadly.”

“Ah.” Michelle steeple her fingers as the kettle sings. She plunks four herbal tea bags into her obscenely large travel mug. “I figured it was something along those lines. My husband, heck, you can barely keep him out of here. I have to remind him we have two other daughters who need their love and attention as much as me and this little one.” She rubs her stomach and smiles as the smell of chamomile fills the room. “Meghan’s lucky then, to have a sister like you. And your parents are wonderful. They come almost every day. She said she fucked it up for a long time, between the two of you especially. Owns that it was her fault and everything.”

I look out the window at the other patients, families, staff, milling in the snow-crueted parking lot. Orderlies hover outside a back entrance and haul on cigarettes, puffing frosty nicotine air into clouds that surround their heads. I nod, to myself, to my sister, to Michelle. “Sisters come back to one another, I think. When they’re ready. It wasn’t just her fault though. I was judgmental, uneducated, really. Harsh.”

Michelle pats me on the back like we are long lost sisters ourselves. “Look after her in Toronto, eh? I know the drive is long for you, making this trip all the time. But she appreciates it, your visits.”

Michelle leaves, her slippers shuffling towards their shared room. I eat three Popsicles in silence before I return to the room with one in each hand, waving them like wands that can produce all that we are missing.

April, 2017

I sit in the doctor's office, a century brick home in downtown Belleville that has been converted into office space, so with each step, the hardwood floors crack like arthritic knuckles. The room stinks like Purell and exam room paper, the buttery yellow paint seeming fluorescent in the April light that filters through the windows. I settle into the icy metal chair and play endless games of Candy Crush, wrapped candies exploding with light on the screen. I just want this appointment over with, for the rest of today to end before it starts.

"Kelly, nice to see you." Dr. Hartland sweeps into the room and sits in front of the computer, tugging at her dress, which reveals a mysterious scar across her neck that I'm always keen to ask about. Dr. Hartland is someone I'd enjoy sharing a glass of chardonnay with, but with my chart in her hands, the balance of information firmly in her favour, I'm inexplicably subservient and ashamed. Our bi-monthly mental health check-ins are a familiar routine, but their regularity doesn't dull the uncomfortable bareness I feel in discussing my medications, my moods, my pointless and pointed despair. "How're things going?"

"It's going." I punch at the last digital candy and watch as it zaps the others in a cascading wheel of light.

"How's your sister doing? The baby?" Dr. Hartland raises her eyebrows at me and smiles hopefully. "That bowel obstruction finally clear?"

My cheeks are wet with tears before I realize what's happening and I heave out a heavy breath, leaning forward onto my knees. "Baby was born yesterday," I choke out. "Little girl, almost eight weeks early. Her name is Lily."

“Eight weeks. Wow. But still, viable. Congrats, auntie!” She says the words hesitantly, unsure of how I seem to be taking them. Her mouth curls into a half-smile, half-wince. “Baby and mom are doing well?”

I pick at my dry cuticles. I stopped caring about manicures and shaving my legs when Joe deployed, and until he returns, I can’t muster the energy to give a shit. But if I focus on this crust of peeling finger skin, then I can ignore everything else.

“She gave birth to a baby and then a six-pound sarcoma tumour.” I snort a strange sound somewhere between a sob and an awkward laugh. The candies on my screen sit in their colourful void, sparkling with distraction on the seat next to me. I cannot bear to darken the screen and find nothing there except my own thoughts.

“Cancer?” Dr. Hartland holds her hand to her chest like she might faint. “That’s why she’s been in hospital all this time?”

“Yeah, not a bowel obstruction like the doctors thought. The baby was hiding the tumour, apparently.”

Meghan called me from Mount Sinai in Toronto earlier in the week, lamenting how everything from her labia down had quadrupled in size. She sounded panicked by her swollen body while simultaneously cracking jokes about it. *More cushion for the pushin’*, we said, laughing until she woke two of her hospital roommates. But later that night, she called again, this time in a spike of wild pain that screeched down the phone line and set my nerves on fire. *They’re inducing labour*, she wailed, barely able to catch her breath. It wasn’t until after the birth that doctors discovered a tumour cutting off her lymphatic system, further complicated but the weight of her baby girl. The edema abated but left behind something infinitely more sinister. I frantically called Bernard all night for an update on her condition, but he hadn’t answered. Once

she heals from the birth, surgery is imminent. We hold this information like fragile eggs in our palms.

“Oh my goodness, I’m so sorry to hear all this.” Dr. Hartland shakes her head.

“I’m headed to see her after this.” I swirl in the air with my hand to the doctor’s office. “To Toronto. Mount Sinai. From one doctor office to another.” Another weird laugh emerges from my lips. At least, I think it comes from me, but everything feels hollow and removed, like an out-of-body experience in a b-rated movie.

“She’s in good hands then. Good doctors there.” Dr. Hartland and I sit in temporary silence while she searches for words of comfort. Realizing there are none, she clicks open my chart and pretends to read it, but she already knows the results, which is why I’ve been called in. “So, I think it’s safe to say, as you suspected, that we’re dealing with a case of PCOS here.” My Google diagnosis suggested Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome, a hormone imbalance that is difficult to regulate, and so after months of suffering, I’d presented Dr. Hartland with my list of symptoms just as I’d done with the Graves’: deeper depression, erratic and painful periods, difficulty losing weight, a spray of cystic and ulcerative acne across my jaw and back, and best of all, a cluster of chin hairs that grew ten shades darker and twenty times more wiry than the hairs on my head. “Considering your Graves’ and celiac disease, both being autoimmune, it’s not overly surprising to have other hormonal issues. Not serious or life-threatening, though, so that’s good news.”

I nod. Fucking celiac disease. The celiac diagnosis came on the heels of the Graves’. I sigh, throw my arms into the air, irritated with myself for deflation over something so minor when my sister has fucking cancer, an hour away, without me. And here I am, wanting bread and pastry and croissants and a pair of non-cystic ovaries. “So, what does this mean?”

“Well, it’s definitely another large barrier to pregnancy.”

*Another. Large. Barrier.* An image of Joe pops to mind, his ease and joy with our nephews—soon, our niece—and my stomach roils with guilt. I picture him in his room over in Egypt, hot sun turning his barracks into a broiler while he counts down days to repatriation, reconnecting with our plans to start a family upon his return. “What do I do to treat it?”

“Well, we can get you into an OBGYN if you want to talk a bit more about fertility treatments. Since you’re—what, nearly thirty-three?—we’ll want to get that ball rolling quickly so you have time for action. Other than that, sadly, the only other thing you can do is go on birth control to manage the symptoms. There are some blood pressure medications that can help ease the hirsutism and acne, but with your low blood pressure, you might not tolerate them very well.”

I snort. “So, I go on birth control to manage a condition that makes me mostly infertile?” The doctor gives a sympathetic tilt of her head. “Christ, I just came off the pill a few years ago to get my thyroid hormones regulated, and now I need to go back on it to get my sex hormones regulated?”

“Bodies are strange,” she concedes, typing some information into her chart. “In the meantime, I’ll renew your Cymbalta. Once things settle down with your sister, come back and we’ll chat about alternatives, okay? And take care of yourself. I know you give a lot of support for your family, but you might need some too, especially with Joe gone.”

I leave her office in a haze, prescription in hand, along with another medical hurdle to a baby I will never have. I turn up the radio and drive towards my sister, angry for her capable womb that has housed two children, even though her insides are now, I imagine, a cornucopia of

fruit and veg-sized malignant lumps. My own assholery chokes the air, everything foggy with hate.

*PCOS is nothing, considering your husband is in a war zone and your sister has cancer and your mom has MS and this is fucking nothing.* This is what I tell myself as I stuff the prescription in my purse, the paper sweaty and damp with tears, then veer onto the highway and head west.

Meghan's been lucky, I'm told by the Mount Sinai nurse when I ask for her at the station, considering she was given a private room although her benefits don't allow for one, but the maternity ward nurses took pity on her. Happy mothers stroll the hallways in various states of glee and exhaustion, but they have their babies in their bellies or attached to their breasts. Meghan's daughter has been relegated to the NICU, a tiny preemie weighing just a few pounds.

When I peek around her door, I find Meghan in bed, a towel wrapped around her head like a turban, so all I can see are two inches of grey roots, evidence of months in hospital without a chance to visit a salon. She looks older than thirty-five. Meghan has grown so thin that she dissipates into the pilled hospital sheets like a stick drawing.

"Nice digs," I call gently, placing the gluten-free brownies I made on the tray next to her bed. There's no room for the snacks except next to the hefty breast pump they've brought her, scattered amongst tissues and packets of gum. Preemies need colostrum more than your average little one, so my sister labours through the pumping process several times a day, although she barely has the energy to move.

Meghan's eyes flutter open. "Well, a little cancer gets you the royal treatment."

I take her hand and our eyes well simultaneously. “Now why didn’t I think of that?” And then we say nothing as my thumb rubs back and forth on her palm.

Meghan wipes her face and takes a breath. “Want to go see her?”

“Absolutely.”

We acquire a push-chair for Meghan, and then wheel slowly up to the NICU area, where Meghan scans her thumbprint like Ms. Money Penny, the electronic lock disengaging and revealing a medicinally-scented space lit with gentle wattage. After washing our hands for the required amount of time, I ease her into the directed room where we find my only niece, baby Lily, hovering under a bluish light. She is motionless, a tiny sleep mask placed over her eyes, in a diaper so minute it almost makes me laugh.

“Hi baby girl. It’s mommy.” Meghan tightens her robe as she stands to wriggle a hand into the incubator, rubbing the baby’s foot.

“She’s beautiful, Meghan.” She isn’t, particularly, as newborns, preemies especially, so often aren’t. And yet it isn’t a lie, this underlying beauty of challenging all that is possible, the proof laying in the miraculous lighted box.

“She is.” Meghan’s face is soft in the blue light. “But look at these friggin’ gun boats.” She waggles the baby’s leg at me. Lily’s foot is like a surfboard attached to a stick.

“Holy shit. Hope she grows into those things.” We snort under our breath as nurses stroll by in cartoon-covered scrubs, efficient but loving in their care for these tiny beings.

“I can’t believe you made this,” I say, reaching in to stroke the baby’s slim thigh. It is against the rules. Only parents can make contact with the baby, but Meghan shuffles her body to create a visual barrier between me and the nurses while I sneak in some surreptitious love.



“Auntie loves you.” I whisper the words towards the plastic case, swallowing over and over as pain clutches at my throat.

“I need to go back to the room,” Meghan says, clutching at her belly. “Getting sore.”

I’m grateful for the distraction, quick to whisk Meghan back to her room several floors down and ease her into bed. She looks to be on the brink of something close to a meltdown. She takes pain medication left behind in a tiny paper cup and leans back into the pillows.

“I brought goodies,” I say to break the spell as I pull items from my tote like a clown escaping his tiny car; lip balm, magazines, books, my Netflix password, a stuffed animal to snuggle. Best of all, chestnut hair dye.

“Thought I could at least ensure you stop looking like you’re sick.” I rattle the box contents.

Meghan claps her hands together in front of her. “Thank fucking God.”

She’s in pain, but we set to work in the large room, sun pouring in from the windows. A cheap hospital towel, scratchy with bleach, is cast over her shoulders while dye sputters from the tube.

“You should take off your shirt,” Meghan says, gesturing to my white tee. I do, looping it over a chair. We watch an episode of *Call the Midwife* while we count down the minutes.

“Alright, let’s hose you down,” I say, gesturing to the bathroom. Thank goodness there’s an extendable shower handle to ease the rinsing.

“How am I going to keep my pajamas clean?” Meghan tugs at her loose flannels with her thumb and forefinger.

“Just go in there naked,” I say, already taking off my own clothes. “I’m your sister. What do I care? I’ll be in my bra and underwear anyways. Don’t want to get soaked.”

She shrugs. Motherhood, birth and illness have scrubbed her of modesty. She strips down to reveal the padded Depends she's wearing, convenient after having a child. Her breasts are pendulous, full of milk. I cannot take my eyes off them. "Well, at least your boobs look great."

"Yeah, I'm a regular porn star." We giggle at this as I help her shuffle into the shower, shocked at how she is rail thin yet simultaneously puffy. She sits on the supporting chair in the shower then leans forward as I set to work, inky brown seeping from the tendrils that dangle over her face. That is, until I drop the shower handle, cracking off the cover, sending water in a zealous spray all over me, cascading a splatter of dye across the walls, Meghan, and the bathroom. Meghan's Depends hang limp with liquid and mascara runs down my face, pooling within the brown sludge at our feet.

"There's a porn movie in this somewhere," Meghan says, laughing so hard she is gasping for air, clutching her belly.

"What's with you and porn today? Besides, I don't think anyone in porn is wearing a diaper." I am laughing too hard to control the shower handle, so I drop it to my side and squirt the dollop of conditioner into my hands, working it into my sister's silky hair.

"Oh, you'd be surprised," she says. And then we laugh even harder. We laugh so hard that later that day, when her tumour ruptures after I go home, I will punish myself for months, worried it was me and our sense of shared humour that caused it to burst.

July, 2017

Pearson International Airport buzzes with people congregating, welcoming, hugging. I stand at the international arrivals area, the chill of air conditioning sweeping across my skin, and smooth my dress at my sentry post outside the swooshing double doors that lead to the luggage carousels. Dad still remembers what Mom wore when he returned from his deployment to Egypt more than thirty years ago, and now, as I wait for my own husband from the same sandy place, I fret about the plain linen shift I chose. I'm wearing heels, too, plenty of makeup to distract from the fact that I shaved my head for a cancer fundraiser. Solidarity with Meghan. We'd livestreamed it over Facebook and my voice had cracked, telling my sister she was not alone while reams of my golden hair fell prey to the shears and strangers clicked the "like" button. I've been wearing lots of makeup and lipstick to distract from the stark look of my face in the mirror.

A text from Meghan alerts in my palm. *Where the hell is he?*

I glance at my watch. Joe is forty minutes late, which has piqued my anxiety. Meanwhile, Meghan's in the car, running the air conditioning so that she and Pot Roast don't die of heat stroke in the airport parking lot. She insisted on coming when we learned the airport doesn't allow pets to roam through the halls. *Joe will want to see Roastie*, she said, arms across her chest.

*Likely stuck in customs*, I respond, thumbs tapping out the message. *Sorry.*

*I can wait a while longer but I'm getting kinda desperate to empty this fucking bag.*

I grip my phone tight, tension building in earnest now. Since Meghan's tumour burst and spread bacteria throughout her abdomen, surgeons had to place an ileostomy bag, where Meghan's meals seem to trickle into the collection bag at her abdomen as quickly as they enter her mouth. Her embarrassment over the medical necessity seems a small price to pay for being

alive, and she got the all-clear last week after her CT scan. Two rounds of terrifying, rare cancers and still, she is alive. Besides, the intestinal procedure will be reversed in November. Just a few months. A blink in a life.

A muffled voice announces over the PA system but no words are discernable. From the crowd, a white bald head emerges from the in-bound Israel flight, surrounded by women in tichel and men in yarmulke. Joe's smile is wide, his face prickled with beard growth and bags slung on every shoulder, another wheeled one behind him. He is both precisely the same as when he left and yet entirely different. My heart sits in my throat as he folds me into his arms, smelling of sleep and mint gum.

"I missed you so much," he says, his words muffled in my neck. "A year is too long."

"Never again. Right? Never for this long." I breathe in deep. He smells like himself but something else, too; a spice I don't recognize or some new cologne, and I feel the former distance between us stretch like a sleepy giant. Overhead, speakers continue to blurt names and locations and destinations, but I hear only the sound of Joe's breath, the rustle of his hands up and down my spine.

"Quite the 'do you have there.'" He rubs his palm across my fuzzy hair regrowth, the shorn ends bristling across his fingertips.

"I think I rock bald as well as you do."

"That's why we make such a good team. Come here." He pulls me in again and we kiss deeply, not caring who watches until I pull away. "Hey," he says. "I wasn't done enacting our Harlequin romance."

“We have to get moving,” I say, grabbing one of his bags and slinging it over my shoulder. It’s heavier than I expected, making me stumble in my wedge heels as I turn towards the parking lot. “Meg is in the car and really needs to use the bathroom.”

“Doesn’t she have a, um, you know...” he points at his stomach where the ileostomy would be.

“Yeah, well that thing doesn’t empty itself.” I hate the sharpness in my tone. But my formerly cancer-riddled sister is in the car with a stomach bag full of her own shit and the guilt of that fact is weighty. “We have to hurry.”

Joe shuffles behind me, trying to match my pace despite carrying triple the load. “How’s she doing?”

We cross the glass-encased pedestrian overpass that dances with light, wheeling his luggage over the tiled floor, then hit a humid bank of air through the prisms of sun. *Almost there, Meg.* Should I stop and text her? Tell her we’re seconds away? I feel trapped in a dream in which I’m being chased but my legs won’t save me from the mystery killer, time expressed in slow motion. It’s a helplessness that makes my body sluggish and my mind frantic.

“She’s good physically but emotionally, I don’t know. I mean, she just beat cancer again, so I wish she would celebrate living instead focusing on feeling ugly.”

“I imagine if your sister had a partner who didn’t make her feel ugly, then it wouldn’t be as much of an issue.” Joe’s voice darkens and my free hand balls into a fist. Meghan tells me less and less about her relationship with Bernard, but she hasn’t been able to hide tears over how much he is drinking, how repulsive he finds her ileostomy. *He can’t even lie to me,* she whispered over the phone, sobbing. *Just leave,* I had snapped, frustrated after she denied my offer to move into my basement with the kids, or the offer for money for a deposit on an

apartment, to pay for a divorce. *If not for you, then for your kids*. She said I didn't get it and hung up just as Sam started wailing in the background.

"I just wish that after basically cheating death a few times, she might, I don't know, appreciate life or something. Smell the roses and all that. Find someone worth smelling the roses with." Meghan's illness has turned me into a geyser of gratitude, spilling out at untold moments. Pot Roast and I take lonely walks and even through the depression, I centre on the heady scent of mowed grass, the flutter of my dog's pert ears, the velvety feel of maple leaves. Even through the veil of depression, I see these things. I want her to see them, too.

At the end of the walkway, glass doors swoop open to the heady air of the parkade, the wheels of Joe's bags clanging a rhythm on the concrete surface. The moment we come into view of our red Golf, Pot Roast bursts from the car and charges towards us, with Meghan having tied a yellow ribbon around his neck. Joe nuzzles into the dog's fur, rubbing his belly until Meghan approaches, her faced marred with tears.

"Meghan!" Joe throws his arms around her and squeezes. His limbs loop around themselves since she's more than halved her weight since he saw her last year. Her thin hair falls to her shoulders, she's lost twenty-five pounds and she looks dead, somehow, hollow in all the places she should be round. I would never say it aloud, but she looks like an addict again. "It's so good to see you."

"I'm so glad you're home safe," she says, sniffing. "We've really missed you." She blows her nose twice, the sound echoing in the parking area. It smells of oil and exhaust.

"It's been a rough year for the Thompsons," Joe says, his hands on her shoulders like a big brother. "I'm sorry I wasn't here."

“God, stop being so nice!” She playfully swats at him and wipes at her face. “I can’t take more emotion.”

“You’re a walking ball of emotion,” I say, laughing as I hug her too, my chin sitting atop her head as she leans into my chest. Joe loads his bags into the car, in animated, squeaky-voiced conversation with the dog. Pot Roast is a flurry of tail wags and face-licks. “We can wait while you go to the bathroom,” I whisper to her.

“Oh,” she says, blushing, leaning into my ear. “I kind of had to, um, take care of things in the car.”

“I’m really hoping a bag of your shit isn’t in my front seat right now.”

She smirks. “In a Ziploc bag. But I threw it out in garbage.”

“Fuck Meg, I’m sorry. I’m sorry you had to do that.” I want to cry now, looking to my sister and Joe and the dog and back again, loyalties and anxieties pulled in so many directions that my throat feels like it’s closing and a bead of sweat gathers at my temples. “That must have been embarrassing for you.”

“Don’t worry about it. I said I’d be here for you and Joe and I wanted to be.”

“I just feel so…” I swallow a few times, open my mouth like a fish, hungry for more oxygen. Joe is here but also was there, and I what if we don’t work anymore? What if Meghan is still sick? What if. What if. What if.

“Kelly. It’s fine. Really. Everything is going to be fine. You. Me. Joe. Everyone. It’s going to be fine. Look at me. Take a deep breath.” I listen, my eyes bugged wide as I inhale through my nose, heaving on my diaphragm. She mimics the motion and I see the crinkle of plastic under her t-shirt move against the fabric.

“How are you the one consoling me right now?”

“It’s my job, I’m your big sister. Today is a big day for you guys.”

“I love you, Meg.”

“Love you too.” She says it with such conviction that I feel my nerves soften, tension sag my muscles. For years, I haven’t been able to attach *I love you* to my sister, the definition foreign in its connection to her image. Now, her thin body wrapped around my own and all the things and people I love home and safe and alive, she is the embodiment of the phrase.

I wave as she climbs into her gigantic Ford truck for the drive towards home, the opposite direction of me, before getting into my own car with the family I have made.



December, 2017

The hospital is decorated with strands of fake pine garland and tacky paper Christmas decorations, likely harbouring some strain of life-ending bacteria rather than cheering patients in hospital during the holidays. I'm an hour early, flustered, sweating a little even in the cold. This week, every action feels like an overreaction, a panic giving way to terrifying reality.

I gulp at the dregs of my cold coffee as I approach the information booth, with plasticky loops of dollar store wreaths tacked up with clear tape. I lean into the walled barrier between me and the volunteer who wears an "Ask me" button pinned to their chest.

"Where would I go to pick up a patient who had an ileostomy reversal?" I knock my winter boots against one another to dislodge a chunk of ice from the tread.

"A what now?" The volunteer leans quizzically into the Plexiglass.

"Ileostomy." I motion to my abdomen and mime some squiggly intestines. The volunteer directs me to the gastrointestinal wing of Mount Sinai, pointing to a coloured tape marker on the floor that guides my way.

I leave out the other reason for surgery: Meghan's cancer is back with a hungry vengeance. The CT scan for her ileostomy reversal revealed dense blocks of tumours filling up her abdomen, so they would cut out what was possible to be removed, consider radiating what was not. At one week post-op, we wait with anticipation for a prognosis and treatment plan.

The hospital is a maze of hallways and waiting rooms, all of them eerily similar to the countless others I've visited. When I finally find my sister, she in the bed by the window, her pale face bathed in grey light, although the sky is dark with a storm threatening. The room is

quiet except for the murmuring of televisions on low volume, moans of pain from the other three patients, and the occasional beep from an IV alarm.

“Finally!” Her face lights up when I peek around the curtain that encircles her bed and lean to give her a gentle hug.

“You get a discharge! And you get a discharge! Everybody gets a discharge!” I boom in my best Oprah voice. She smiles weakly. “You ready to get out of here, or what?”

“You have no idea. Just waiting on the doctor to sign the paperwork.”

“Well, your personal recovery palace awaits chez Sister.”

“I better get spoiled.” She grins and reaches her hand for mine. I give it a squeeze, her tiny fingertips cold in my palm.

“Your healing house options are limited, so spoiled or not, it’s my place or parenting two kids while attempting to get well at the same time.”

“Bernard would have looked after me.” She doesn’t sound sure, her hand retreating from me, busying it with the blankets. He hadn’t offered to take time from work, and has endlessly complained that her time in hospital is making his schedule difficult, although his mother, Mary, and a host of volunteers care for six-month-old Lily and three-year-old Sam.

“Has he come to see you?” I ask, although I already know the answer. “Doesn’t he work just down the street from here?”

She ignores the question and instead, tugs the sheet down to her pubic bone. “Wanna see?” Her face is a plea of distraction.

“Stupid question.” I lean in as she bares her belly, showcasing ten staples sealing a fat line of skin where the ileostomy site was a week ago. Evidence of her cancer battle—just six months ago—sealed like an envelope.

Harder to ignore is the new cross of sixty-five staples from ribs to pelvis where the doctors tried carving away the latest tumours. The cancer has taken root, hungry and insistent. *Very advanced*, the surgeon said to me over the phone. I called to check in when the promised call from Bernard didn't materialize, grateful that she'd added me as Next of Kin, giving me legal access to the information. *But we have to wait on pathology*. I am the only one in the family not surprised by the news. *My sister is going to die*, I write in my journal, cursive huge and looping. I stare at the words on the page, devastated by how sure I am in this, craving some other emotion, like anger or denial. But there is only this acceptance of her upcoming death, which I use to temper my own panic. Comfort in truth is all the comfort we can glean.

The new stapled section of her abdomen is a crude line, wobbly like the doctor was drunk while wielding the scalpel. I look from Meghan's stomach to her face, waiting for impending bereavement or anger at the cancer's return, but she only conveys glee to be rid of the bag of shit. "Any word yet? On a prognosis?"

"Well, we know it's cancer, we just don't know how bad yet. But hey, I'm not wearing my own crap like a fashion accessory so, there's that." She pats her belly gently, denial a glassy sheen on her skin.

"Atta way to look at the bright side. In the meantime, you have some sexy new scars, right? Why do I want to touch it so bad?" I reach out a finger with a joking threat to poke.

Meghan swats at me but grimaces sharply, clutching the surgical site.

"What's wrong? Pain? Want me to get someone?" I fret, search for a call button. I've talked to my sister three or four times a day throughout this hospital stay, finding new reasons to be devastated with each ring; she shat her pants or threw up on herself or got her period and bled

all over the sheets. I picture her in these moments—wet, embarrassed, helpless—and a ball forms in my throat.

“No, I’m fine, just moved too fast. I just want out of here. God, where is the doctor?”

“I’ll go check.” At the nursing station, I wait for someone to look up from their monitor to acknowledge my presence. “Excuse me, can Meghan Montaigne leave now? There’s a snowstorm coming and I’m keen to get on the road.”

“Just waiting on the discharge paperwork,” says a nurse without making eye contact. She stops, taps at a keyboard and leaves me to fill in the space. “The doctor’s in surgery.” She relays this information like it is the most important thing in the world. Not that my sister wants to go home. That she has cancer. That she has been incontinent all week in a room far away from family.

An hour passes. Two. Four. Meghan’s face has gone from pale to sunken, grey around the eyes where her skin bunches tight with each wave of pain.

“Good news!” chirps a nurse as she enters the room, shaking a sheet of paper like a New Year noisemaker. “You’re free to go.”

I look to the window dramatically. Outside, the promised storm is in full swing, massive clumps falling like snowballs, plops hitting the window with icy slush. “We could have been home by now. And she hasn’t received anything for pain the entire time I’ve been here.” It is two pm. No way to make it out of the city before rush hour starts.

“It’s fine, Kell,” Meghan whispers. “Let’s just go.”

“So, is there a porter or something?” I say to the nurse as she wanders to the next patient, stethoscope poised. I want someone with trained qualifications to maneuver my sister’s chair because every move she makes sends my heartrate soaring and I cannot be responsible for

accentuating her pain or I will die too, here in the gastrointestinal unit, a place akin to hell and smelling of shit and puke.

“You’ll have to go find a wheelchair,” the nurse says dismissively, gesturing loosely towards the hallway. “I think there’s one down the hall somewhere.”

I raise an irritated eyebrow and return ten minutes later with a chair that sports three questionable stains and a tear in the padded seat.

“Where have you been?” Meghan sounds like a child, her body disappearing under the thin white sheet. She has grey Uggs on, a grey robe, and plaid pajamas pants, as though we’re headed to some sort of outdoor slumber party.

The process of getting her into the chair is herculean, and I manipulate her like a marionette, bending her legs for her and resting her slippered feet on the foot pads. Once her luggage and countless reusable Costco bags are slung across my body and shoulders, I set off in search of the way I came, which proves somewhat elusive in the medical labyrinth. Eventually, we find the elevators and cram in, the car large enough for a cartwheel and yet packed with humanity, the space smelling of antiseptic, sweat, and snow melting on moth-balled jackets. Classical music pipes through the speakers, all tinny and metallic. Meghan produces a low murmur of agony.

When the elevator arrives at on the main floor, I surge onwards but the wheelchair catches on the open lip between the flooring, lurching Meghan forward. She screams in pain and the sound scrapes at my insides, filling the elevator, the lobby, and all the space in my head.

“Jesus Christ, I’m sorry, Meg.”

She sobs into her hands as strangers help me manhandle the chair across the barrier until we arrive in the brightly lit lobby. “Oh God, oh God. Oh my God,” she whispers over and over, rocking ever so slightly in place as she repeats the mantra, clutching her sewn-up stomach.

“Just wait here while I grab the car, okay?” I arrange her chair by the rotating door entrance.

“Where do you think I can go?” she snaps.

I run until my lungs burn, down the street and up three flights of parkade stairs. It is mere minutes until I whip my Golf into the front entrance amongst ambulances and police cars, dash into the hospital and wheel my sister to my waiting car, then eye the impossible task of tucking her inside without damn near killing her.

Near the hospital entrance, a woman stands by the rotating doors and sucks on the end of a cigarette, the red tip fiery to match her cold-nipped fingers and a *No Smoking within 9 Metres of This Door* sign posted above her head. The plume circles Meghan’s face and she waves it away while I sink my nails into my palms. If Meghan coughs, the pain will fucking kill her.

We manage to ease her into the vehicle with only a few well-placed expletives, stuffing pillows between her and the car door for cushion. After returning the wheelchair to the information desk, I swirl through the rotating doors, just as the smoker blows a nicotine cloud in my direction.

“Excuse me, do you see that sign?” I point behind the woman’s head and she turns slowly, lips curling around the tip of the smoke as she does. “This is a hospital and you’re blowing smoke right into the entrance.”

She rolls her eyes and I rush up, exhilarated and yet shocked with myself. She’s even older up close, her face full of lines and age spots, yellowing hair curled in a 1980s pouf that

borders on a mullet. Hands, too, show wear and tear, the spotting of years and no sunscreen.

“And?” She shrugs, curls her lip upwards like a snotty teenager.

“AND? My sister was just gutted in there, can barely move for pain, and you’re blowing smoke at her.” I am screaming, words screeching from my throat, tears threatening while I take up all the physical space between us. All the emotional space too, my stance threatening while tears surge. Fuck this woman and her selfish fucking cigarette and her disrespect for life and her fucking shellacked hair. The woman’s eyes dart from my car to the cops who linger nearby, thumbs hooked under their vests, hands on their hips. My eyes fix on her hesitant face, her smoke turning to ash, my reflection evident in her pupils. There is something painfully familiar in the defiant sass of her, and suddenly, I want to cry.

“Kelly,” Meghan calls from the window. “Just get me home, please.”

I take a breath, condensation building between us, and turn on my heel. Saved by my sister.

Meghan falls asleep for the first hour of the ride towards Trenton as we move slowly through a clog of traffic and the first season’s snowstorm. I keep the radio on low so I can hear her lungs empty and fill, reaching out occasionally to keep her head from bobbing against her delicate chest. Oshawa’s traffic reaches a pinnacle, the car pattering forward at a maddening pace as the snow falls around us in earnest, building up on the windshield. Slops of salt and sand create brown sludge on the whiteout roads and I gently tap the breaks as a transport truck’s back tires slip into my lane. Meghan stirs, her eyes fluttering open before they squint again. She clutches her stomach, pressing warm, open palms to the stapled incisions. I reach over to turn on the seat warmers, adjust the car’s temperature control so that a vent gently hisses air on her face.

“How’re you doing?”

“Miserable as fuck,” she mutters, licking her lips. I pass a bottle of water and she takes small, tentative sips. “Where are we?”

“Not even halfway. Storm and traffic are both being jerks.”

She groans. “I have to go to the bathroom.” A gurgle emanates loudly in the enclosed space and her eyes widen. “Now.”

“You’re in luck, milady,” I say, gesturing to the highway. “Behold.” The highway rest stop lights blink through the storm, housing bathrooms, fuel, and a few fast food joints. I park as close to the entrance as possible and help Meghan hobble through the snow in her robe. When she is safely on the toilet seat, I lean into the fingerprinted mirror and assess myself in the overhead lights that cast eerie shadows. I look older, full of knowing I don’t want.

I wash my hands over and over until Meghan appears next to me, grabbing me at the elbow. She looks simultaneously elderly yet youthful. Too young to be this sick. Old enough to know that isn’t a reason. “Home, please,” she croaks, her voice a whisper. Her skin is the colour of eggshells.

As we shuffle towards the exit, she cries out, pangs reaching a crescendo, the car so very far away as more snow piles like white clouds, masking our footprints to the entrance. “Meg, let me grab the car, bring it closer. We can get someone to help. I’ll just...”

“Stop talking.” She grips my arm tightly and takes a few steps then stops and clutches her side. I cannot stand it.

“Meg, I’m going to pick you up, okay? Don’t flex your stomach muscles because that’ll hurt like hell. Just trust that I can hold you. Just fall back into my arms.”

“No, your bad knee. You’ll hurt it.” But she stops protesting and her knees give into my waiting arms. I lift Meghan like a newlywed carried over the waiting threshold, surprised to find



she is both heavy and light at the same time. I shuffle towards the car in the slip of slush, Meghan's head tucked into my armpit, one hand looped around my neck, the other sagging in her lap until I deposit her into the Volkswagen.

While walking to my side of the car, I pause to catch my breath and look into the sky, taking a grateful breath. I did not fall. We have made it this far.

Ten days later, at Mom and Dad's house, the smell of roasting turkey and sage fills the room as steam wafts from the oven like an atomic cloud. I drizzle the crisping poultry skin with a line of fat from the baster, add some more salt, check the temperature. Everything will be perfect.

After Meghan's week of recovery at our house, Joe and I delivered her to her home with promises to visit in two days for a family Christmas at our parents'. She refused our offers to come inside and get her set up, even though Bernard was nowhere to be found, and I watched as she waved from her front step and then disappeared into her lonely bungalow. Powerlessness smothered my chest into a persistent ache. Two days later, the feeling is still with me, so I fuss with napkins and tablecloths and the perfect toys for children and chocolates for stockings.

"Late, as usual," Dad says with a huff from his recliner, dramatically assessing his watch.

"You know if it was up to Meghan, they'd be here first thing," Mom quips angrily. "She loves Christmas. Why can't he ever just let her have it?"

"Can't be on time, even for once. For her," Dad says, his voice rising with Mom's support. They share a look while I rattle the turkey back into the oven then uselessly fiddle with knobs on the stove, returning them back to their original position. Joe kisses my shoulder as he

passes and pours me a glass of wine. When he wasn't at work last week, he was part of the Meghan Recovery Team, crafting cups of tea and snacks for our movie nights.

"I just want to give her a nice, final Christmas," I whisper to Joe as I take the pinot. My bottom lip quivers but I stop myself. Meghan's surgical report has taken residence in my email inbox, where I still mark it "unread." *We resected at least 150cm of small bowel... Diagnosis: metastatic leiomyosarcoma stage 4.* I compulsively read through the forty pages of medical jargon and dispassionate writing, searching for the "but" even though I knew it wouldn't come. *Kelly, am I going to die?* Meghan asked as we read the report together. I expected it, this question, but hoped she'd ask someone trained to respond with medical insight. If Meghan had taken to Google, she wouldn't have bothered asking—sarcomas are rare, with less than five per cent survival rate once it metastasizes. *We don't know, Meg,* I said, lying better than she could ever lie to me.

"Deep breaths," Joe says to me as he wipes the counter. I listen, sucking through my nostrils, then blow out pursed air in perfect timing with the doorbell.

I fling open the door to find Sam at my feet and Bernard shoving my snowsuit-laden niece at me, the baby's cheeks rosy with cold. "Merry Christmas Montaignes! Hi Pudding! Hi Piggie! Auntie missed you guys so much!"

"Auntie!" This word, Sam pronounces perfect. He circles my legs with his arms before fleeing to his grandpa, who scoops him into the air and zips him airplane-style through the foyer. Meghan walks up the driveway slowly, looking weary.

"How're you doing?" I ask, leaning in to kiss her cheek while Bernard wordlessly piles packages into my arms alongside his daughter.

"I'm okay." Her voice is as weak as her shrugged shoulders.

“Well come in so I can load you up with food and presents.”

The entryway becomes a trove of boots and mittens, melted snow making puddles on the tiles. Joe and I help the kids shuck their layers and ease Meghan out of her coat.

“I’m frigging hungry,” Bernard mutters. He has not taken off his outerwear. “Gonna go get a bite.”

“Oh, we’re eating in an hour,” I say, gesturing towards the kitchen with a nod of my chin and a kindness I don’t feel. “I baked cookies if you want something to tide you over.”

“I need to eat now,” he says to Meghan, without looking my way, his voice wheedling. “I’m getting a burger.”

“We were going to open presents first,” I say, bouncing Lily, whose bottom lip is trembling. “You’re two hours late.” I want the children pacified with new toys, quiet enough for us to eat a meal, but he is already revving the truck engine before I say another word. Meghan tracks the vehicle as it moves at speeds not befitting a subdivision as Joe takes Lily from my arms and ushers the kids downstairs to admire the Christmas tree.

“What the hell is his problem?” I search myself for compassion but come up wanting. His wife is dying and he must be impossibly, horrifically stressed. He is, I suspect, also battling some kind of undiagnosed mental illness because there was no other explanation I could find that would justify so much of his behaviour, not that it would. But still, inside, there must be humanity, which he keeps roped off like a museum exhibit. I don’t actually know my brother-in-law, and what I do know is now scarred with resentment.

“Kelly,” Meghan says. She’s steeped in exhaustion—dark eyes, over-styled hair with corkscrew curls, posture sunken. “Not now, please.” She pushes into the entry area, crowded with gifts that I helped Meghan to buy when Bernard revealed, two days into her recuperation,

that he hadn't bothered to purchase her carefully made Christmas shopping list. She begged me to take her to the Dollar Store and Bulk Barn for candy, then hobbled through the mall, barely making it back to the car before collapsing. In the process, she tore open a small area of stitches that I fought to reseal with butterfly strips.

Bernard returns an hour later reeking of marijuana, joining us in the den where we numbly flip through cards and pick at tape. Joe and I spread across the carpeted floor with Lily perched on her diaper-laded bum while Sam runs from one side of the room to the other, handing out gifts that he plucks from the tree. Mom watches in a haze while Dad stands on guard to collect the garbage.

"You done there?" he barks each time someone finishes with a gift. Before thanks are given to the giver, the paper is balled and deposited in Dad's waiting hands, as per every other Thompson family gift-giving event. Meghan and I call him the Garbage Nazi, always wielding a plastic bag the moment Scotch tape is loosened.

Sam and Lily unearth their final presents and Dad snatches the discarded pieces of coloured paper before they even hit the floor, stuffing them into his construction-grade bags, his lips pressed into a tight line.

Meghan and I eye each other from her position on the rocking chair, mine on the floor next to her, and stifle smirks. "Hey Dad," she says innocently. "I think you missed a piece over here." She points to the opposite corner of the den.

"What?" He whips around to face us, head on a swivel. "Where?"

"Over there," Meghan repeats airily. Dad stomps to the corner to peek around furniture as Meghan's lip curls into a mischievous smile, gesturing non-specifically. "Same old, Dad," she whispers to me, just a foot away. I can smell her laundry detergent, the essential oil-based soap I

bought for her, her hairspray; these things that remind me that she is still here, in this moment. And just for a second, I try to imagine life without her, even though I'm grown with my own life, my own family, and for most of adulthood, have easily trundled along without my sister. Except seeing her now, our eyes reflecting back at one another, I remember our shared army brat life—the constant moves, the continuous rotation of new friends and faces—where I relied on her to build my bridges of friendship, to assure me her sisterly comfort would continue no matter the venue. No one else, absolutely no one will share in this joke with me, this history, this knowledge of our family and its complicated inner workings. The Garbage Nazi joke will die with her.

“Where, Meg? Where’s the paper you saw?” Dad’s bum wiggles from behind the armchair, where he’s stooped to peer under the skirt of the cover.

*I love you*, Meghan mouths to me, lip quivering. I pat her legs, swallow so many times that my throat feels raw, and return to play with Sam until the kitchen timer sings an alert.

“That’s the sound of dinner.” I hop up with enthusiasm I don’t feel. “You hungry, Piggy?”

“Mmm!”

Upstairs for the meal, Joe and I serve a perfectly browned bird and countless crafted sides.

“This is really good, Kell,” Meghan says, holding up a pile of mashed potatoes on her fork. Her plate is swimming in so much gravy that everything is tan-toned and soupy.

“Clearly I should have made an entire pot of gravy for the cancer patient. You going to share some of that for us who only got a drizzle?”

She smiles into her plate. “Deal with it. Illness has its perks.”

“Ma,” Sam whines. “Want hmm.” He raises fists in the air while his sister slaps pureed squash on her tray. Although she’s been seated next to her father, I’ve been feeding her small spoonfuls when her hungry squeals keep going unnoticed.

Meghan easily deciphers the language of her son. “Sam, we aren’t going home. It’s Christmas and Mommy wants to be with family. Eat the grilled cheese Mommy made you.” He pouts as plasticky orange oozes from between two slices of crispy Wonder Bread. I look to the beautiful plate of white turkey meat I prepared for him, the perfectly cut carrots arranged in a fan, feeling irrationally irritated. Our dinner table is an array of placated grins, teeth ground into cheeks. Only Lily appears happy, smashing the squash into a creamy pool on her highchair tray, her fists pounding and pounding until the whole kitchen rattles. I gulp my wine. Eat more stuffing.

When we finish eating, Bernard immediately retires to the recliner while Meghan wrestles with freeing the kids from their highchairs. “Let me,” Joe says, gently touching her arm. “You’re not supposed to be lifting anything, remember?” Joe can’t resist casting eyes to Bernard, who has abandoned his post to relax.

“I know, I just…” Meghan’s eyes are damp as she glances at each of us. Joe. Mom. Dad. Me. Her children. Finally, she rests focus on Bernard, whose eyes are closed peacefully. Her bottom lip quivers, the freckles around her mouth dancing like brown snowflakes.

Sam reaches for Joe’s neck and breaks the spell. “Gunco Joe!” Joe swings Sam from the chair and holds him upside down, comically bouncing to some unheard beat until he has a child in each arm, galloping around the living room like a horse. The sound of children laughing takes over.

“Why don’t you go lay on the couch?” I say to Meghan as I clear the table. “You look tired.”

“It’s pain, actually,” she responds, looking to Bernard who has fallen asleep in the chair, his phone in his hand. “But I don’t want to dine and dash.”

“Hey, just another reason to play the cancer card. Right?” I say with a wink. “Go home and have a rest.”

“You guys sure?” She asks, receiving nods from everyone. “Maybe you’re right. Babe?” she says to Bernard. “Do you think you could gather the kids and gifts? I’m in a lot of pain. Think I’ve overdone it for the day.” Bernard opens his eyes and looks at her but doesn’t answer.

“Babe? Did you hear me? Can you get the kids? So much pain.” She points to her abdomen for effect.

“Yeah, yeah.” He blinks a few times and waves dismissively, closes his eyes again. “Man, my back hurts.” He stretches lazily, the leather crunching under his weight. I almost snort laugh; the idea that this grown man is complaining of back pain to a woman who is dying.

I grit my teeth while wielding the pot scrubber, hustle plates into neat stacks. Dad makes a concerted effort to create as much noise as possible—pans clattering on the gas range, dishes bonking as they are rinsed and thrust into the dishwasher, his eyes burning a hole in the back of Bernard’s head. Meghan sits on the edge of a couch cushion, pain causing her to perch awkwardly.

“I can help you load the car, Meghan,” Joe says cheerily, the kids still dangling from his arms like sloths. He gently lowers Sam to the floor. “Hey buddy, why don’t you go collect your new toys for Mommy?” Sam makes for the basement, a bag tucked under his arm.

“No, no you’ve done enough, Joe. Bernard, please. I’m hurting so bad.”

Bernard leans back further in the recliner and grips the armrests, his face showing nothing. He doesn't bother rising from his seat as he explodes. "WHY DON'T YOU GET OFF YOUR OWN LAZY ASS AND DO SOMETHING!"

Dad hasn't heard Bernard over his own racket, but Mom, Joe, Meghan, and I stare in disbelief, mouths agape, fists clenched. Lily, perched on her uncle's hip, takes no notice, happily sucking her thumb.

"BECAUSE SHE CAN'T!" I scream, startling everyone, my fists balled tight. Then I lean in, face close to his so the kids don't hear. "You realize she just had half her insides excavated, right?"

The room freezes. Tears threaten and I am hot all over, sweating. Bernard looks through me and into my sister instead, hate dancing across his expression while Dad holds dishes aloft like a deer in headlights. "What? What just happened? What'd I miss?"

"Kelly," Meghan says, putting herself between me and her husband for what, the millionth time? I've lost count. "It's fine. I'm fine. Bernard, let's go. *Now.*"

He shuffles wordlessly outside under the premise of getting the car warmed for the kids, who he does not bother to dress for the cold or carry outside. Joe and Dad dutifully deliver the children to the truck, no words exchanged, as Bernard stares ahead and ignores them. Meanwhile, Meghan sits in the chair in the front hall while I help her into her coat, stooping at her feet to tug on her boots like a parent. A plastic card falls from her coat pocket and rattles to the floor.

"Whoops, you dropped this." I pass the gift card to her, emblazoned with an image of an overcooked pizza printed in primary colours. "Dominoes. Yum." The *To* and *From* sections of the card have not been filled out. Meghan sheepishly shoves it into her pocket. "Meg?"



“Kelly.” Almost as a warning, said through gritted teeth.

But the words form anyways, take over my body. “Did he get you a pizza gift card for Christmas? As your gift?”

She shrugs, zips up her coat. “It’s so I don’t have to cook. And we don’t have a lot of money for each other this year.” This is delusion speaking, right? Or self-preservation, or protection of her abuser? Whatever it is, I want to shake her by the shoulders and scream or wrap her in my arms and cry. I want anything but this. I want her to want anything but this.

“Then how about cooking a meal himself and making you a nice card? It’s not about the money. It’s about making a small effort, you know?”

For her part, Meghan spent a painful afternoon at my house using my watercolours to craft him a card, covering it in faded pink hearts like a teenager’s textbook. He could have made a card, given her a home spa pedicure, made those corny IOU coupons—anything other than something bought at the gas station on his way home from a work shift.

She bites her lip to keep from crying. But she cannot hold it in, the embarrassment, the anger, the sadness and I am suddenly responsible and sick with myself. I always have to be right on the side of my sister’s wrongness.

“God, I’m sorry. You okay, Meg?”

“I’ll be fine. Everything is just sort of…” she trails off while looking out to the truck, exhaust pluming from the pipe in the frosty weather.

I want to fix it. “I can come out to the house tomorrow if you want. Help with the kids and give you a break before we go back home.”

“I’ll be okay. Thanks. Bernard and I just need some time together, I think.”

She waves as she walks to the truck and Dad kisses her, his voice a positive chirp for the kids. When Joe and Dad are back inside, we wordlessly gather in the living room with glasses of white wine, trying to occupy the void that Meghan and Bernard swallow up in a vacuum.

“And to think,” Mom says, sipping her drink. “On her very last Christmas.” And then she begins to cry.

I cry too. It is the first time anyone other than me has voiced the truth.

Part 4

*Depression?*

*Or delusion, or devastation, or peace...*

Dear Meghan,

You said that in your next life, you want to come back as my dog, live a juicy life of blankets warmed in the dryer, snacks on demand, cuddles and company.

Let me analyze this for you, Meg, because I've been in therapy long enough now where I think I've earned the certification: what you wanted was the love. All the other stuff was just frosting.

Pot Roast had your back though. Sometimes, I think of that night you two really forged your bond, a few days into your recovery. It was a good thing but bad thing too, because lucidity meant awareness of your situation. Dying. What a thing to come to terms with in your sister's basement.

I could hear you crying when I laid on my bed, which, when I think about it, was directly above the guest bedroom where your staples were sealing you back together like a Ziploc. You wanted to be alone though, so I left you with Roast, who took the command position near your cheeks and let you sob into his fur.

I'm laying here in bed now, writing this little note out. I keep having to put down the pen, because when I really think about the suffering, the absolute epicness of your anguish, that's what undoes me. Sure, dying is a real bitch, but worse was the husband, the children, the lack of support from people who should have been toasting your blankets in the god-damned dryer.

I'd wrap you up in the snuggest of sheets, Meggie. Grief is such a dick..

—Kelly

April, 2018

The end of April air has a chill but also promise of spring hovering nearby, tulips pushing through mulch and robins tentatively pawing at snow-flattened grass. Rebirth. Newness. Spring isn't my favourite season, full of soggy earth and icy crusts at the edges of lawns, but I force myself into daily practices of gratitude. The sun is bright. I have a home. I am safe. I am loved. I am alive. I am a Hallmark card barfed onto a journal page.

For the last four months, Mom, Dad, and I have served as Meghan's support team for her weekly chemo treatments and bloodwork, Dad idling his truck at the nearby Tim Hortons to save Meghan the hospital parking fees while Mom cares for the children. Google helped me answer the questions I had about her medication, Gemcitabine. Usually used for advanced stage cancers like ovarian, pancreatic, and sarcoma. A BandAid on a gunshot wound.

In January, Meghan asked me to come to her first chemo appointment, and I made us matching t-shirts with black block letters on white background. I spun in a circle and let her read the words across my chest. *Helping Kick Cancer's Ass Since 1984*. And then I produced hers from my purse and she changed in the middle of the kitchen, baring her stomach of scars. *Making Cancer My Bitch Since 1983*. We left for the appointment pretending that Bernard had offered to be there, that I wasn't a comfort consolation prize. And while the medication dripped silently into her arm and she her head bobbed in sleep, I held her hand, intent on letting Meghan to maintain the charade if it meant she will stay alive, too.

Over the past few days, Mom, Dad, Meghan, and I played board games, went to a spa, drank wine, baked mini cheesecakes while Bernard's mother minded the kids. Anything for

distraction from Meghan's impending oncology appointment today, which will indicate whether or not her chemo is shrinking the tumours, staving off expansion within her body. An early death sentence or a temporary stay of execution.

The entire Weekend of Distraction hinged on Meghan's demand that Bernard was not to be a topic of conversation unless the commentary was supportive and loving, which is getting harder to do as days pass. In February, Bernard experienced a bipolar break. He raged on Facebook against everyone from Meghan to Prime Minister Trudeau, then disappeared from his job despite a stellar work ethic. The manic episode resulted in Bernard taking off for British Columbia and calling 911 on himself when he felt his mind vibrating out of proportion, thoughts suggesting death might be the easiest way out. For a month, he was committed to care while Meghan's disease progressed, both of them prisoners to treatment plans and medications and schedules made by doctors. But he's been home for a few months, thankfully stable and medicated. It's like living in an overwrought melodrama.

So, it's me she asked to join her at this oncology appointment, the one that determines whether continued treatment is worthwhile. *I want to ease some of this burden for him*, Meghan explained. *And you'll make it fun*. I nodded, feigned ignorance that she'd asked Bernard to come but he declined.

While waiting for Meghan to finish her pre-appointment bloodwork, I check my watch and eye the entrance of the hospital from my parking spot, sipping a Tim Hortons iced coffee laced with sugar even though I hate sweetened caffeine. I also received—for some reason—two coffees despite ordering only one, as though the bored server sensed my desperation for something neither of us could name.

My phone blinks.

Meghan: *All finished.*

I zip my car towards the hospital entrance, then lean across the console to throw open the door for Meghan. “All good?”

“Yup.” Once settled in the car, she drums her fingers on the armrest at a frantic pace. “Just have to wait for the doctor to let me know when my bloodwork results are in and then I’ll meet with the doctor. Anywhere from an hour to longer. I’ll lose my mind by then.”

“So, we’ll keep busy. Onwards—to the mall!” I thrust my fist in the air like a superhero. “Little retail therapy.” I ease into highway traffic.

“There isn’t enough retail therapy in the world to make me forget all this. Especially when I only need new bras because I look like a Holocaust victim.”

We’re beyond pretending she doesn’t look sick, laughing to ourselves as we use her hollow body to skip a line or get a free latte from the gullible Starbucks barista. Elastic leggings sag from her body like elderly skin and her hair has withered to a point of near transparency, the new pixie cut serving as a mousy halo.

*Parenting kicks my ass.*

*I hear parenting kicks everyone’s ass.*

*Especially when that ass is full of disease.*

*Especially when that ass is about as skinny as those depressing pines.*

*Those burls are bigger than my tits.*

*Look on the bright side, at least you’ll go as out the skinny sister.*

We snicker under our breath, look around like teenagers caught smoking during class break. But in the space between breaths, there is a palpable knowing strung between us like a tether, a tin can phone we used to make with string and youth, tied into knots. Meghan is dying.

“Don’t take Cundles Street for Christ’s sake,” she screeches. “We’ll be in traffic forever. Watch out for that pedestrian. God, you’re driving so slow.” She points this way and that with her tiny fists, arms flailing.

“Did you want to drive, Miss Crazy Town? Or can I master my own vehicle?”

“Sorry. I’m being controlling. I’m just...” She looks down into her lap, pick, pick, picking at the tender skin around the cupid’s bow of her lip. There is so much that has changed and there is so much that has not.

“Sure, play the cancer card.”

This makes her smirk as I wheel into Georgian Mall, put the car in park. Meghan moves fast, inside before I can get my purse slung over my shoulder, her body a sequence of tiny movements like hummingbird wings. I jog to catch up—hilarious considering my legs are six inches longer than hers—as she stalks towards Victoria’s Secret on a clear mission. Inside the dimly lit store, a wall of scent is piped into the air, which makes everything smells of overly sweet flowers, fake and pungent. Within minutes, Meghan has a collection of bras in her arms, three cup sizes smaller than her previous versions, frowning as she checks price tags and shakes her head.

“My treat,” I call to her. The last few months, everything is my treat. The visits to nail salons, the hair appointments, the clothes she doesn’t need and sizes out of the following month. The endless loop of coffees during visits, after chemo snacks, during chemo snacks, parking. Neither she nor Bernard ever offer to pay and I never ask.

“Is that just because of my Big C?” she says with a laugh.

“Why else? You think it’s just because I love you or something?”



We used to share bras, stare at our 34Es and wonder who in the family had gifted us with the bulbous orbs when Mom could barely fill an egg carton.

“I’m ready to try on,” Meghan says, clutching the throng of lace and microfibre as we wander to the change room.

“Hi ladies!” The saleswoman saunters close, ample chest on display, smiling wide while she adjusts the headset resting at her temple. Like everyone else in the shop, she is dressed in black, perfect red lipstick circling her crescent mouth. “You let me know if you need anything, okay?” she says as she unlocks a changeroom. She smells of lilacs and lavender, something natural in this space of fake representations.

Meghan steps inside and calls to me. “Stay close in case I need advice.”

“I’ll be right here.” I plop on a tufted pink cushion that sits outside the door.

“You two having a nice day out together?” The saleswoman asks me as she snaps her gum—a trait I generally find annoying—but there’s something about her that is comforting, affable. Her curves slither left and right as she folds tiny undergarments into perfect squares.

“Well, yeah. Kind of.” I don’t know how to explain our purpose. *She’s lost her tits to cancer.* No, no, not breast cancer. *We’re wasting time until we can find out how long she’ll live.* No, that wouldn’t work either. *Please, distract us because we can barely breathe.* Yes, those are the words I cannot say.

“Kell?” Meghan’s voice echoes from behind the closed door. “What do you think?” She opens the door and I step in behind her, my sister’s body on display in the mirror. The ridge of her spine is like a knotted tree root, snaking from absent glutes to the nape of her neck, sharp bone after sharp edge, tendons taut and ghostly. Then my eyes connect with her front in the mirror, ribs mummified, deflated breasts slinking lazily in the fabric cups.

Her eyes are on me, waiting. I take all of this in with military precision, mere seconds in which no time passes at all. “Hey, that one looks great!” There are moments when I can lie to her so well, I hardly recognize myself.

“Yeah? You sure? I’m worried I look a little saggy.” She jiggles a finger between her breasts as evidence. The flesh wobbles back and forth like jelly.

“Christ, Meg. Give yourself a break. You’ve lost, what, fifty pounds? That one is super flattering. You look beautiful.” It’s only a recent phenomenon in which I compliment my sister, something I always withheld from her because I knew she wanted my approval and I didn’t want to offer it, even something as small as complimenting an outfit. We were both so monstrous back then that I can hardly stand it—here, now—in Victoria’s Secret. She twists and turns in front of the mirror and I watch the scars, one running from belly button to back, the other cutting her from ribs to pubic bone, forming a bastardized cross. How long will she own this bra, need it even, have places to go that require one?

“Yeah, okay.” She shrugs, noncommittal. I suspect the bra could be adorned in diamonds and she still wouldn’t be interested. “Can you see if they have more colours? Black just feels sort of...you know.” She hands the tiny bra to me and I nod and smile my way out the room like I were leaving an audience with the Queen, never showing her my back, my tender kidneys never dissected for disease.

Outside the change room I run smack into the saleswoman, who is folding frilly panties into a perilous tower. “How’s it going in there?”

“We need some other colours,” I squeak. “Ideally not black. She doesn’t want black because, because she...” And then I cannot stop the tears. I burst out crying in a way that heaves at my chest, makes me feel sick and hot all over. I am so warm and nauseated, heat rising

through my collar like a desert mirage. “I’m sorry,” I gasp, gesturing with a thumb at the door where my sister waits for lavender or sunshine yellow. Anything but black. “She’s so thin. Cancer. It’s cancer. I didn’t expect...”

“I just said goodbye to my mom to the same damn thing, sweetie. You let it out.” She tugs me close and my body falls into hers, without resistance, and I let this stranger hug me, her perfumed skin tart in my nose. And my arms wrap around her back and rest myself there, in the Victoria’s Secret change room, choking back sobs against the chest of a woman I do not know, a woman who appears to be a decade younger and yet can snap her gum and bring customer service with a side of empathy.

I snort up my tears, fumble awkwardly through my purse for tissues. “God, I have to sort my shit out here. She needs me.” A dribble of snot slips from nostril to lip.

The woman holds me from my shoulders like a parent, her eyebrows furrowing. “You can’t change the outcome, so what she needs, and what you need too, is to look after you a bit.” I swallow hard and nod at her sage advice. “Now,” she says, all matter-a-fact, holding bras from their foamy cups. “I have this style in white, pink, and orange. Take your pick.”

We leave with orange. Bright. Hopeful. Impossible to wear under a white shirt but today, Meghan and I are women who don’t care about impracticality.

As I hand over my credit card, Dr. Woo’s office calls. The caller informs Meghan that her bloodwork is in and she can come for her appointment now, whenever she’s ready, and could she hurry? Dr. Woo would like to leave for his weekend holiday. I strain to hear, try to discern results based on the tone of the receptionist’s voice. Meghan pops an Ativan and is silent the entire ride back to the hospital.

At the Cancer Centre, Meghan taps on the kiosk screen for automatic check in. For a moment, her familiarity with the machine stings my senses, her fingerprints just a selection of thousands of smeared and gummy identities on the touch pad.

*Since your last treatment, have you had:*

*Any sweating or dizziness?*

*Any flu-like symptoms?*

*Any fever?*

*Any aches or pains?*

*Any mouth sores?*

She taps, taps, taps, each push of her finger terser and sharper. We silently approach chairs in the waiting area, but our asses barely meet the seat before a nurse arrives to lead us to an exam room. The room is not light-filled and shiny like the chemo treatment rooms or the waiting area, making it feel considerably more ominous. I had imagined major medical news would be delivered like you see on television, with the doctor aged and wise, slipping behind an oak desk while a panel of supportive family members sit on the other side, wringing their hands. But this is just a regular hospital room with a computer, exam table, and sink, plus two uncomfortable plastic chairs lining the wall at the end.

“Jesus, they don’t exactly make this a picnic, do they?” I mutter.

“Guess they figure you’re already pissed to be in the Cancer Centre so they don’t give a hoot about decor.” Meghan’s voice is throaty and deep like she’s doing *ujjayi* breathing in yoga class, although she has never been one to exercise.

“I like a nice dose of feng shui with my cancer experience, thank you very much. Tea would be nice.”

“It’d probably be fucking radioactive.” She laughs. “You know, Mom and Dad hate our death jokes.”

“Yeah, I’ve learned that the hard way,” I respond. “Had some good zingers that have fallen pretty flat the last few days.”

“Well, they don’t get it.”

I take my sister’s hand as the door pops open with a soft click, and Dr. Woo peeks his head in, unsmiling. He looks barely old enough to vote, much less relay important medical information. He wears New Balance sneakers—not the hipster suede kind but the sporty running kind—with the laces tied so tight that the sides of the shoe panels meet over the bridge of his foot. Pleated khakis break over the shoes and he has a plaid shirt with pens tucked in the pockets. A nerd, really, someone who would embrace the title. Someone Meghan and I would have seen in the mall twenty minutes ago and would have shared a secret smile about the pocket protector hovering near his heart.

“Hi Meghan.” He shakes her free hand. Then, to me: “Meghan’s sister, Kelly, right?”

“Yup. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to see you have support, Meghan. Your husband coming today?”

Collective silence fills the room. “He couldn’t make it.” And we leave it there, this pregnant knowledge of his absence. Meghan was horrified when the chemo nurses thought Dad was her husband. I didn’t say it was because she listed married as her marital status but had yet to produce a spouse for a single appointment.

The doctor sits on a wheeled stool in front of us, hands clasped together, rocking slightly back and forth. He pulls up her latest scan on the screen, blinks repeatedly, clears his throat.

Meghan and I lean forward, wondering if he's actually not talking or if he's just speaking too softly for us to hear. *Spit it the fuck out!* Meghan's body is a rigid line.

"I'm afraid it's not good news," says Dr. Woo. And then he stops. Looks to Meghan, me, Meghan, me.

"Oh God." Meghan hangs her head to her chest. These are the words I expected, yet still, a wash of heat drapes me like a curtain. I squeeze her delicate hand twice. *I'm here.*

"And?" I finally say, my voice terse. I keep calm. Stable. My sister needs this and I need her. "Is there more information than that?"

Dr. Woo spins around his monitor to show us Meghan's CAT scan on the screen, side by side with the one from five months ago, just after surgery, just before chemo. "The entire abdomen is full of cancer, I'm afraid. It's spreading quite rapidly. The chemo hasn't effected any positive results."

"Which part are the tumours?" Meghan asks, squinting at the screen. The scan results are hard to discern, shades of grey blending into snowy static. A lung could be a liver for all I can tell.

"All of this." The doctor uses his pen to point out a general area that covers from rib cage to pelvic bone. Everything is filled in with dark masses that I cannot stop comparing to orb-shaped fruit. A grapefruit in the pelvic bone. An orange over the liver. A plum on the kidney. A goddamned melon where her intestines should be.

"I'm going to die," Meghan whispers to herself, but we all hear. No one argues. We sit amongst her tears while I rub her thumb with mine. This acknowledgement has come in so many sharp, bitter steps.

“How long?” I ask. It is the practical question, the one asked in all those movies, so the words sound trite and cliché.

“Well,” Dr. Woo stretches his lips into a nervous grimace, and I want to slap him and his healthy insides, his oncological education. I want to beg him to stop dragging on the news like the disease will. “Looking at how fast it’s spreading, and judging by how full your abdomen is, I wouldn’t expect you’d see Labour Day.” It is April 27, 2018. Four months. Meghan squeezes my hand tighter, her breath catching. “But if you’re not having symptoms yet, then it could be longer.” He doesn’t sound sure. He squints again at the screen like it will give him new answers.

“Well I don’t have any symptoms!” Meghan says, suddenly alert, a positive lilt in her tone. “So, I’m probably doing better than you might think, right? If I don’t have symptoms yet?” Her voice is at a pitch, her body vibrating. “What should I expect to see when I’m going downhill?”

“First, we’d expect that you’d lose some of your appetite or start vomiting.”

“I’m still hungry. So that’s good, right?”

“Meghan,” I say gently. “You haven’t been able to keep food down for a while now.”

She turns to me with wide eyes, like it hadn’t occurred to her. “Yeah, I guess that’s true. But it might just be the chemo, right, Dr. Woo?”

“Probably not. Typically, Gemcitabine doesn’t cause vomiting, especially if that wasn’t a side effect in the first few months of treatment.”

Meghan wilts. “What else?”

“Another symptom we would expect would be for you to start having some acute pain. But we can manage that for you as things progress.”

“See?” Meghan throws her arms up in the air triumphantly, like the doctor and I are full of shit. “I haven’t had any pain.”

“Meg.” My voice is pleading, borderline desperate. If she doesn’t face this, then how do we ride that pain together? “You’ve been complaining about back pain all week.” She’d asked me to knead at a knot in her back, a deformed lump poking out between her ribs. She could barely handle the pressure of my hands on her skin, and I had known I wasn’t pressing on muscle as I rubbed warming oil into her flesh.

“That was just muscle pain from lifting Lily. Right?” She turns to the doctor. “Right?” Her panic fills the room like water in a glass and there is no air left. I want to tear out of there, run to my car, drive too fast down the highway. Anywhere but here.

“Why don’t I take a look?” Dr. Woo gestures to the exam table and Meghan climbs up deftly. *See?* her face seems to say. *Could a dying person move like THIS?* She lifts her shirt and winces at his cold hands as they press down the sides of her spine, then prod at her abdomen. His eyes do not meet hers when he says, “I’m sorry. That’s definitely the cancer.”

The moment solidifies like a digital snap. Meghan’s eyes wide, shirt still held up around her withered breasts, hands gathered in the material. The doctor, awkward and unmoving, staring at the floor. From her face, hope dissipates like condensation and it is this moment, not the dying, that I cannot stand. Meghan just sits there, blinking her huge eyes, the same colour as mine but infinitely more beautiful in the way they protrude beyond the brow bone, the way the lashes curl up and out. Have I only just noticed this?

“So, there’s nothing else that can be done?” I ask.



“Sadly, we’re out of options,” Dr. Woo says as he washes his hands. I’m grateful for the noise of rushing water echoing against the stainless steel. “I’ll talk to Dr. Baratta in Toronto and see if there are any experimental studies you can be a part of.”

“So, that’s it?” Meghan looks upwards, to a God I’m not sure she’s ever prayed to. “Experimental stuff?”

“Afraid so. I’ll be in touch when I hear from Dr. Baratta and we’ll set you up with a pain treatment plan. I really am sorry.” He looks at his feet, genuinely sad. I wonder how many people he’s relayed this type of news to, how many times he has knotted his thin eyebrows into concern while keeping a distance from all this tangible suffering. “I know this wasn’t the news you wanted to hear.”

“This must have been hard for you too,” I say, “delivering news like this. Thank you.” We shake hands and I feel proud of myself for this compassion, because it will save me, prevent my focus from landing on what is happening in front of me; my sister a shuffling shell moving hazily towards the exit.

Meghan instantly wails as she walks, awkwardly leaning her head into my shoulder while I wrap an arm around her and the people in the waiting room turn away from us. We amble towards the parking lot, my own eyes oddly dry. But then I see an elderly couple shuffling arm in arm, the husband sporting the signature Cancer Centre haircut of gleaming baldness. His eyes are hollow and dark, scabby looking, as though he’s spent too many hours dabbing at his own tears. He looks to Meghan, see the hope melting into the floor tiles, and slowly shakes his head in sympathy, then meets my eyes. And then I cannot take it and the tears lurch forward, my sister and I stumbling like drunken bar mates, snot dripping, tears staining matching chemo shirts. The

automatic hospital doors swirl in a rotating sweep and direct us out into the sunlight where we find ourselves standing beside my Golf, stunned.

Meghan folds into my chest, her head tucking neatly under my chin. "I'm dying."

I nod, over and over, my chin bonking her hair each time. "I love you, Meg."

I drive her home in silence. I want to offer a grocery shop, on me. A tub of shared rocky road. Maybe another shopping trip. A movie, perhaps? But there is nowhere we can go to buy the one thing she wants most: time.

May, 2018

When Joe and I arrive at Meghan and Bernard's property, it looks like the scene of a crime—unused cars parked in corners and under trees, kids' toys abandoned mid-play, the looming three-story workshop Bernard had built, mostly unused for anything other than storage, which dwarfs the tiny board and batten bungalow.

“Another crisis in the day of the Thompson clan.” I have the armrest in a death grip, my joints aching against the leather.

A few weeks ago, Bernard flew into a rage and threatened to kill Meghan, throwing her up against the wall after ordering a series of large hunting knives to the house, under the auspices of family camping trips they'd never taken. When the cops were called, he led a high-speed chase through their small farming community, ending the spiel by crashing into three cop cars and causing more than eighty-thousand dollars in damages to police vehicles. After being hauled away to jail, he was transferred to a mental health facility. The result is that legally, Bernard is no longer allowed in the home without another adult present, nor can he be alone with the children. None of us admit that this is a horrible but necessary outcome.

“Home sweet home,” Joe mutters. He sounds as tired as I am.

My definition of home is murky since I started my routine trips between Barrie and Trenton to assist with Meghan's care, along with a host of other family and friends who have rallied to help. I squeeze in bouts of work on my manuscript whenever possible, usually late at night after Lily and Sam have been bathed or Meghan has been medicated or her house has been cleaned, desperate to catch up on my revisions for the publisher, always in secret, clacking away until two in the morning by the glow of my laptop screen and waking at six am to do it all again.

Because if Mom, Dad, or Meghan see me working this late, they will feel guilty, and I cannot handle assuaging any extra emotions.

I take a deep breath as tears threaten. “I don’t want to go in there. That house is where happiness goes to die.” What I want is to not be needed. And yet at the same time, being needed is a salve.

Packing for this trip, I realized all the coloured bristles of my toothbrush were worn down and I ran my tongue across my teeth, trying to ascertain when I last saw the dentist. Or changed the oil in my car, considering how often I’ve been making this drive. When was the last time I went to therapy, didn’t cancel to make room for Meghan’s appointments? No sense looking at the calendar. No sense at all. This seems to me the greatest injustice of dying—that the world continues to exist, to produce bills, to demand work hours, to require clean underwear and ironed shirts. The children still need to go to school and lunches need to be made and the world doesn’t stop for death, even when it feels like it should.

“I know this is hard,” Joe says.

I push back into the headrest and press my fingertips to my temples, close my eyes to the sharpness between love and hate. “I’m tired of trying to save someone from something they don’t want to change. The cancer is what it is, but she can change the rest of her situation.” As the words leave my mouth, I hear their place of privilege, of safety, of comfort in my cozy home with a loving spouse and a disposable income. Even knowing this, hearing this, doesn’t stop me from feeling the bitter tang of frustration.

“She’s never going to leave, Kelly. You know that.”

“Yeah.” I thwack my head on the headrest. “It’s like we’re living in a soap opera. Honestly. When I talk to people about what’s going on, sometimes they have to stop themselves

from laughing. It's like a badly written book." I hold fingers in the air, counting offences. "Phase one, cancer diagnosis on day of birth. Two, husband is abusive and absent all through treatment. Three, husband has mental breakdown. Four, husband threatens death and attempts assault on cops and goes to jail. I swear, if a point number five crops up in the next ten minutes, I give up." I take a deep breath, then unbuckle my seatbelt. "She's in there dying, leaving behind her children, and he gets to absolve himself because of mental illness and we pick up the pieces. Every, single time. So far, miraculously, I've managed my mental health diagnoses without being a completely shit human being."

"You want to take a little break? Go to your parents' place for a nap? I can manage things here with your sister and the kids."

"Did I mention the dying part? My sister, dying. Is that phase five or fifteen?" I find myself saying the word dying often, hoping that the more often I repeat it, the sooner the shock will dissipate. But it also lingers, making every other observation so much more pointed and painful.

"You have mentioned it once or twice."

"And if one more person tells me it can always get worse, or to be positive, I will actually kick them in the fucking face." The phrase robs the grieved and the dying of the right to be sad, to advance mourn, to mire in their devastation. If this isn't a time to be fragile and frightened, then when is?

"Seriously, Kelly," Joe says, jingling the keys in his hand. "Maybe it's time for a break. I'm worried you're going a little, I don't know, off the rails here."

I pat his forearm. "I'm fine, just needed a rant. Enough of my crap. Onwards." I plunge ahead like a general leading the charge.

We pick our way through muddy puddles on the property and stomp up the deck stairs. Sam sees me through the window and I plaster on a smile as he runs into my arms then zips towards Joe, who swings him around in circles.

“Gunco Joe! Mum!” Sam says, running back to Meghan. “Gunco Joe!”

“Yes, Mommy sees Uncle and Auntie, buddy.” Then, in a less cheerful voice, directed at Joe and I; “Hey, guys.” She waves limply and I register her slight form underneath a fluffy comforter, smack dab in the centre of the living room. It isn’t the first time I have seen her in the loaned hospital bed, the mechanical adjustments allowing her to change position as she pleases, but she looks infinitely thinner than last week, edging closer to an ending. The sight makes me take a sharp inhalation and fills me with an overwhelming desire to sob into the dishtowel.

I go over and give her a kiss and one for Lily, who smiles a gummy grin from her spot nestled at Meghan’s side. She slaps together some dinky cars until one of the tires wiggles loose and skitters across the floor. A year old already. She reaches for me and I pop her on my hip.

“How’s my Pudding?” I raspberry her belly and the baby laughs wildly, although I struggle to connect with the sound. For me, Lily embodies of all the things that are wrong in this house, which is ridiculous, I know, even as I see her nubby teeth cutting from angry red gums, the tuft of neutral-coloured hair. I breathe in the baby’s talcum scent and kiss her belly again, showing the love I struggle, inexplicably, to feel because her arrival marked the cancer—an uncommitted sin I can’t forgive. “Quite the sleeping palace you have here. Even comes with a cute sidekick.” Since my last visit, Meghan has moved some items to make the living room into a bedroom; a chest of drawers, a chair acting as a side table, a lamp with mass produced romance novels stacked next to it.

“My kingdom,” Meghan says with a smile, swooping her hand over the arrangement. The absence of Bernard is felt everywhere, although the house is no cleaner or dirtier. There are still children’s toys on every nearby surface, Cheerios stuck to everything, gummy leftovers growing mould in the sink. But the air is different, calmer despite the rising crescendo of illness. “At least with me out here in the living room, the kids have their own space.” She gestures to the two tiny bedrooms where Sam now has bunkbeds in the primary and Lily’s crib sits in the other room, pushed against the wall to make a spot for a tiny dresser and bin of toys.

“How about I take these two outside to burn off some beans?” Joe asks, taking his niece from my grip. He makes silly faces at her while Sam jumps up and down in place and chants.

“Outside! Outside! Outside!”

“Make sure you put your rainboots on,” Meghan calls to him. Sam buries his head in the closet, hunting for some wellies. This small act of parenting from a hospital bed makes me ache. “Thanks, Joe.”

Joe waves her off like it is no big deal while I settle into bed alongside my sister. The mattress is air-filled and individually coiled, like a cloud of comfort, all meant to accommodate the new tumours that jut from between Meghan’s ribs.

“So.” I take the remote from her lap and click off a cartoon character mid chatter.

“You’ve had a rough couple of days. Any word on Bernard?”

“He’s in Homewood Treatment Centre now, in Guelph. It was so scary, Kell.”

“Bet it was. Hopefully he gets the right kind of help. Homewood has a great reputation.”

“Well, he shouldn’t be there long,” Meghan says assuredly. “We think this was an allergic reaction to his bipolar medication, so that’ll get him out of legal trouble, I hope.” She nods to herself, as though she can will this hope into reality.

I grip the fluffy comforter between my fingers. Squeeze and release. Squeeze and release. “Oh?” This narrative makes me ill and I do not ask if this assumption stems from doctors. Regardless, it is the answer Meghan wants and therefore, the only one she will hear.

“Although, things are going to get worse before they get better.” She punches at the bed remote to adjust to an erect position, taking up the large bundle of chenille for her latest crochet project. Lately, she spends hours with a hook manipulating chubby acrylic yarn into throw blankets—one for each family member. *Meghan hugs*, she says, to wrap ourselves in when she is gone. We each picked our colour, but Mom couldn’t settle on one, humming and hah-ing in the Michaels’ aisle until she burst into tears. Meghan’s feverish crochet pace is a deadline set to match her personal expiry date.

“What do you mean it’s going to get worse? There cannot be some other vector of hell in which this situation gets worse.”

Meghan discards her crocheting at her feet and gets up slowly, all of her actions now like moving through molasses, and sets a cup under the Keurig machine. She drums dainty fingers on the countertop. “Bernard called Children’s Protective Services on me once he was in the hospital. Told them I was giving the kids my medicinal marijuana, so they came out here to investigate.” She registers the horror on my face and changes tact. “It’s hard to be mad at him though because he’s sick. He just wanted to get back at me for calling the cops on him.”

“You mean, for calling the cops when he was threatening to kill you.” And just like that, Point Five swooshes in the cancerous air.

She goes silent as the machine farts out the final few drops of acidic coffee. “Anyways, the social worker lady just left this morning, and they’ll have to do regular assessments. Bernard still isn’t allowed in the house with us.” She starts crying and blows her nose into a piece of



paper towel. I can't tell if the towel has been used, since there is a crushed mess of them on the sparse counter, along with a pile of dishes that could be clean, or dirty, or somewhere in between. "So, I'm dying, and I don't even get to have my husband with me." She throws the paper towel into a loose garbage bag that sits on the floor, because her garbage can is full, overflowing and unable to close. I want to pretend that this mess of her home is merely a byproduct of her cancer, but it's always been like this.

"Well, legally, he hasn't been allowed here for months. Not that that's stopped either of you." Last week, while cleaning the bathroom, I found a host of Bernard's long, curly hairs clinging to the side of the tub. *I'm here all fucking day, cleaning your house and caring for your kids—me and a whole lot of other people who are giving their time and energy, by the way—and you two can't even stop from breaking the law?* She'd scowled, body a ball of tiny fury.

"You don't get to judge me. I'm dying, Kell."

"Doesn't make what I said any less true."

Meghan folds her arms across her chest and turns her head from me but that's all she can manage. She doesn't have the energy, the ability, and I have trapped her here and feel sick for it. But I look to the patio doors, outside which the children play, and try to not hate my own self-righteousness.

"If you were me—if you were dying in a few months—wouldn't you want to spend that time with your husband? As a family?"

"Jesus, Meg, of course. It's not that I don't have compassion for how impossibly hard this must all be, but more than that, I'd want to know my kids were safe. That would be my priority."

"What are you saying?" The nerve I've struck bulges like a vein from her face, rage piqued. I take a deep, considered breath. *Yes, I have to.*

“You know what I’m saying. You pick men over your family, always. But now it’s worse, because you are actually endangering your children.” I’m crying now, so impossibly weary. I rub at my face, feel the heat rising there. “CAS doesn’t care that you are dying and want to be with your husband, sadly. They care about your children being free from abuse, now and when you’re gone.”

“It’s so black and white for you, isn’t it? The perfect daughter.” She gestures violently to me, then Joe outside with her children. “Bernard is bad so he shouldn’t be here. Bernard is hard to get along with, so we should all hate him.”

“Nope, you don’t get to make us the assholes here, sorry. You think I want Bernard out of the picture? Of course not! The kids need a father who is healthy and loving and supportive, especially when their mother is gone, and I’m not saying he’ll never get there, but he has to do the work, and you and I both know that he’s not doing it. He’s not getting the counselling or even trying to find someone to take him on, he has you do that research instead. He’s not going to AA or NA or support groups. So, you tell me what his priority is. Tell me.” She slurps sullenly on her drink. “You keep saying all the horrible things he’s done are because he was sick, but he’s been abusive and violent for years, and, I want to point out, declared stable by doctors, but you’ll look for any explanation other than the truth. And if he’s coming around here even when the law doesn’t fucking permit it, can’t he be bothered to help you while he is? Do some laundry? Clean? Or is that fun stuff just for us? The people who actually show you they love you?” I spit those last words, yelling at her vulnerability, her shame, her pain. I heave for breath, dizzy and disoriented now that everything I feel has been voiced, although where is the elusive gain? The push-pull of anxiety and anger, caregiving and care-wanting, sisterhood and feminism, aunt and daughter, has me pressed so tightly that my airwaves constrict.

We're both crying now, depleted. She comes back to join me on the bed, touching me even though she radiates animosity. It never used to be like this. We used to stay angry for days, not speaking, throwing snide glances at one another from across our childhood bedroom. I always apologized first, desperate for her good graces. But we always return to one another, and the stakes hadn't been nearly as high. We no longer have days to waste.

"Why can't you see we just want to help you?" I ask, gentler now. "To protect you and the kids?"

"And why can't you see I can protect myself?"

Meghan has told me countless lies over the years. This one, above all, feels like the largest, and yet I feel such tenderness towards her vulnerability and simultaneous strength that I'm lightheaded. Her personality—gregarious and kind, heart-on-the-sleeve-esque, and above all, full of self-loathing—has made her a walking target for abuse and oppression, and it is epitomized here, in this shitty little house. Meanwhile, I've surrounded myself with certainty to negate the possibility I would turn out like her, blows away like dust. We're all susceptible to the need to be loved.

"Meg." My voice is soft. "Unfortunately, it has to be about what's good for the kids. And clearly, things are a little too volatile when you two are together."

"He would never hurt the kids. Or me. Ever." She gazes out the window, watching as Joe bounces with Sam on the trampoline and Lily plods across the grass in a plastic space saucer. We can also see the truck Bernard wrecked while careening into the cop cars, its front end caved in like melted butter. Sam had pressed a loving hand to the metal and said Daddy's truck was sick, just like Mommy. "I haven't been able to play outside with Sam for a while. Too sick and tired. This is nice for them." She leaves a tear that has slipped down her freckled cheek, and blows her

nose into a tissue this time, tucking the used Kleenex in her sleeve. I can see the tumours jutting out from underneath her shirt like a lumpy mattress.

“Meg.” I cannot let it go. There is too much at risk. “I’m trying to not be an asshole here, and I know you don’t want to look at this part of things, but he’s been abusive and violent before. Years ago, before his breakdown, before you were married, before you moved in. And while I know he’s bipolar and struggling, there has to be some accountability here.” Like when he threw a knife across the room as Sam walked by, angry about something pointless, then yelled at Meghan for leaving the knife in such an obvious place like the wooden knife block. Or screaming at Meghan for not making lunch, at me for defending my sister, at my dad for offering financial support, at his kids for making noise, at Mary for daring to put chocolate chips in his oatmeal cookies instead of raisins. Where is the sense of regret, other than lodged deeply in my own chest?

Meghan chews at a fingernail, still watching her children in the yard. Accountability has never been her strong suit. “He’s being charged with a bunch of stuff, so he’ll have to go to court at some point,” she says, as though this is the accountability I speak of. “At the very least, evading police and dangerous use of a vehicle, maybe attempted assault. And get this; Mary thinks that if we all get together daily and take Bernard for lunch so he has someone to talk to, then he’ll feel better.”

“He tried to run over some cops, threatened to kill his wife, and she thinks he needs to be taken out to lunch? Who’s the one out to fucking lunch?” We both smirk a bit at this. And right then, precisely then and a million times in between, I’m overwhelmed with how much I will miss her.

“It’s just as well,” Meghan says sarcastically. “I’ve been doing all this without him anyways, for months.” She does not define *this*. It is her thinning hair, her hospital bed, the overflowing garbage, the children on the trampoline.

“If it’s been so bad, why not get him into some more medical care? Like another hospital stay to get more treatment?”

Meghan scoffs, frustrated with the stupid question. “He said he’d leave me if I committed him.” She says this as though it is all the answer anyone should ever need because for her, the most terrifying of threats is not death, not pain, not abuse. Divorce.

She lays next to me now with her eyelids closed to the sunlight, and I search her face, wondering how far to push and what I hope to achieve. From outside, Lily’s delighted scream reaches us, and I look out to see my niece rolling on a blanket with her brother, their bodies a ball of chubby limbs while Joe tickles them. “I hate to say it, but you’re as complicit in abusing the children as you are perpetuating it, Meg.” As kids, Meghan was defiant whenever one of her friends protested me, three years younger, joining their play. *She stays or I go*, Meghan would say, hands on hips. The other girls always backed down to her certainty. How did our roles reverse so dramatically?

“How dare you.” Her voice is angry but also, hesitant, like she’s uncertain of where to direct that hate. Our bodies are still nestled against one another, heat radiating from the tumour, making me sweaty. She does not shift away.

“It’s the truth, Meg, and you know it.”

“I’m not going to die divorced.”

And there it is.

I open my mouth and close it again, so impossibly tired. The absurdity of the past few months, the last year, reel into place like a film. Black and white, because I don't want to see the colour of the bruises, the depth of the actress' pain. It will be a long movie, tortuous, some indie flick that will show the complexity of humanity within the realm of abuse and addiction and bereavement. It will be a complicated thing, with no tidy route through grief, no prescribed method.

I've been endlessly consuming narratives about domestic abuse, addiction, bipolar disorder, grief, trying to make sense of all of this. For a long time, I've thought my sister stupid for staying—she has options; a supportive family, people willing to help financially and emotionally, opportunities so many are denied in the same abusive patterns. But the set of blinders Meghan sports seems to be the only method she has found to wake each morning and continue on. My heart knows I owe her my silence, and yet Sam and Lily's voices echo like banshees.

"I'm scared," she says, leaning into my shoulder. "I don't want to die. I don't want to leave them." I can feel her desperation for this conversation to end, for resolution that will not give way. Her tiny hands clench at my thigh, tensing as my flesh dimples in her nervy grip. She may be playing me, using her understandable fear to silence me. She has done it many times before.

I tug a blanket around her arms and place her coffee on the table nearby before she falls asleep and spills the drink in her bed. As her morphine doses increase, it's already happened three other times and I spend the afternoon dabbing Polysporin on tender, blistered skin.

"I know you are. I'm here. I'm always going to be here."

She falls asleep before the tears take over, both of us aware that my presence, while welcomed, is never going to be enough.

July, 2018

We steer the Volkswagen up to Meghan's home and park near the workshop, children's shrieks piercing the air, cars scattered about like confetti. Fifteen kids run around screaming, dashing through sprinklers and the gigantic bounce house waterslide combo that dominates the yard. The whirl of the air generator is a perpetual hum I feel in my chest before I even open the door.

"We're late," I say to Joe, putting the car in park. I'm never late for anything, but I'd been stumped, standing sweat-sheened in Party City, trying to pick between birthday candle-shaped balloons, animals, or numbers, panic filling my chest as the employee blasted gas with a squeal. As soon as I emerge from the car, a wall of humidity hits, making the helium selection droop. "Kid birthday parties are literally my idea of hell." I manhandle the mylar pig that has extricated itself from the ties.

"She did say you didn't have to come."

Meghan gave me permission to bow out of Sam's fourth birthday party. *I know it isn't your thing*, she'd said with a smirk as I stabbed a needle of morphine into her thigh. I don't say that I'm coming for her—not my nephew who will likely forget today ever happened—but we feel that sentiment linger in the air between us, heavy with purpose.

The partygoing adults are lined up in patio chairs like viewers at a UFC match, as their children hurl themselves down the air-filled slide and land in the pool of water below, and send shoots of water into the air. Muddy puddles slop at their feet while the kids disentangle themselves from the knot of limbs before racing back up the stairs for another go. There are



some streamers looped loosely onto trees, latex balloons laced to the mailbox, the scent of seared hot dogs in the air.

I cast my eyes about for Bernard—who is meant to be chaperoned by his mother—but can't find his head of dark curls anywhere. Meghan, however, is easy to spot in her chair central to the action. She's wearing a loose tunic I gifted back when she was pregnant, something to cover the jut of tumours, and sports a morphine pump like a belt around her hips. Her slightness means she could easily be mistaken for one of the kids. Sam stands at the top of the bounce house and waves at her. He shimmies on his bum, bouncing down the slide, and runs to give Meghan a sopping hug, leaving a boy-shaped print on her front.

“How's my birthday Piggie?” I call out.

“Auntie!” Sam runs to throw his arms around my legs. He smells of dirt and citrus. I have never smelled something so perfect.

“For me! Birthday!” he cries, reaching for the burl of strings in my hand.

“A pig for my Piggie.” I grasp the foil animal by its body and make oinking sounds, ruffling its muzzle into Sam's armpit. He gives it a gentle kiss before tearing back to his crew of friends.

“Kell, hey.” Meghan beckons with a weak arm raised to my shoulder, drawing me in. “I want to open gifts and cut cake, like, now. Right now. I have to go inside. Agony.” Her words come out staccato with gasps for breath.

“I am your official party wrangler, on duty.” I give a mock salute. “We'll get you inside in fifteen, okay? Where's Bernard?”

“Around. Somewhere,” she says, her voice desperate and raspy. “Just want it over. Please. The kids can still play, I just. Everyone is looking and I don’t care about taking to anyone. Just want Sam to have fun.”

“Who are these people anyways?” I don’t recognize almost any of the faces. Some parents from Sam’s daycare, Michelle from the hospital and her children. But otherwise, this is Meghan’s mothering world, the world I’ve been so distanced from. She shrugs as if to say, *who cares?* before the pain erases emotion from her face.

I slip back into the role of military logistics officer like fleecy pjs and begin to give loving orders to those standing nearby. One of Meghan’s friends is sent for the plates, napkins and utensils, another to start corralling the children from the bounce house. Towels appear, little ones are buffed dry, and Mary reveals the boxed Costco sheet cake Joe brought. Upon bearing it to the sun, the icing instantly starts to melt, slopping sideways drunkenly.

“Can you find where in the fuck Bernard is during his son’s goddamned birthday party?” I say to Joe quietly, my face smiling but my jaw clenched. “Meghan needs to wrap this thing up.”

“I was wondering where in the hell he went,” Joe says, sending a spray of chip crumbs onto my shirt. He brushes them off with a palm and kisses my cheek. “I’ll find him.”

As if summoned, Bernard emerges from behind his workshop, an armful of barbecue tools in hand, even though the grill is on the other side of the lawn. His face, as usual, is somber and his thick hair falls loose around his face. He moves through the throng as though a ghost, speaking to no one, not daring to smile, eyes fixed somewhere in the distance. He settles in front of the cake, poised with a knife about to slice through the middle.

“We haven’t sung Happy Birthday yet,” I say, my voice sharp with bite. The candles still sit atop the buttercream, slanting sideways as they follow the melting pool of icing.

He says nothing but blinks back at me lazily, reeking of marijuana. I edge Bernard out of the way and light the wax number four, which casts a wobbling shade onto the car-themed cake, then carry it over to where Meghan sits with Sam in her arms. The echo of “Happy Birthday” rings out as Sam blows out his candles, sinking back into his mother’s arms when finished.

I mindlessly cut into the dessert, handing out hefty slices while Sam tears into packages like a dervish. By the time he finishes unwrapping the tower of gifts, a litter of paper and ribbon is strewn across the lawn, with chunks of glitter wrap dissolving to mush in the splash pool. Sam and his friends return to play in the water, cries muffled by mouths stuffed with cake, and I heave a sign of accomplishment while wiping sweat from my upper lip.

Joe wraps an arm around my waist. “Well, that was a wild fifteen minutes. He looks happy.” A smear of blue icing streaks Joe’s cheek, making him appear boyish and playful.

“He does, doesn’t he?” Sam will need the memory of this day to trail like a lingering scent, something to get him through inevitable nightmares and longing. I stoop to adjust the buckle on my sandal to keep my emotions in check.

“Sorry you can’t have any cake. Don’t think it’s gluten-free.” He takes a big bite, bares blue teeth in a wide grin.

“I’m too busy snacking on all the tension around here.”

“It’s definitely a little thick. Bernard seems checked out.”

“I just want him to make an effort.” Sam waves to me from his bouncy tower and I make a silly face, watch as he careers into the brown water below. “Like, spend time with Meghan, help out, play with the kids. I know he’s going through some stuff, but he seems plenty able to

go to work and be kind and productive there. Can't seem to manage it at home though." Meghan flaps her arms across the yard, waving me over to where she sits with Lily in an exercise saucer. "I'll be back. My mistress bids me." Joe gives my bum a pinch as I approach Meghan, who looks sunken in, like her body is retreating involuntarily from the day.

"Inside, please." She takes my elbow but stumbles and her best friend, Lucy, rushes to the other side. Meghan says nothing as we walk towards the house, offering no explanation to the rest of the guests, although everyone seems entranced by the bouncy castle, the screaming kids, food—and we slip through the patio doors and shut out the sound. We ease her into bed and I bring the sheets to her chin while Lucy makes tea. It feels like we are constantly, endlessly making tea, no matter the temperature. Empty comfort in chipped mugs.

"Oh my God. I was dying out there." Meghan clutches at her stomach and leans her head back into the pillow. One spindly leg hangs off the side of the bed, her neck craned to the side, like she crawled into bed but only made it halfway.

"Literally." I wink at her and she grins back. "But seriously, I don't know how you lasted that long. It's hotter than the hubs of hell and I'm like a boob sweat factory. Can we get you anything?" Lucy brings a glass of water to the side table then returns to cleaning.

"No, I'm good." Meghan's face creases with a tide of pain but it's quickly replaced with a smile. "Sam had a good day, didn't he?"

"Are you kidding? He's in Shangri-la out there. It's like toy mountain, although who the hell knows where you'll put it all in this house."

"My baby is four."

The morphine pump grinds another shot of pain control through her bloodstream and her pupils widen, hand hangs slack. And then she is asleep. I sit and stroke her fingertips with my

own, the clamminess of humidity sticking us together. I turn up the air conditioner, adjust the blankets again, willing them to smoothness that can't be actualized.

In the kitchen, Lucy scrubs at the countertops with a J-cloth, her breath huffing a tune. "She's been waiting for this," she says. Her bottom lip wobbles, knuckles white on the sponge. "Holding on for today."

I nod, watch though the window as Bernard disappears into his shop amongst his tools, his vehicles, his forgotten welding projects, likely craving the silence we all hunger for. I want to tell him he won't find it there, that there is no silence to be had at a child's birthday party or in a home hosting the dead. The crowd seems oblivious to Meghan's absence, and yet how many lives will be shattered by this one, vital death?

Meghan begins to snore. This will be the last family event that will include her, the last of the children's birthday parties in which Mom, Dad and I will get an invite. I cannot stand the fact, so I plunge my wrist into the soapy dishwater and scrub until every dish is clean, every surface sparkles, and every memory is protected through her hopeful lens.

July, 2018

Meghan's laboured sighs echo in the living room where Mom, Meg and I lay but only Meghan sleeps. There are no curtains, so moonlight filters in and lights Mom's position on the lounge of the sectional couch. My feet dangle near her face where the L-shape connects.

For the last two weeks, raising kids combined with Meghan's increased need for care became rapidly unmanageable, so the children moved in with Mary. A temporary fix, we told Meghan. Just for now. Neither of Mom nor I had wanted to sleep in the empty children's bedrooms, further away from our charge.

"I'm so drained that I feel like I should just be slipping into a coma as soon as my eyes close. But then I close them, and my brain just keeps whirring away," I say. I reach for a sip of water from the coffee table, knocking over pamphlets for the funeral home. We've been calling it a funeral but in fact, Meghan doesn't want one. Just cremation and a plain box, her ashes divided; one lot to Mom, Dad and I, and the other to Bernard, spending her death as she spent her life. She stoically checked off the boxes on the ordering form. Viewing? No. Embalming? No. The bare bones of service. Still, the three-thousand-dollar price tag concerned her, although she'd stashed money in a separate account that only I knew about. She asked me to pay in advance. The fact that my sister had to stockpile funeral money so Bernard wouldn't spend it is knowledge that I push to the far recesses of my brain.

Bernard was supposed to be here today, supporting Meghan during the funeral planning process. His mother promised to deliver him and be the supervisory adult that CAS required.

Instead, he called an hour prior to the appointment, angry the moment Meghan pressed the green answer button.

*I'm too tired.*

*You're tired? I'm the one dying here.* She'd turned away from me, unable to go anywhere for privacy, and me in the middle of making lunch. She cupped a hand around the phone's microphone but I heard every word. *I thought you'd be able to put your own shit aside and support me today,* Meghan said sternly into the phone. He screamed more profanity down the line until she hung up and cried.

"We can't keep doing this." I say to Mom without whispering. Meghan will not wake. Mom doesn't answer, worries the corner of her blanket. "We're exhausted," I say, my voice gentle, urging. "This is the third night like this, Ma."

The alarm on my phone does a digital countdown on my screen and I watch it in silence. Two minutes. Twenty seconds. I click it off before it alerts and approach Meghan, her chin on her chest from her semi-seated position in bed. It's easier this way, with her upper body elevated, to manage her constant, raging nausea. I press the bolus button on her morphine pump and listen to the mechanical churning of the medicine entering her bloodstream, then breathe a sigh of relief along with my sleeping sister.

Meghan's pain has become unmanageable, even by the constant stream of medicated infusions through the port site on her thigh. A nurse comes daily—originally to help fill syringes with medication, before Meghan's loss of fatty tissue made needles impossible—to check the site for infection and occasionally move it to a different part of her body, and now, to also change the fentanyl patch glued to her shoulder in concert with the morphine. The nurse instructed Meghan on the programmable device—three times an hour she can elect for a bolus, an extra shot of

morphine for moments of intense pain. Now, Mom and I have spent the last three nights sleeping on Meghan's shitty couch, setting an alarm for every twenty minutes to press the bolus ourselves so that Meghan can somehow, miraculously, sleep through the night before she wakes writhing and crying in a way that I feel in my marrow.

"She needs hospice, Mom." I've been approaching the subject for two weeks as Meghan loses more hair, more weight, more colour, more options. I hate being this voice of cold, tempered reason but I cling to that reason because the minutia of small decisions is a distraction that helps me function. Because if I pause, even for a moment, to think of the calamity, of what it must be to watch your child die, what it is to witness anyone you love suffer, then I am rendered hysterical. So I try to do small acts of care for Mom and Dad in between the larger acts for Meghan because these chores are the only way I know how to keep from breaking, to remind them of love they made.

"I wanted to keep her here, in her house, as long as we could." Mom's voice cracks in the night and I do not need to see her to know she is crying. The house should have been razed. A shitty layout, poor design, too small for a family of four. But the home embodied all Meghan ever wanted, even if it was crumbling in on itself. For me, the house was haunted with hate.

"And we did. We did that." I swallow over and over. Meghan groans in her sleep and our ears prick for her potential needs. But she settles back into the pillow, her thinning brown pixie cut like a tuft of alfalfa. "But it's time."

"Time for what?" Meghan says with perfect clarity, suddenly awake. She swings her legs from bed with shocking agility and stalks towards the bathroom. Sometimes, it's possible to believe she might be well again, when she pops up and clomps across the floor with all the noisy authority with which she's always operated—wildly loud for someone so small. And then I hear



her drop to her knees and retch, funnels of her vomit splashing against the toilet water. We do not ask if she wants company, someone to put a cold cloth to her neck, if she is okay—she will only wave us away. Double-layered plastic bags hang everywhere in the house as the tumours leave no room for nutrition. We're all well-versed in dumping runny bags of her barf down the toilet, holding the plastic by pointer finger and thumb before shoving them in the trash.

Minutes pass and Meghan continues to throw up so violently that Mom can do nothing but shake her head over and over, dabbing her pajama sleeve at her damp cheeks.

“It should be illegal, someone suffering like this,” she whispers to no one.

I pass my mother a tissue and she blows her nose to try to drown out the sound her daughter makes while dying.

In the administrative office of Matthew's House Hospice, I blow my nose for the fourth time, making a soggy pile of tissues that I force into my already full pockets. Mom, Dad and I had picked Meghan up at home and carried her belongings to the car while I cleaned out the fridge with Lucy, preparing the house for months, potentially, without a family within its walls. Before she left, Meghan wandered the small rooms, caressed the light switches, abandoned the clothing she wouldn't wear again, neatly folded the children's blankets on their empty beds. *Bye*, Meghan whispered to her house as she flicked off the lightswitch, sobbing all the way to the car, where I eased her in the front seat amongst pillows and blankets. I followed in my Volkswagen and cried until my ribs hurt, breaking open, spilling and emptying and crackling through my skin. What is it like to drive your daughter to the place she will die? And what is it like to drive past shops

where you bought diapers, farms where you let your son pick berries, and know you'd never see those things again?

“So, you're the power of attorney then?” The nurse asks while reading the form for what feels like the third time. It is standard POA paperwork issued by the Ontario government. As clear as can be. One of those handy tear sheets marking where the page can be tugged free and easily photocopied, snagged from the Canada Post offices, just like a passport application. Except passports take people places—to adventure, to experiences, to culture—and Meghan's paperwork gives her a one-way ticket to hospice.

I nod and blow my nose again.

“But she's married. Your sister.” The nurse's eyebrows point downwards, meeting in the middle of her wide forehead. I don't know what business this is of hers.

“He's an abusive asshole so she picked me instead.” I leave it there, this pregnant statement sitting in the dimly lit space between us. I've started to make this proclamation—that my sister is abused—with wild abandon, liking the way the words roll around my mouth after years of stifling them. Why hide it now? But being forced to say it, to answer for her choices, makes me hate this nurse. Hate her rubbery clogs and her wrinkled scrubs and her jubilant pen clicking. Hate her pointless questions, already answered by legal forms, and her seeping, persistent judgment.

“Is he out of the picture then? The husband?” The nurse's hand sits on her hip as the photocopier spits out a reproduction of Meghan's POA and executor forms. All the hard choices will be me, Bernard absolved.

“No. They're still together.”

“And legally? Is he allowed to visit? I’d remind you to think of what your sister wants here.”

Fuck. Right. Off. It seems that as a family, we’ve spent a lifetime trying to figure out what Meghan wants and how to give it to her, even when she’s unsure herself, and what does this nurse think I’ve done for the last eighteen months, other than perform emotional cartwheels at Meghan’s request?

The room is too hot, the air conditioning humming on overdrive in the July heatwave. I drum my pen on the table to some unheard beat, trying to tamp down the desire to answer in the negative. *No. He can’t visit.* I love the idea, feel giddy. And who would know? I could spare Meghan further abuse. Could prevent my parents from having to see his face appear at the door, should he bother to approach it.

“Yes, he’s allowed to visit.”

The nurse nods and hands me the admitting forms, writing Meghan’s name on the white board above the nursing station. Patient Name: Meghan Montaigne. Date Admitted: July 8, 2018. Diagnosis: Metastatic Leiomyosarcoma. Age: 37. The board is smeared with black and red, identities added and erased with the swipe of a felted brush.

“She’s not thirty-seven for another two weeks,” I say, my eyes fixed on the chart. “She wouldn’t like that.” The sobs rise up from my feet then, swelling like a tide and I have to lean forward, head between my knees. I want to tell the nurse our stories so that she understands, how my gestational due date was Meghan’s birthday, but she had chemo the week I was due, so Mom was induced early but still, my sister considered me the best of birthday presents. I turned thirty-four three days ago, and Meghan and I have always enjoyed this short span of time where we are only two years apart instead of the usual three. For some reason I feel like this stranger must

know these tiny details of our lives, because then she would understand the history behind this single truth. But now, Meghan is in her room, settling into the place she has come to die and how on earth can I make this okay when next year, I will turn thirty-five without a sister to turn thirty-eight?

The nurse sighs as though I've caused her some great, pointless hardship. She wipes the seven from the board, replaces it with a six. I leave my scribbled signature on the page to admit my sister and leave.

July, 2018

*Never leave me alone.* That's all Meghan has asked of us, and so we rotate our care to ensure a constant stream of company. Overnight, Mom, Dad, and I take turns, often with Dad or me staying with Mom, since she can barely manage walking the long hall as her MS progresses. Bernard comes on Friday evenings and leaves early Saturday morning, despite working just a four-day work schedule and his boss's offer of paid compassionate leave. Last week, although he's avoiding speaking to me for reasons I don't understand, he lamented that Meghan was barely conscious most of the time so, *What's the point in visiting?* he asked, like he genuinely wanted to know.

"Hi there, Kelly." Shirley, the elderly volunteer who seems to spend more hours at the hospice than home, greets me with a warm hug and I shuffle my bag onto my other shoulder. She operates the front desk login sheet, sitting in the sunny lobby with a haze of the garden swirling behind the glass. "You on the late shift today?"

"Nurse Kelly reporting for duty. Hey, I've been meaning to ask if your son get that job he was after."

"He did! You're so kind to remember."

"Good for him. You must be proud."

"Don't tell him, but I'm proud even if he just draws breath."

"That's the life of motherhood, I hear. Just wanted to mention that Meghan has asked for no other visitors. Just me, my parents, and her husband are allowed in."

Shirley nods. “I’ll note that and ensure no one else is permitted. Taken a turn, then?”

Shirley tilts her head, keeps holding my hand with her own knotted joints radiating heat. With another acquaintance, this prolonged touch might be odd, but in her sweater set and chunky costume jewellery, Shirley is someone I want to melt into.

“Not particularly. She’s just tired, and people stay longer than she wants them to and don’t really get the hint. And I think she’s embarrassed about getting so thin. Feels ugly. That, and people visiting who she doesn’t give a shit about, really.”

Shirley raises an eyebrow, nudges me with her elbow. “It’s like that, isn’t it? People like to attach themselves to grief. Suddenly the person dying is their ‘best friend,’ and they have all these ‘memories’ they have to share. Gimme a break.” Her fingers are arthritically knobbed into air quote marks.

“You’re a hoot, Shirley.”

She taps her forehead with a coral-painted fingertip. “That’s experience talking.”

She’s not wrong. Social media has surged a throng of Meghan’s apparent friends, most of whom she hasn’t seen in years. They arrive with gifts—flowers that go crisp with lack of watering, photos she asks me to throw away afterwards—then stand at the end of her bed, afraid to touch her, stumbling through goodbyes even though she still lives.

At first, Meghan welcomed the visitors, asked me to set up a rota so she didn’t get overwhelmed, and politely engaged with everyone who entered her room. *I didn’t know I meant so much to so many people*, she said. But the constant goodbyes grown tiring, and eventually, she started to wonder aloud where all these people had been over the years when she’s been well. Worst of all is that these acquaintances seem to crave something from Meghan that she can’t give, laying their grief on her chest instead of offering to take some of her load. *What do they*

*want from me?* Meghan asks when these virtual strangers leave, and then she sinks back into her pillow for sleep.

Personally, I'm grateful for the flurry of gawkers to have dissipated, because I am jealous of and hungry for all of her time. But also, when these guests leave, I want to quiz them in the hallway, discover what parts of Meghan they know but have been held back from me. What stories do they share that I haven't been part of? How can I muscle into every element like a prize fighter, because I want to know her best, and these different storied versions of my sister make me question that knowing. But then, in her life of lies, in all of our lives, really, we glimpse the parts of we expose, and I want to meld these collected stories into the ultimate book of Meghan.

"I should get to her now."

"Yes, you go. I'll bring you a mint tea." Shirley pats my arm and gives a gentle push towards the long hallway of Matthew's House.

I sweep into the room like I'm doing a waltz. "I come with the fruitful offerings of my labour, milady."

Meghan's eyes flicker open and she rolls her pupils to the sky, but still, a smile. "You don't need to keep buying me stuff. But keep doing it."

"You said you wanted something different to drink." I count the criteria on pointed fingers. "Not too sweet. Nothing acidic. Not dairy-based. No fizz. You complicated cow."

"What did you find?" She holds her hands together like an anticipatory prayer.

I dramatically reveal a jug of watermelon juice, give it a shake as the pink liquid slops back and forth in the plastic. "Ta da."

“I knew you were the one up to the task. Load me up.” She gestures to a stack of waxed mini cups, the kind our grandparents used to keep a dispenser for in their bathroom, and Meghan and I would fight over who tugged the next cup from its plastic prison tower. I fill one halfway and she takes a grateful sip and smacks her lips.

“Oh, I needed that.”

“You’ll revisit it later when you barf it up, I’m sure.”

“It’ll be tasty twice.”

I slurp direct from the container. “I’m going to be addicted to this.”

“Quit slobbering on my juice. You could have cooties.”

“What’s the worst that could happen?” I waggle the jug back and forth. “It’ll kill you?”

“I love the shit out of you.”

“A mutual feeling.” We cheers my container to her baby cup. “Sorry I’m late. Was just catching up on some work.”

“That’s okay. I think I slept, but nights are the worst.” She looks around, like she’s waiting for the Boogeyman to spring from the ensuite.

I start changing into my pajamas, slip my feet into what I’ve come to call my hospice slippers. “Well, if it helps, nights are when I get all my good worrying done. Sister is as sister does.”

Meghan yawns wide, revealing teeth stained from childhood chemo. She had braces for years, and we’d always giggled that without dental coverage, we’d still be virgins, our teeth so wonky and misbehaved. After losing her retainers, her teeth shifted back, determined to return to their state of unruliness, yet there’s something charming about the change, about her determination of self. “Not sure I’ll be able to stay awake to chat much.”



“And here I was, all ready for a party.”

“Ha, ha. Will you sleep with me?” She pats the quilt that lays across her skinny legs.

“Will you snore?”

“Probably.”

I sink in next to her and put my arm around her shoulders. Meghan falls asleep instantly, her body curling around mine like a cat.

Hours or minutes? I can never tell how long I’ve been sleeping, always fitful, always halfway between sleeping and waking. But I feel her alertness more than I feel my own. Her body is tense. “You okay, Meg?”

She’s worrying the edge of the quilt, biting at her bottom lip over and over. I feel her chest quivering, tears dampening my nightshirt. “Yeah, just anxious I guess.”

“Want me to turn on the TV? Play a game?”

“I need a distraction. How about a midnight snack?” I hear the smile in her voice.

“You’re a masochist. You’ll barf it up.”

“Hey, the body wants what it wants.”

“Your body is an asshole. What do you want me to get you?”

“Let’s go together, to the kitchen,” she whispers. She slowly pulls away the blankets, slings her morphine pump over her shoulder like a purse. “Midnight snack.” She pretends to crouch, leaning forward on her tiptoes like a stalking thief.

“You’re operating like it’s a midnight sneak, not snack. You’re not a prisoner,” I say laughing. “You’re allowed to leave your room.”

She wobbles, catches herself on the bedframe. “I’ll need help.” She’s standing now, her nightie swinging around her knees. “I think I’m too weak.”

“You just want my complicity in your shenanigans.”

“What else are sisters for other than to be partners in crime?” I hook my right arm around her waist while my left holds her hand, and we emerge into the brightly lit hallway. Meghan is only one of three residents currently in the hospice built for ten, making the silence feel as though everyone is resting peacefully, not on a route to death.

“Ssh,” Meghan says, holding a finger to her lips. “Don’t let Mom and Dad see us.” She points to the nurses station in the middle of the hallway, where silhouettes of the carers are outlined through the translucent glass partitions.

“If they hear us, they might want to partake in our spoils.”

We take tiny, coordinated steps, pretend they are sneaky and subversive instead of shuffling and sad. In the kitchen, I help Meghan onto a stool and fling open the doors of the industrial fridge.

“What tickles your fancy? Sweet or savoury?”

“Sweet. Definitely sweet.”

“There’s ice cream. Three flavours.”

“Dairy and I aren’t really good friends right now.”

“Sorbet?”

She nods to this, and I set to finding bowls, spoons, and scoop the neon-coloured dessert from the tub. I’m not hungry. Hate eating at night. But Meghan takes a heaping spoonful to her mouth, closes her eyes to the pleasure, and grins at me in this shared, pointless secret. I love her more than I have ever loved anything, and I eat the sorbet until the bowl is licked clean.

“I wish to be returned to my bedchambers.” She holds an arm out dramatically, sweeping it like a baroness.

“Cancer has made your quite the demanding little bitch.”

We snicker the entire way back to the room, once again, pointlessly sneaking past the nursing station until we are tucked back in bed.

“I should have seen this coming,” I say, once I’ve retrieved blankets from the warmer. “The evolution of your bossiness.”

“It’s the only reason I had children. People made to listen to me.”

“I’m just biding my time until you’re gone so I finally get to be Ariel in the Thompson Disney re-enactment. No more sidekick for this girl.” As kids, Meghan and I used to plod through Ontario lakes on family camping trips or visits to the pool, me in my designated role as villain, Meghan, as oldest, choosing the title princess character for play. Water demanded *Little Mermaid* scenes, and I would loop after my sister in my best octopus-monster impression, flopping and splashing dramatically, while Meghan swam through the water with her ankles clamped together and feet curled to a point. She has tiny, perfect feet that I’ve always wanted instead of the size eights with warped toes that are attached to my ankles. It feels silly now, to be jealous of feet.

“Oh, come on,” Meghan says, laughing. The sound is a balm. “I was the best mermaid. Younger sisters are supposed to come second.”

“Who’s gonna be Ursula now, bitch? There’s a new Ariel in town.” I toss a pretend mane of red hair over my shoulder while Meghan clutches her belly in gobs of laughter.

“I’m not even Ursula,” she says, gasping for air. “I’m so weird looking now that I’m like her freaky sea creatures, the ones that can’t hold their promises to the sea wTich, so she turns them into those creepy crawlies that suck at people’s arms as they pass.” She cranks her hands

into claws and paws at my shirt, bulging her eyes like the critters from our favourite childhood movie. I want to laugh and cry all at once.

“And yet, how are you still so beautiful?” My voice is tender and breaking. I have always been sparse with compliments for her, despite priding myself on giving kudos to strangers. *You have such nice teeth. Great hair! Love those shoes!* But with Meghan, there is so much underlying frustration and anger that my feelings are convoluted, a buttress of protecting labyrinths. And really, there is nothing particularly beautiful about Meghan walking death’s tightrope. There is no dewy pregnancy glow or soft, delicate skin. No gentle curves of flesh. But still, I mean every word, and she needs to hear it.

“Beautiful my ass.” Her voice is questioning, needing confirmation. A few nights ago, the hospice caretaker came by to install her bathroom mirror, working while she slept. She’d be pleased, he thought, to have it replaced. Instead, after not seeing her own reflection for weeks, she’d wandered into the bathroom and been so hysterical over her corpse-like reflection that the doctor had to sedate her.

“I mean it.” The words choke out and I squeeze my eyes shut to keep from crying.

“You’re the best sister, Kelly. My best friend.”

“Ditto.” I can’t take it. We sit in silence as her digital pump delivers a gush of opiate.

“I’m so grateful. You know that, right? Thanks for looking after me.” Her tears fall in earnest now, but I pretend not to notice. We will both be undone if I do.

“What are sisters for if not to, literally, wipe your ass?”

“Parents. Parents wipe asses.” Meghan holds her palm in the air, hallucinogen taking over, miming the action like she is changing a diaper mid-air, imaginary wipe at the ready.

“Ah, well there goes the plan of dodging the mom bullet, eh?”

“I knew I’d suck you in somehow. Welcome to the mommy club.” She smiles weakly and I want to take a photo, capture her like a firefly in a jar. Instead, I watch as her pulse beats in her neck, temporarily calmed. She is still alive, still here. This is living proof.

The air conditioning kicks in again, a constant, perpetual hum. It leaves the space feeling soggy with condensation—the blankets, the pyjamas in the drawer, the slippers I leave neatly in the corner for my impending return. I imagine the illness devouring her from the inside, big spoonfuls of sister on a silver platter.

She squeezes my hand as tightly as she can. The pulse of her flesh against mine barely registers.

“Ideally,” I say, coughing away the tightness in my throat, “you’d stop this whole dying business so I can really show off my Florence Nightingale skills and nurse you back to health.”

“That’s me, always messing with your plans.”

“The nature of having a big sister,” I say with a smile. I’m painfully uncomfortable, edged in like a sardine against the hospital bed rails and my sister’s tiny body. It’s always been like this, really, me pressed against Meghan’s choices, forced into acceptance or silence.

Across the room, I see that someone has turned away the photo of Sam and Lily so that their lively faces peer towards the exit. Next to that, a photo of her and I at my wedding, matching smiles and matching eyes. No photo of Bernard. An overwhelming sweep of fear takes over, panic over all the things I haven’t said and won’t say, and all the moments Meghan will miss and all the horrible moments she’s subjected us to.

And then the words come and I cannot stop them. “Meg, why didn’t you ever leave?” My voice is soft, devoid of judgment. This may make her angry, and perhaps I should shut my mouth because it doesn’t matter but if I don’t ask now there will be this truth about my sister that I can

never know. And the kids. What about the kids? I can't bear it. We've had this argument so many times, but I'd never asked right out, always silenced by her flared anger. But it wasn't the dying that she was mad about: It was the shitty marriage, the arena of life in which she so badly wanted to succeed.

When I turn over to Meghan in the hospice bed, she is asleep, eyebrows knitted into medication-infused dream. I let her rest, my unanswerable question dissipating into the air-conditioned void. I stare up at the dropped ceiling, count the tiny perforations until she snaps back to life, the medication having settled in her bloodstream. Within minutes, her eyes are wide and creepily alert. The moment is gone, which may have been her intention, or maybe it was mine.

The next day, Dad on shift, she calls to tell me she can no longer walk. There will be no more late-night snacks shared in the hospice kitchen.

July 2018

Meghan was insistent the last few days and again this morning. No cards. No presents. No birthday celebration of any kind. Who wants to celebrate another year passed when there will never be another? Still, Mom, Dad, and I gather to celebrate-not-celebrate her, even though we normally share rotating shifts of Meghan duty.

“You guys going to just sit and stare at me all day?” Meghan asks with a smirk. “I’m not going anywhere. Still here, dying.” She shakes jazz hands. Her nightie is loose, hanging like slack skin, the bright pop of pink a nice change from the sea-blue bedroom. There’s a chalkboard serving as a type of headboard, and family is encouraged to write loving missives in multicoloured chalk, but its presence behind her where she cannot see, is offensive to me.

“You might be the sassiest dying person alive,” I say, flopping into the corduroy recliner by her bed.

Dad is pacing by the window, checking and rechecking the weather app on his phone. What difference does it make when we spend every day inside? Mom sits on the daybed, her cane resting across her knee. It feels we’ll never leave, that we’ve always been here.

“Will you two ever stop?” Mom says, smiling despite herself.

“Us? Nope. Death jokes to the bitter end,” Meghan answers, thrusting a loose fist in the air.

“Our parents are boring, Meg.”

“Spoilsports.”

I dramatically mouth the words, *Don't leave me alone with them*. Her smirk of complicity washes over me like warm bathwater.

“Hello? Hello in there, birthday girl!” A voice calls from the hallway and we sit alert in our seats. Sam and Lily toddle in with Mary, who didn't get the family memo that this birthday is not to be acknowledged. She and the kids launch into a round of birthday wishes, Bernard noticeably absent as one of the nurses peeks into the room with a Dairy Queen log cake in hand, the start of “Happy Birthday” echoing until the children catch on. Mom, Dad, and I sing obligingly and smile while feeling none of the emotions, watch as Meghan blows out the lone candle, my nephew clamouring up her hospital bed to help with a slobbery puff of air. The nurse slices the dessert and we slurp at melting ice cream cake, unsure of what to say.

“Lily, come see Mommy,” Meghan coos to Lily, who we now see has started walking. The baby shakes her head and turns to wander the halls, independent, unable to be told what to do, and after two months apart, her attachment to her mother is uncertain. I cannot bear to look at how this makes my sister feel, so I stare at the lifeless painting on the wall, some landscape thing, and dream of being in that grassy hedge, swallowed by green and air.

Later, melted dairy coagulates on paper plates while the kids play in the grassy courtyard and Mom and Dad attempt conversation with Mary. In the garden, boxwoods form a delicate diamond pattern criss-crossed with paving stones, capped by a cedar gazebo that smells like lazy summer docks heated by the sun. Despite the heat wave, Meghan is draped in blankets on the outside bench we've managed set her on, eyes barely half open as I chase Sam through the sunlight of the hospice garden. Sam dekes to the left and as I run towards him. My nephew laughs, wild and unknowing. He halts in his tracks and turns to me.



“Auntie, my truck has cancer like Mommy.” He holds a dinky car up as evidence, appearing stoic by this uncomprehensive diagnosis. He looks up at me, his blonde towhead so like my own, the smile that is all his mom. I scoop him into my arms and hold him upside down, marvel at his face that is a perfect reflection of my sister when she was four, the same age he is now.

“Can someone take me inside?” Meghan calls. She looks green with pain and nausea, even in her shady spot on the patio.

“Mum, no!” Sam wriggles from my arms and runs to her, flinging himself into her arms. It makes Meghan wince with pain, but she leans into the hug, layering his cheeks with kisses. I stand to the side with my hands on my hips, sweaty from running while Lily obliviously pounds on an ant hill, grinding her chubby heel into the dirt and her nose scrunched in concentration. Fifteen-months old, and she won’t remember all this. But Sam—his tiny fists, his empathetic, gentle way—has absorbed the decimation of cancer like a toxin.

“I’m sorry, Sammy, but mommy’s tummy hurts. She needs to go lie down.”

Sam does not complain that mommy always hurts, that mommy is always crying. He watches as the nurses and I carry her indoors and lay her gently on her bed, tuck the blankets, press the morphine bolus. Her eyes begin to roll into the back of her head drunkenly while Sam watches.

“You want to cuddle Mommy for a while, bud?”

He nods and reaches for me to lift him, settling in when I place him next to his mom and her arms snake around his shoulders. They fall asleep holding one another and I watch them while our parents manage Mary and Lily outside, sounds batting at the glass that separates us.

From the recliner, I keep guard, tears wet on my cheeks. I leave the streaks there to dry like battle wounds.

“She’s such an attention whore, am I right, ladies?” I rub Meghan’s cold feet with lavender oil.

Meghan laughs with the nurse, as hard as she can considering the morphine, the tumour like a tire around her waist, and the fact that she doesn’t have the energy to hold her own glass of water anymore. The nurses have slotted into our macabre sisterly humour like well-fitting gloves. Thankfully, I haven’t seen the horrid administrative nurse from Meghan’s first day and I launched an angry complaint.

“There goes my sister and her ‘cancer.’ Making it all about her.” I flick mocking air quotes as the nurse fiddles with the morphine pump settings. Despite hallucinations and a dosage that should dope a farm animal, Meghan’s pain management needs grow with the cancer. Last night, she woke me in the night by telling me she had some magic beans. Did I want some? *And look, look, Kelly, at my new makeup*, which she patted on as though holding an invisible compact, all while applying air lipstick. She takes imaginary pills, too, popping them into her mouth and craning her neck like the non-existent water will ease the slip of medication from gullet to gut. I want the magic beans too, to plant them and have health sprout new, or to liven her dying skin with the compact. And Christ, pass the fake pills. We all need some.

“Everything in the world is all about me,” Meghan croaks with a smile, pawing at her dry throat. I bring a glass to her, wiggle the straw until it meets her lips. Using my sleeve, I dab at a dribble of spit that works its way down her semi-open mouth. She rolls her eyes at me and holds her arm aloft, showing she’s still capable of this, at least. Her body has been failing in slow

degrees. When I noticed she hadn't peed in more than twenty-four hours, the nurses inserted a catheter for release, and we watched as a gush of orange urine filled the waiting bag. When she sleeps, I take videos of her breath, photos of her hands, things that can live on when she can't.

"Don't we know it, lady!" The nurse gives Meghan's foot a gentle swat, tucking her neatly into the blankets she's brought fresh from the warmer. The material fills the room with the scent of bleach, although there has been a considered effort to make the room less clinical—gorgeous French doors that swing onto a patio, a built-in twin bed under the windowsill, which is too short for me to stretch in, quilts made by past volunteers, and nubby recliners. But it's impossible to ignore the sponge swabs for moistening dry mouths, sanitizing wipes, basins to hold vomit, and grab bars for weak bodies. "Then again," the nurse says, "as our longest lasting resident, you get all the extra attention you want."

Weeks now, we've been here for longer than we hoped, because hope doesn't live here. Other "residents" come and go, literally, within days. But Meghan is young. Her heart, at least, is healthy, and this keeps her going even when we dream—out of compassion, selfishness, exhaustion—that it will stop. *I have never, ever seen anyone suffer like this*, this same nurse said to me last week, tears in her eyes as she folded me into a hug, her soft body like a favourite pillow. I am relieved, oddly, to know this is as bad as it gets. And yet part of me knows it can be, has been, so much worse. This is the life truth that I wish was a fallacy.

"That's me," Meghan says, wincing in pain as she adjusts herself in bed. "Always knew I'd break some kind of record."

"And longest-lasting hospice resident is the one you set? You need loftier goals, Meg." I wipe excess oil from my hands onto the warm blanket, sinking my fingertips into the heat. I'm newly obsessed with feeling everything, senses on overdrive, to absorb every squeak of life

through my pores. I want this sentiment to extend to Meghan, even though she doesn't have the energy or inclination. Whenever I visit, I produce tubs of ice cream or other goodies I think might pique her appetite, then hope for nights of secret sharing and spa treatments and sleeping under the stars to watch our shared Cancer astrological sign move across the sky. Because that's what you do when you're dying, right? You personify *Tuesdays With Morrie*, you execute your Bucket List. Instead, Meghan's eyes bob with medical dope and I spend those nights watching her veins pulse in her neck, recording her breath so I can listen later and allay my own panic. Somehow, when night comes and I press my exhausted body into sleep, this stings me most of all—the wanting of her appreciation, the desire for her to enjoy her final spring, her final time eating ice cream, her final this, her final that. Instead, there is the necessity to step forward, then forward again. Nap. Breathe. The minutiae of life are all she can manage.

“Well, you've been here every day too,” the nurse says to me. “You two are like our little sister warriors.” She leaves with promises to return with a new fentanyl patch.

“She's right,” Meghan says once we're alone. “You've been here all summer. You should go home. Enjoy some time with Joe. Pot Roast, too.”

I crawl into Meghan's bed, inching myself between the metal hospital railing and her thin body. She's almost unrecognizable, her arms like the desiccated duck wings I buy Pot Roast from the pet store. Daily, sometimes several times, she heaves litres upon litres of barf into the plastic tubs we hold out and rinse in the laundry room. I wake desperate for the end and then hate myself for that horrible, dark desire.

“Meg, wherever you are, that's where I am. Okay? I'm not going anywhere.” We lace fingers and I give her a kiss on the palm as tears slip into her pajamas.

“The kids,” Meghan says, pausing to what? Swallow down more tears? She rarely talks of the kids now, whether it is because it hurts her too bad or she’s too drugged or resigned, I don’t know. It hasn’t been acceptance, certainly. Nothing about this is something she accepts, which I can’t help but wonder if serves as the reason she’s still breathing—sheer determination to alter fate’s course.

“The kids will be okay.” I finish her sentence and she wipes her nose on my t-shirt.

“Look at how many people love them, eh?”

“You’ll teach them things, right?”

“Everything I know. Including how to fold a fitted sheet. I’ll have to google it first.” She can’t help but chuckle and I pull her for a hug. “You need distraction. Maybe we need a game of truth or dare.”

“I can barely move.”

“Fair point. Want to know a secret?”

“Stupid question. Do you have any?”

“I’m offended. I’ve lived a life of sexual intrigue and secret spy service. But seriously, it’s going to come out in my book next year so, might as well share with you.”

“I’ll take it to my grave.” We snort at this.

“I had an affair with a married man when I was twenty-one. Went on about a year.”

“Get out!” Meghan has never looked more excited. “Oh my God, you always seemed so, I don’t know, good.”

“I’m just a better liar than you are. Now you.”

“You know all my secrets.”

“Oh please. You’re like a life of Fort Knox over there.”

She looks to the sky, takes a deep breath. “I smoke.”

“Honestly, you’ve reeked of weed since you were fifteen. I think I’ve got the scoop on that.”

“No, cigarettes. Since I was a teenager.”

Did I know this? Is this a real secret? Her face is pinkened with the sharing of the news, and I wonder what else I don’t know, combined with a panic of that not knowing. “Dad and I shared one the other day, actually.”

“Mom will kill you two.”

“Well, she’ll only have one to pick from. Dad didn’t want to share. I played the dying card.” I think of them sharing this moment, Dad passing his Export A with nicotine-stained fingers. I’ve never seen her drag from a cigarette except when we she was ten and I was seven, and she was determined to try. I kept watch at the door while she lit the tip with a stolen Bic, and sucked to the point of concave cheeks. She hadn’t even coughed, and when she held the smoke under my nose for my turn, I’d refused, solidifying my goody-two-shoes status. I wanted to share it then but couldn’t risk my health, and I want to share it now.

“It’s sort of the only card you’ve got at this point.”

She presses her face to my shoulder. “I’m tired, Kell. I’m always so tired.”

“Maybe a shower would make you feel good? We can clean you up before bed. Get you nice and warm.”

“It’s too much work.”

“Stop being so lazy. Besides, you stink.” I hold my nose for comedic effect.

“Do I?” She sniffs a pit in response, moving in perpetual slow motion. She is like a three-toed sloth these days—tinted green, slow moving, gangly limbs. I have always held an irrational fear of sloths.

“Of course not.” If she knows I’m lying, she doesn’t say. My sister smells of rot, likely because her coccyx is exposed from weight loss, gangrenous around the edges, with the rest of her covered in a scaly rash, weeping bedsores. She’s oozing disease, seeping it from her pores. If I think hard enough, I can still picture, in this new body’s place, plump cheeks and dimpled thighs, just like mine. “But it’ll make you feel better.”

She acquiesces and lifts up her arms like a child reaching for its mother. I scoop her slight frame into my arms and carry her like a princess to the shower, where I place her in the waiting commode seat. What does she weigh now; seventy pounds? Not even as much as Pot Roast, I imagine. Then I stand in my bra and underwear and gently glide a soapy washcloth across her fragile skin. Meghan leans into the spray and closes her eyes like this is the spa treatment she’s always dreamed of, swathed in steam and shea butter salve. I wonder if she too, dreams of soft, healthy curves bared to the water spray.

My feet are leaden as I clunk towards Meghan’s room. When spending the night at the hospice, I average about two hours of sleep, but even off duty in my parents’ guest room, rest evades when the nightmares creep in.

As I move down the hall, I shuffle a mug of mint tea back and forth in my hand as the ceramic scalds my fingertips. This too, Meghan will barf back up, just like the chicken wings she

demanded and the burger she craved and the pizza that was too much to resist. Whatever goes into her mouth returns like a liquid boomerang.

I push into room ten and breath through my mouth. The smell of this place, my sister, my clothes, makes me perpetually nauseous. “Your wish is my command.” I place the tea on her nearby tray. It steams next to four other mugs of tea gone cold, all with mere sips taken, but she takes to the hope of each cup, the promise of quenched thirst.

“You’re so good to me. Come, sit.” She pats the chair I’ve nestled to the side of her bed and I plunk down into it. These days, I’m nervous to lay next to her on the mattress for fear of causing new, preventable pain. “That’s a pretty outfit.”

“They’re pajamas. From the grocery store.” I fob off the kindness. The t-shirt and pant combo was one of those hazy, anticipatory grief purchases, something shoved into my cart while I bought the hospice packs of tissues and rolls of toilet paper. But it hurts to hear the compliment, to see her long not for the clothing but rather, for the fatty curve of my hips, or that the clothing that will take me to new restaurants, new countries, new camping trips, while she will never dress for anything again. What a thing, to hold that knowledge in your hand.

“Will you read some more to me? From your book?”

“I thought you just wanted to listen to me type all day.” Sometimes, I’ve thought her to be sound asleep, stealing those precious moments to work feverishly on my book. We don’t talk about how my dream will actualize once she is long dead. A year away. But then I pause—for a cup of tea or to stretch my legs—and Meghan stirs when the clack of the keyboard keys ceases and demands more. *I love the sound of you doing what you love*, she said, eyes closed to the ceiling. *Keep going.*



“I could read to you about us instead. My second book in the works.” I don’t know what kind of story this second book will be yet. One of hope or despair, of sisterhood or hatred. It’s a mixed bag of bundled emotions I can’t untangle, but writing it while she is next to me helps.

“I love that you’re writing about us.” She smiles, eyelids still gently closed.

“Hey, it’ll finally let me pay you back, on the page at least, for what an asshole you used to be.”

She grunts a laugh but clutches her sore stomach. “I’d deserve it. But maybe, you think, other people will read about my addiction and, I don’t know, it’ll help them?” She’s staring at me now, hope etched into her smooth forehead. She’s clinging to a legacy, one that can evolve with new meaning, a shoot from a seed. We can share it, this future, within the chapters of books. A life that will continue to be led, even if just on a page.

“Are you saying my entire career is pointless?” I arch and wiggle an eyebrow. “Because if true stories don’t help people, I’m doing an awful lot of writing for an awful lot of nothing.”

“I’m serious, Kell.” I watch her larynx move up and down her throat, the tendons so sharp that they look like piano strings. “Does it matter?”

“Of course. Why else do we read about other people’s experiences if not to, I don’t know, find a part of themselves in there, feel understood? Why else do we write about it?”

“Yeah.” Relief spreads through her body and she melts into the pillow.

“I’m scared, to be honest.”

“How come?”

“The military’s response. Social media. Having a public life makes people think they can comment on whatever they want. It can be harsh.” Emotion stirs like potion in my guts. How will

I navigate all that while navigating all this? “You won’t be around to protect me from the assholes.”

“Oh, Kell.” Meghan smiles at me, brings a hand to my cheek like a mother would a child.

“You haven’t needed me to protect you in a long time.”

“Knock, knock. Hey dolls.” Annie, our favourite nurse, pops her head in. She assesses my face and stops in place. “Am I interrupting?”

I wipe my face and shake my head.

“You up for something to help you get to la-la-land tonight?” She gives Meghan a thumbs up and waggles a pill in a tiny plastic cup, rattling it about like a ping pong ball.

“Drugs all around, or just for the cancer patient?” I quip. We grin wide.

“I’m fine. I don’t need anything,” Meghan says.

“You sure, hun? Might help with the anxiety.” Each night, Meghan wakes, usually around one am, panic taking over, fearing what comes. My subconscious waits for these tides of anxiety so that I can pop up from underneath my quilt on the daybed and turn on the TV to distract, crack a joke, get a cup of tea, but those efforts are waning in efficacy.

“I just don’t think I should,” she says uneasily. “I don’t want sedatives to become my way of coping.”

“You mean because you were an addict?” I rub my fingertips up and down her arm. She nods, looking ashamed. I can’t help snorting. “Geez, Meg, I admire the dedication here, but I think when you’re dying you get to throw addiction caution to the wind.”

“Really?” She fiddles nervously with the edge of the sheet. “You sure?”

“What’s the worst that can happen? An overdose? Elton John would say you’re here for a good time, not a long time.”

Annie laughs at our banter and struts across the room to the side of the bed. “Think of me as your dealer, gorgeous. A legal dealer.” Then she takes Meghan’s hand and gathers it into her own. “Doll, it’s all about peace and comfort now. Let us give you that.”

Once Annie leaves the room, Meghan points for some water and I bring it to her. The effort of her sucking lips eases a slip of liquid up the straw and the pill disappears.

“Tell me something funny, Kell. A funny story.”

“God, talk about putting me on the spot.”

“You’re a writer. It’s your thing.”

I want to tell her a story of fear. A sister, lonely, quiet, shy to a point of pain, who cannot move in the world without her partner in crime, the eldest, who is feisty a rebellious and passionate. Who says things like, *You can’t talk to my little sister like that*, and, *You’ll have to go through me, first*. In the story, the sisters grow old together.

“All my best stories involve you. Remember when you told me my labia was made of rubber? And that was why babies were born that way, because it could stretch?”

She snorts at the memory. “Ha. Yeah, you slid off the back of your bike seat onto your tire and scorched your crotch all the way down that hill.”

“You told me you could smelled burned rubber.”

“I could,” she says, still laughing. “I swear I could.”

“I believed whatever you told me. Gullible.”

“I think it was more like trust. I’m sorry I wrecked that trust.” She closes her eyes at this, swallows over and over until I bring the barf bucket to her chest, but she shakes her head and pushes it away. “I wish there was something they could give me to just knock me out,” she says, her voice not at all a whisper. She keeps her eyes closed.

“You mean to sleep? That’s what Annie just gave you.”

“I mean, what am I waiting for?” she continues dreamily, as though she didn’t hear me.

“Seriously? But then, I guess that would be asking them to kill me, wouldn’t it?”

How many times have I wondered what she’s waiting for? For the kids? For Bernard to appear and atone so that she can slip peacefully towards some cheesy light? No, Meghan refuses to die because she is waiting for a fairy tale. Fairy tales, she’s not yet learned—because I was always able to rewrite the endings for her—are not reality.

“So, not just to sleep,” I say carefully, trying to clarify. “Is that what you mean?” I want her to mean it, want the pain-free release of an assisted death, of goodbyes, of absent husbands, of kids growing without her.

“I don’t know what I mean, Kell.”

“If you’re ready for that, then I’ll talk to the doctor for you tomorrow, okay?”

“Yeah. Maybe.”

When I ask her about it this morning, she claims to not remember, but I am my sister’s lie detector and her darting eyes reveal her truths like a chart on paper.

Part 5

*Acceptance?*

*Or complacency, or sadness, or knowledge...*

Dear Meghan,

I woke up today hoping to have one of those brief moments other bereaved people talk about, where for a blissful moment or two, everything feels okay. They believe their loved one is alive. It was all just a dream.

But nope. You're still dead.  
I'm still here.

It is the worst truth I know.

—Kelly

August, 2018

“So,” Dr. Mohabi says, looking around at Mom, Dad, Meghan, some nurses and me, all of whom have collected in room ten. “I think it’s time we talked palliative sedation.”

She explains that Meghan will receive Versed through a continuous pump, much like her morphine, slipping her into a twilight zone of consciousness, somewhat aware of her surroundings but unable to communicate. All of this in hopes of easing her suffering. As the cancer fills her abdomen, Meghan has been constantly spitting up bile or working up chunks of mucous lodged in her throat, the room vibrating with the rattle of phlegm. She is in constant, moan-filled pain. She cannot get up from bed. Cannot shower. Has a catheter and a diaper, her dignity disintegrating like her skin. I have never wanted anything more in the world than for my sister to die.

“Yup. I’m ready,” Meghan croaks from her bed. I look to her, shocked, having half-expected her to fight the request. To say she needs more time. To ask to see the kids. To wait for Bernard. We cannot handle anymore final goodbyes.

Dad, Mom, and I burst into tears that cannot be contained, understanding what Meghan doesn’t quite seem to—that being unable to eat and drink will mean death in days. That, or she understands just fine and no longer has the capacity to care. Meghan retches another glob of black bile into a kidney basin and Mom rushes to her side.

“What’s the big deal, Mom?” Meghan says, her mouth curved into a weak smile. “It’s just barf. I’m not dead yet, guys.”

We laugh, because she needs it and we do too.

This is the right choice. This is the right choice. I repeat this over and over in my head because the doctor says it will stop her pain but if she can't talk, how the fuck do we know if she's in pain? What signs should I look for? I've always been able to discern my sister's thoughts by concentrating on her face. Today may be the very last day I hear her voice or feel her touch me or crack some horrible, death-themed joke that only she understands and oh my fucking god nothing is okay. I pull my sweater close and lean in to rub Meghan's feet. She gives thumbs up.

"Hey, can you take this?" She pushes her phone to me, which has remained at her side the entire time we've been here, alert to the chirps that signal Bernard might be reaching out. She wrote the passcode down weeks ago and sealed it in an envelope for this moment. But this moment was supposed to come once she was already gone. "You know, for my passwords and stuff."

"Sure, Meg." I turn it over in my hand and drop it into my purse like it's burnt me.

"Can you tell Bernard what's going on?"

I rub into the callous on the ball of her foot, pressing gently as I parse out her choice of words. She does not ask me to have him come here. She does not ask to say goodbye to her husband, to have us call so she can hear his voice. Whether it is because she knows he won't bother to come or she wants us to have this private time with her, I don't know.

"Of course I will, Meg."

The nurse approaches, eyes full of compassion, and slips another IV into Meghan's withered body, starting the sedation while Mom, Dad, and I linger. I hold the phone's weight, turn from my sister and lean against the wall to catch my breath. The pump whirls away under



our watchful eyes and Meghan's eyes slip closed as we tell her over and over what we need her to hear.

"I love you."

"We love you, Meggie."

"Love you so much."

Mom, Dad and I repeat these words whenever we leave the room in case it is the last time. With Meghan, we know the feeling of ending conversations angry. We can't bear for her to have that kind of end.

"Kelly, can I see you a minute?"

Mallory, the RN on duty, must have heard me coming down the hospice hall, the buckle on my sandals making a sharp slap with each step. Mom, Dad and I have returned with a tote bag of belongings, not intending to leave again until Meghan does, too.

It is Tuesday morning and Meghan has been sedated for a full twenty-four hours. Bernard has not texted or called, even though I told Mary to relay that sedation had been started because he isn't speaking to me.

"Sure," I say, wheeling right into the nursing station. "What's up?"

Several staff members are gathered with placating smiles, sitting on chairs or hovering in office doorways. Five friendly faces greet me, faces I know and love. I know that Sarah the RPN has a son who needs expensive dental work, that Lucy is about to run a marathon, that Max and his wife have had ten miscarriages and now care for others through their work at the hospice.

These people, my sister's caregivers, are slowly damming the holes Meghan's life will leave behind.

"So, the sedation level isn't quite where we need it and Meghan is still awake and chatting away." Mallory stops there, leaves me to fill in the space.

"She needs a higher dose then? Of the Versed?" The answer seems logical to me.

"Yes, well, that's the thing. I went in to do that and Meghan waved me off. Said she was fine. But she's still in a lot of pain. Still dealing with all that bile, which is exactly why she's on the sedation—so that she doesn't have to suffer. I turned to your mom to see what she thought was best, but she just defers to Meghan. At this point, we think Meghan doesn't want to up the dose out of fear, which we understand, but we also know she's in agony and not necessarily in the right state of mind with all the medication she's on."

"So, what you're saying is I have to decide. As power of attorney." My throat feels tight and I clutch at the strap of my purse. I'd come so close to not having to make any hard choices. So very, very close.

"We support both you and Meghan, of course. But she chose the sedation, and now she might need you to be strong enough to choose to increase it."

I swallow hard but the ball will not move. "Can I just pop in and see her first? Go from there?"

"Of course," Mallory says with a sympathetic smile.

I stand awkwardly in the doorway of the nursing station, biting my lip, wanting to say something else, wanting to ask more questions I already know the answer to. In making this choice, am I stifling her spirit? Robbing her of peace? Taking away chances for more goodbyes

and last-minute visits with the kids? What if there are more things to say and we haven't yet said them?

I spin on my heel and wheel around to Meghan's room. "Hi there," I call as I enter. Meghan's eyes click open as best they can, dopey and lidded. Mom looks uncomfortable on a hard plastic chair, her forearms resting on the bed where she traces faint lines up and down Meghan's arms.

"Hey." It is a croak of pain and thirst and exhaustion. Mom squeezes her eyes shut tight until they crinkle and then opens them again, looking equally as exhausted, hair askew. "Mom," Meghan says, her voice urgent. "Now. Quick." On command, Mom holds the kidney basin next to my sister's lips as another burp of bile squirts from her mouth into an inky slop.

"Looks like good times in here."

"Well you know, woot woot." Meghan raises her arms into a raise-the-roof air pump. Three months ago, we'd been teaching Lily to "raise the roof," hooting as she revealed a gummy mouth while palming her hands into the air. The image stirs something deep and I wince at the pain of it.

"You make dying a blast."

Meghan grins, skin stretching taught over her skull. Mom clucks her tongue at us but smiles, too.

"What in the hell are you doing awake, anyways?" I ask as I sling my bag onto the floor by the daybed. "Aren't you supposed to be in a nice little coma by now?"

More bile, spitting. Mom wipes a glisten of sweat from Meghan's forehead and rinses the basin in the sink, returning it right before another burp that leads into a stream of steaming vomit. Finished, Meghan leans back into the pillow, defeated. "I'm a tough bitch," she says.

“Ain’t that the truth. I’m going to make some tea. Be right back. Anyone want anything from the kitchen? Mom?”

Both Meghan and Mom shake their heads and I blaze a wide smile as I leave, all cheerful and supportive. Ten steps down the hall, I divert to the nurses’ station where I find Mallory documenting charts from her swivel chair.

“She’s suffering, isn’t she, Mal?”

“Yes.” Mallory is curt but her tone is empathetic.

I fiddle with my tissue before the tears come in earnest and I am gasping for air. Here, my weakness can spread like a plague. “Increase the dose, please.” I sink dramatically to the floor, clutching myself as a flurry of arms circle me.

“It’s the right thing to do,” Mallory says. “You’re caring for her by making the choice no one else wants to make.”

In minutes, I am at Meghan’s bedside as the nurse slips in and wordlessly increases the dose on the Versed pump.

“Don’t mind me, sweetie,” she says to my sister. “Just have to get a reading off this thing.” Mallory gives me a thumbs up as she leaves and a sad tilt of her head.

And so, our vigil begins.

By Friday, Mom, Dad, and I look borderline psychotic—hair in greasy patches that stick up in odd ends, makeup half-assed off and on, unshowered, clothes full of the musty stink of overwear and exhaustion. There is a constant, palpable fear of leaving the room in case this moment is it, or this one, or the one after that.

I rub Blistex across Meghan's lip, selecting from one of the five tubes of balms that litter her nearby tray. "Sorry Meg, just don't want you getting chapped. I know you'd hate that." A grunt emanates in return.

Since her full sedation, Meghan has done nothing but consistently moan, punctuating the otherwise empty air with a painful ache. Her haunting wails are stabs in the gut, pulling at my breath, my steps, the food I spoon mindlessly into my mouth. I hear it in my sleep, back in my car, even as I crank the radio.

The lip balm jerks erratically when her lips move with the tube as though her flesh is made of wax. "Fuck," I whisper under my breath as I wipe the excess away with my thumb. Mom and Dad don't know how much Meghan and I swear together, and I want to keep this a special secret between us. "Sorry, Meggie. Got it all over the place."

Meghan moans again and I stroke light fingers up and down her arms in an attempt to soothe us both. I have righted the framed portrait of Sam and Lily so Meghan could feel the gaze of their look-a-like faces. Another moan, this one like nails on a chalkboard.

"Now," I say, narrating all my steps of care as I replace the cap on the lip balm. "I know you like to be clean." I nearly expect her to answer, despite the sedation. Even yesterday, even with a dose of Versed that ought to to conk out farm animals, she reached up to hug Dad and she told him she loved him, her bony arm extending into the air like a wheedling pine branch. Dad waited until her arms fell limp before hurrying out, his tears echoing in the hallway.

I tug a Burt's Bees face wipe from its resealable package, snap it in the air to unfurl it. I've been spending, on average, more than fifty dollars a week on these damn wipes because she likes the smell and was using them three times a day pre-sedation, swirling the scent of floral cucumber across her skin. I watched countless times as she closed her eyes to the cooling tingle

of the moistened cloth, breathing in deep to appreciate the moment. We appreciated those moments together.

“Here we go, Meggie.” I wipe at her face. Her mouth hangs slack, eyes half open, skin pale and yellow, far beyond the reach of the apparently brightening wipe. “Nearly done.” I tug at her skin to get into the folds of her face, both wrinkled and yet somehow ageless, a natural byproduct not of age, but of a sinking into oneself, fat eviscerated, leaving nothing but epidermis stretched over a barely recognizable skeleton. In the hollow of her neck, I wipe away blackish-brown slurry that has pooled from her open mouth. “Let’s get this all cleaned up, Meg,” I say as I tug another wipe from the packet, soaking this one too, until it is brownish black with backtracked feces, vomit and bile. I take a bony hand and clean it as she’s done for her children, digging underneath her fingernails, no longer sure which one of us cares about her cleanliness. But it is something to do. Mom is watching us with a river of salty tears running down her cheeks and I have to look away. Focus. My sister needs me to focus. My mother needs me to focus. I have to hold my breath because a smell emanates from Meghan—through her mouth, skin, pores. It is the smell of death. Each day, I’m unable to wash it from my hands.

I sleep, barely, with a perpetual discomfort of Meghan’s breathing that chortles on phlegm between her aching moans. Every noise is cause for concern, and I wake ten times a night to watch her chest rise and fall. Once I witness the cadence of her breath, the confirmation soothes me long enough for another brief nap, in which I never dream and always wake sweating and startled.

We’re now four days into sedation. We cat nap in shifts while staring at the television without watching. Each day, I dress and wonder if this is the last outfit I will wear while I have a sister, then slop down the hall to the family kitchen to take my morning medications. The expiry

date on the hospice carton of milk is three weeks from now. My sister will be dead by then and I will still be here. And I cannot shake this panic—soon, any minute, my sister won't be here, and then what? Right now, she needs face wiping and sponge bathing, moist towels to her lips and her hand held, feet rubbed and the room tidied. I can move in this world without bills and Meghan's children and work and school because all that exists—all that can exist—is this hospice room. Anything beyond that is beyond comprehension.

I stretch and stir from my post on the fold out cot we've wrestled into the room alongside the hospital bed, the recliner chair Dad sleeps in, and the day bed built into the wall where Mom spends the wakeful nights. It's orderly and neat, even though our belongings cling to every corner, every surface, four people in a space for one.

"Joe called a while ago. He's going to be here in a few minutes with dinner," Dad says with reverence, his voice soft as I wake. Joe has been cooking us meals and delivering them daily, tucking in love notes scrawled on Post-Its and stuck onto the Glasslock containers.

I groan. "I'm not really hungry."

"None of us are," Dad says with a sigh, although he's been obsessively snacking on the baked provisions made by the elderly volunteers. Usually, he chews mindlessly, and can never answer if the cookie was good, or what flavour it was. "But we have to eat."

"How's she doing?" I force the hope from my voice, no longer sure of what I'm hoping for. When will it be over?

"No change." Mom's voice is a croak.

*I'm here!* A text from Joe pings to my cell. *Come meet me?*

"He's here," I say, holding up my phone and tugging on shoes. Meghan's head is craned at a horrible angle that makes me nauseous, her neck wrenched towards the pillow. Her skin is

sunken like an imploded building. I want to remember her, and yet not this, but the image is already a haunting I can't shake. Prayer for her to die is both horrible and necessary. "Maybe Meg is like one of those people who just needs everyone to leave the room before she finally lets go?" I let the questioning tone linger, knitting my fingers into a braid.

"That might be a good idea. I saw that a lot at work," Mom says from her uncomfortable plastic chair next to the hospital bed. She's barely left it in days. Her eyes don't track to mine, but rather, stay fixed on Meghan's hand, which she strokes delicately with her own. They are tiny women, so very alike, and then there is me, the family giant, and still, I cannot protect them. I wonder how much death mom has seen as a nurse, how many dying hands she held.

"I'll ask Sandra to sit with her while we eat," I offer. Meghan likes Sandra, the kind PSW who calls herself white trash, is a supporter of Donald Trump, yet cares for my sister with such gentle kindness that I'm often overwhelmed at the sight. *I'm just going to change this medication bag, Meg*, Sandra will say, narrating as she works. *I'm just flushing this line, okay?* She doesn't wait for the permission that never comes, but I like the way she makes Meghan a part of her own care.

"So, let's all go eat, okay?" I clap my hands together, rallying them like a sports coach. We fuss to make ourselves presentable, tucking in shirts and smoothing gobs of hair, but on the brink of leaving the room, none of us can move to open the door.

"What if...?" I can't finish, my words choked. Dad pats my arm, nodding wordlessly.

Joe greets us with a sweep of his hand at the dining table he's laid out; pork tenderloin with cheesy potatoes, baked cauliflower and a hefty serving of gravy worthy of Meghan's approval. He hands out plates, unloads his cooler full of snacks, as well as breakfast, lunch, and dinner for tomorrow. "Just in case," he says. Just in case she's alive, we'll be alive too. We eat in



total silence, shoveling loads of meat and potato without tasting. There is no conversation and Joe does not ask how we are. I want to thank him for all of it, for the effort, for the chocolate bars he pushes into my hand, for being him, but swirling in my plate of gravy, I can't muster the energy.

"Joe, thanks for that," Dad says after a few mouthfuls, "but I think I'll head back to Meg." Dad walks purposely down the hallway without another word, swiping a mini muffin from the coffee tray as he goes. I watch as he hauls on the door at the far end and disappears into the void.

"You guys must be so tired," Joe says, taking my hand.

"It's been so, you know." Mom bites her lip and shakes her head over and over, dark eyelashes sweeping her cheeks.

"Try and eat, Ma."

"Look who's talking, bossy pants." She gestures at my nearly full plate. I push my fork through a glob of gravy, let my tears drip and mixing them in with a careful tine.

As I look up, Dad bursts through Meghan's room and flaps his arms wildly at the opposite end of the corridor like he's doing snow angels in the air.

"What?" I holler, stifling laughter. He looks ridiculous. *Always overreacting*, Meghan and I would say, nudging one another conspiratorially. But then Sandra peeks from the doorway and waves at us as well, a hand swooping inward. *Come. Now.*

"It's time," she yells, miming at her watch.

The hospice, this space I am uncomfortably familiar with, blurs in scene. And I am ready, or I am not ready, and I feel sick but purposeful, anxious but calm. All of it. I feel everything as I push from the table and run towards my sister, selfishly not even thinking about my Mom who

can barely walk and is pushing from her own chair. Joe, instinctively, waits behind with our discarded meal.

“Hurry!” Dad jogs down the hall to help Mom manage her MS stumble and I run ahead of them both because she cannot die alone, she can’t. I explode into room ten to find Meghan taking in stilted breath. Shorter, raspier, her chest barely rising with that incessant, agonizing moan. It’s hot in here, sticky even, and oh my God there is brownish mucous oozing from the corner of her mouth where her ear is pressed against a pillow. She would not want to go like this. She would not.

“I need a Kleenex!” I cry out, but the voice doesn’t sound like me. It is a demand, not a request, shaking my empty hand in the air and wanting a tissue to materialize, to distract. She would not want this, this filth, and Mom and Dad can’t see this and oh my fucking God it is happening.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t notice,” the nurse says. The tissue appears in my hand and I wipe at my sister’s mouth, because I can give this to her, the gift of organization, of a modicum of dignity that she’s been clutching for, the last time I will touch her living body. My hand lingers on her face, cupping her sunken cheeks in my palm as a mother might a child. “I love you, Meg.” In the softest of whispers.

Mom and Dad burst into the room looking harried and I take my place at her feet, Dad on Meghan’s right, Mom on her left. The nurses slip away as we wait for death. Mom, ever the nurse, keeps her hand on Meghan’s wrist for a pulse while we watch her chest for breath. Has she stopped taking in air? I can’t tell, want to get close and press my cheek to her lips, feel the puff of air there, or lack of it. I want to know for myself, and more than that, I want to be the first to know because I have always read my sister’s lies, her joys, like words on a page, and our final

moments together cannot be more lies and subterfuge because this is the most honest thing we will ever experience together simply because it is the last thing we will experience together.

“It’s okay, Meggie,” I say into the room. “We’re all here. We love you. We love you so much.” I want the last words she hears to be the thing she has always longed for. Love. *We love you. You have always been so very loved, even when you made hard. Your children love you. Your friends love you. You have left a legacy. You matter.*

“Yes. We’re all here. Mom, and Dad. Your sister.” Dad cannot keep his voice even as Meghan breathes in raggedly and we go silent.

“Is she gone?”

“Not yet,” Mom squeaks, fingers still at her wrist. “It’s okay, Meg. It’s okay. You can go.”

We are quiet. Unsure of what else to say beyond the panic.

And then it is done, known. Something missing. For a moment, there is pure silence as we listen, or ignore, hope. I can feel her absence on the tip of my tongue, like a taste of childhood tinged with bitterness. A roar rises in my throat but I swallow it down, stare at my knuckles gone white in their grip on Meghan’s feet. I’m overwhelmed with panic, fearing that in her final moments, I was hurting her somehow, pressing hard into her skeletal body like it could stop her from leaving.

“She’s gone,” Mom says with a nod, naturally looking to the clock to call it like she would have done at work in the nursing home, a million times over. 1605 hrs, 17 August, 2018. And just like that, we’ve become a family of three, and as we make eye contact with one another, it’s clear that none of us know how to process this new fact. My throat is so tight I can barely

breathe, and tears plop onto the warmed blanket atop Meghan's feet and disappear into the quilted pattern. I watch the damp spot bloom like a mushroom cloud.

Dad throws himself on top of Meghan, his hands snaking gently under her body to tug her close. She will not moan in pain, and I am so relieved by this. He cries out for her in a way that scrapes at my heart, guttural and simultaneously pinched. I put my hands to my ears and grit my teeth as his sobs fills the room while Mom rocks back and forth, her eyes fixed on Meghan as though she might come back any minute now, half here, half somewhere else.

"God," Dad says after a moment, rising to his feet. He swipes at his face. "I have to get myself together."

"Dad," I say gently, through my own tears. "Just let yourself be sad."

"Don't tell me what to do," he growls.

I feel a stab of anger at the outburst followed by the most intense longing for something I just had. Because Meghan would get it, would roll her eyes with me in response to his snappy ways, because we both know that his brashness is a cover for something else. We understand him and now there is now one to share that spirit of sisterhood with, and no one to whom I can whisper in the dark about the million ways our parents fail us while helping us succeed. And she would hug me and be on my side like a big sister does, but the impossibility of this hits me like a sledgehammer and a swath of anxious sweat glazes my skin.

"I'll go tell the nurses," I say, standing unsteadily.

I step out of the room and into the incandescent lighting of the hallway, blinking into the reality outside of room ten. Nothing has changed. The hospice continues to hum with activity, the world actively spins, and this revelatory moment of death has revealed nothing new, nothing meaningful. Just the pang of loss felt in each of the ten rooms several times a week. We are no

different, but we are so different and I want to share that story with everyone who doesn't know it, words rising up my throat like bile.

I peek around the corner into the nursing station where the caregivers are sitting somberly, waiting for me. I pause in the doorjamb, fiddling with the tie of my pants. Because if I don't say it aloud, don't give voice to this horrible thing, then for another few moments I can live in a world in which my sister shares that world.

"It's, um, she's done. I think. Gone." The RPN nods. She's always bugged me a little. Too loud at night, always waking us with her sharp cackling. Yet now I want to fold myself into her curly blonde bob, listen to her stories about softball and stare at the scar on her lip and ask her how it happened. I want anything but this. As if sensing that, she stands and folds me into a hug. I melt, feel her hands rub up and down my spine like a xylophone, and I let tears sag my body into hers.

I pry myself from her, suddenly worried for my parents, for my sister's body, for Joe, and our family scattered to these hallways. "Do you think we could call the funeral home now?"

"We can wait, honey," says the RPN. She pats my hand. "Give you all some peaceful time with her."

I can think of nothing I want less. I don't want to be in that room another minute longer, because I've lived a life in there already, left it behind like a shed snakeskin. "We've had our time. I think I just want her..." What? Gone? Done with? "at peace, or whatever."

"Okay. We'll just go in and prepare her for you to say goodbye then."

I nod, praying they will not go into details about what it means to prepare her, although part of me does know already because late last night I couldn't stop reading, hoping to prepare myself, iPhone glare illuminating my face while Meghan slept.

*What to expect when someone dies.*

*What to look for when someone dies.*

*What happens when someone dies?*

Her body will have let go, literally, figuratively. She will, wherever she is, likely be grateful for the incontinence brief they put on her earlier, a guard against the slip of feces that has been bound up inside her as her heart continued to pump but her lone kidney didn't process waste. She will need certain parts of her washed, and I have laid out the pajamas and robe we wanted her sent off in, complete with underwear, which she hadn't been able to wear for months because the elastic waistbands pinched at the cancerous lumps. Apparently, we may witness little exhalations of breath that are not actually breath, but rather, the body letting gasses go, releasing and purging, giving up itself to the next stage. Her chest may move in this process, I read, but it is normal. *Often, this is upsetting to loved ones*, the website says. I imagine the dead person's chest rising, the falsehood of hope and potentially something else, desperation for it to be over, levering our emotions with cruel after-death tricks.

“Okay sweetheart, we'll give the funeral home a ring and maybe you want to take your parents down to the living room there?”

I bob my head unenthusiastically, glad for the task. Once in room ten, my heart wants to avoid the bed where Meghan's body lays, but she is there, looking unrested and unpeaceful and anger bubbles up inside me because a look of peace feels like the consolation prize to death. A promise that the person is in a better place, or whatever that means, free of suffering and pain. But her eyes are still open, and her mouth is a circle like Munch's "The Scream" painting, skin yellower, blood already bruising her extremities where it has pooled. She looks frozen in a tableau of pain and my powerlessness to change this makes my own body feel leaden.

Mom is in the bathroom, blowing her nose, while Dad wrestles with the unwieldy legs of the cot I've been sleeping on. It flails about while he inhales and exhales loudly, the stench of cigarette smoke filling the air. The metal legs of the cot clank against the hospital bed as Dad's movements turn wild, jostling Meghan's body in a way that makes me nauseous.

"Goddammit," he mutters, slamming the cot frame into place, like trying to refold a map the way you found it in the package. I am angry with him yet filled with tenderness all at the same time.

"Dad, that can wait. The nurses need to get Meghan ready. Clean her up."

Mom emerges from the bathroom and looks at me pleadingly, her eyes puffy and red. Dad is trying to ram the cot into the carry bag it came in, but like a cartoon, each time he tries, a new section pops into the air, stubborn and refusing. Meghan and Dad spent a lifetime trying to fit each other into the perfect boxes they set out for one another. They never did fit. I want to tell him this is okay, that all of us have been there, willing Meghan to something she isn't and look at all of us—exhausted for the effort.

"Dad," I say, a hand gentle on his shoulder as he whacks and jams the unruly pieces.

"Dad!" This time, sterner, my voice loud but tender. He stops, drops the cot, his eyes wild when they meet mine. And then his shoulders sink like a melting ice sculpture, hands on my triceps.

"Mooster, I'm sorry I yelled at you." His eyes brim, lip wobbling under the moustache. He falls into my shoulder and we stand there a moment, silently sharing tears.

"It's okay, Dad. I get it." I try to calm my own voice through sobs. "You should take Mom home, get some rest. I'll wait for the funeral home guys."

"No way," Dad says. "We're not leaving you."

My role in the family has never felt so certain, my parents never so frail. And I realize now, with this horrible certainty, that I will exhaust myself filling the hole of space my sister has left. Sparing my parents from their dead daughter is all I can do as the living one.

“I have paperwork to sign and stuff, as executor,” I say. “Joe will be with me.”

“But we don’t want you to have to do this,” Mom says, dabbing at her nose.

“None of us want any of us to have to do this,” I say. She shrugs, blows her nose again.

“If you’re sure then.” Dad gathers their bags, their pillows, his eyes darting back to Meghan as though he can’t bear to leave her behind.

“I won’t leave her alone, Dad. I promise.”

“All okay then?” The RPN stands in the doorway with a warm bucket of water in arm and Sandra at her side. “We’ll get her ready for you.”

Joe comes to help my parents carry their things to the car and then Joe and I return, lingering awkwardly in the halls to wait. When the nurse calls us back into the room, I find Meghan laying with her hands folded neatly as though in prayer, but her mouth and eyes still agape in that horrific stare. I try to close her springy eyelids, only to have them pop back open with an elasticity that makes me shudder. The room smells strongly of cleaner, windows wide open to the warm August evening. Joe shuffles in behind me and puts his hand on the small of my back. I lean onto the railing of the bed to catch my breath and swallow down hysteria that threatens to make itself known.

“I’m here,” Joe whispers into my neck. I feel his eyes on my sister and suddenly want to shield her because she wouldn’t want to be seen as this desiccated version of herself. She would want some mascara on those impossibly long eyelashes, some blush to bring her skin to life. A bra for her now tiny breasts, or a cardigan in a pretty blue. “She looks so...”



“Dead.” I cough to stifle the tears, desperate to get home first before the breakdown begins in earnest.

“Thin,” Joe says instead, his voice a soft wobble. “I guess it’s been a few weeks since I’ve seen her.”

I look between my husband and my sister, aware I’ve lost all sense of what a body should be, how much fat should pad the bones. Countless times I thought she couldn’t possibly grow more skeletal but somehow, nature found a way, betraying me with cruel tricks, illusions of shadow and skin. Joe stares at her now, his own eyes welling in fear or horror, I can’t be sure, and I want to comfort him but also do something, because doing has been my sanity saviour and now there is nothing but thoughts and pain and my sister’s corpse. There is my husband’s hand on my back, heat radiating from my scapula, and swirling blobs of colour and movement on the periphery of my vision.

“I have to. I need.” The rest of the words don’t come and so I move, gently pushing Joe’s hand away. I pack what can be donated, chucking what cannot, arms and legs moving independent of my mind, tossing the cheap junk that it is—the polyester pajamas, the dirty slippers, the hand creams, the endless tubes of half-used lip balm. The smell of the lavender oil—how many times did I rub that scent into her skin?—makes me gag before I shove that in the garbage bag too, hand shaking as I wrench the plastic shut. It takes mere minutes to finish, and that recognition stabs the air; her whole life tidied up in three minutes and a bin bag.

The nurse pops her head in. “The gentlemen from the funeral home are here. They’re just bringing the vehicle around now.”

I go to follow and then my throat catches. “You’ll stay, Joe? Stay with her? Don’t leave her.” The tears heave then, swelling up in my chest. I take the clipboard from the nurse and

mindlessly sign papers, mutter words that barely register. I've been preparing, preparing so much. My paperwork is in order, signatures in all the right places. This is what I do; make necessary arrangements, logistics, planning, execution. *Meghan, I did all of it, kept it all together for you. Look. Look how your life of disarray is so tidy and neat.*

"We'd like to do the walking out ceremony with you," says the nurse. She is standing too close. The smell of her shampoo overwhelms, combining with the cookies she was eating earlier, butter tinging her breath. "We have a ceremony here where the staff walk out with you and Meghan to see her off. It's one of the ways we say goodbye. Closure."

Closure. What a thing. I picture this parade of thirty people down the hall and want to laugh or cry or something somewhere in between. My nose scrunches in distaste, the weird pomp and circumstance, the ritual she wouldn't want. I wordlessly shake my head gently at first, then forceful.

"No. No, I don't want that," I manage. My voice tightens until I am almost yelling at these wonderful people who have held our hands and literally wiped our tears and kissed my forehead while I slept. "She would hate that. She hates stuff like that!"

"I understand, Kelly. Everyone will understand. We don't have to do it."

I sink to the floor like a dramatic movie heroine, fold my head to my knees as the men from the funeral home walk towards me wearing suits of black. Dread swells as they approach because this means the end and goodbye. I want me and my sister and the way things were. I want us against the world. I want be Ursula to her Ariel. I want her death to be like I read in countless books, full of peaceful acceptance or at the very least, a peaceful death. I want her to read my book. I want her to admit her lies about her husband and her finances and her choices. I

want her to choose her children above all else. I want my parents to have two children. I want so many things I'll never have.

“Mrs. Thompson?” the older man asks gently. His voice has a soft timbre that I imagine has put countless families at ease. “So sorry for your loss. Your sister talked about you with such pride.” They introduce themselves, owners of the parlour up the road, a father and son duo.

I smile up at them from the floor. “That’s nice of you, thanks.” They wait, expectant. “She’s, um, in there.” I nod with my head to her room. Meghan’s room that will now become someone else’s room and this is another injustice I cannot stand.

The men disappear and Joe comes to my side, just in time for them to wheel the gurney—my sister—out to the vehicle. She is in a black body bag like a murder victim, a quilt laid over the plastic to humanize the experience somehow, make her less a body and more a person. It doesn’t work.

“Ready?” the younger man asks? Everything about the way he moves is respectful, and I want to tell him this, how good he clearly is at his job, how I trust him just by the way his hair sweeps his brow and his hands fold in respectful compliance when he speaks. But words have left me, and I can only bob my head and follow their lead towards the front doors, Joe following closely behind. Under the protective bag, Meghan’s body forms a strange hump where the tumour sits like the middle of the Michelin tire mascot. My sister is in there, wrapped up in the dark and alone and I will never hate anything more than this fact, this horrific, painful knowledge of her loneliness that haunts even in death. I walk alongside Meghan, the two of us, always the two of us, reaching out to touch her as we move, fingering the plasticky coating of the bag for something familiar but everything feels padded and lumpy, not like human flesh and bone and sister. We keep walking and I turn away from the other families, the volunteers, the people I

know keenly because we're all here losing someone, sharing the grief, but they don't understand this grief, this pain, that is unique to us and I don't want to share it. I turn towards her protectively, shielding her from view.

It feels like an hour but in a minute, we arrive outside the front doors and to the waiting van. An ordinary van, industrial even, white and cubed. I expected a hearse, which seems more dignified somehow, but this is just some non-descript van owned by criminals and contractors.

Cicadas chirp noisily as the sun beats the pavement and pollen wafts by on the end of summer's breeze. A beautiful day to die, but I don't want to let her go. I don't want my sister in this van, away from me, with strangers in a rapist van, taking her to be burnt to ash. Panic blooms, my throat tight, tears dampening my banana printed t-shirt front. In this outfit I went from a sister to a sister without a sister and I hate this fucking t-shirt even though it was on sale and it fits perfectly and Meghan loved it. I am a thirty-four-year-old woman wearing bananas and my sister is dead and none of this makes sense.

"Wait!" I yell, although there is no reason to yell, the air around us calm. The men stop rolling and I frantically grab at the bag, plucking but not really wanting to find the opening. "Can I kiss her goodbye?" I just want to touch her one last time. Countless, endless last times. I want to see the tiny toes I was jealous of growing up, the delicate, pointed fingers, the rosebud lips speckled with freckles.

"Of course," the older man says. "Do you want us to unwrap her?"

"Yes please." I don't get what he is really asking. Just open the fucking bag.

There are layers. The bag. Blankets. Fleece. Inside all this, a white shroud, and I have never seen a shroud or known they were this real, modern-day thing not meant for mummies or religious traditions, but it is there, semi-sheer, with her body underneath, the pink striped robe

knotted over her stomach. I lean in, unprepared for the smell to already be so pungent, Meghan's skin the brown and yellowish colour of mud.

"I love you, Meggie." I kiss her forehead, place my hand on her heart. "I love you so much." I drip tears onto her skin but leave them there. She will take this with her somewhere new, this love in liquid form.

The men nod with placating smiles, wrap her back up. They've seen this all before. They pack my sister into a van, another body, another day in the life. I am left behind, a sister without a sister. A protector without something to protect.

August, 2018

When Joe and I return to Mom and Dad's house, we all settle into the living room, sip at glasses of wine while staring mindlessly at the television on mute. Meghan's hospice possessions are stuffed into black garbage bags and lay abandoned in the foyer. They're full of cheap clothing and crochet kit oozing from the plastic, eerily reminiscent of the tumours sprouting from her abdomen. Each time I glance at the front door, my heart surges with possibility even while simultaneously recognizing the impossibility. She's just returning from another failed relationship, at the door with proverbial hat in hand. But she isn't. I zipped her back into a body bag just hours ago.

"What did Mary say?" Mom asks, blankly. "When you told her about Meg?" There's a wad of tissues making a soggy pile on her end table. I want to wrap her in cotton wool.

"That it was 'not news she was expecting,'" I say bitterly. "Like her death was some surprise. She's going to tell Bernard."

"Maybe we should have made more of an effort," Mom says, fretting with the edges of the blanket Meghan crocheted for her, a swirl of blue and white. She finished it just last week.

My shoulders drop, energy draining like someone pulled the plug. By "we," she means me. "Mom, I told him she was starting sedation. Explained that means death within days. He didn't want to be there, so he wasn't. We could see that end coming." *It was hard for him*, Mary said to me over the phone while I sobbed through the announcement of my dead sister. *It was hard for him to watch*. As if for us her death had been a blockbuster film that Mom, Dad, and I scrambled to buy tickets for. I hung up feeling inexplicably guilty before making calls to aunts,

uncles, grandparents, keen to get the process over with so I could sit with my own thoughts. I'd driven home alone, each of us having our own car, inexplicably dry-eyed, as though I'd spent myself of tears. And yet the hardest nugget of knowledge had laid itself bare after her death—even when it feels that everything should be different after a loved one dies, nothing actually is. The world remains unchanged while your personal world combusts.

Knuckles, Mom and Dad's French Bulldog, is perched in front of the entertainment console, staring with longing at Meghan's photo, his bum perched in the air, chest to the ground and paws spread wide like he's praying to some canine goddess. The photo is a family favourite, a professional shot from when she worked at the local college, the first job of which she was proud. She's beaming, brown hair scrunched into waves, freckles highlighted by the photographer's reflector. The stark difference between the more recent mental image of my sister is like a cattle prod to my brain. This photo here is exactly how I want to remember her.

"What in the hell is Knuckles doing?" Mom leans forward in her seat and calls him but he doesn't listen. The dog whines, still facing Meghan's photo, and wiggles his bum.

"Even the dog gets it," I say, blowing my raw nose for the millionth time. The sun is setting, the living room glowing Creamsicle orange. It's an impossibly beautiful evening, the humidity having given way to the gentle call of autumn.

Knuckles rears back onto his haunches and moves closer to Meghan's image while Pot Roast sits alert near Joe, ears pricked to some frequency only the dogs are registering. The photo of me in my blue Air Force uniform, assertively staring down the camera, sits on the other side of the console, noticeably ignored by both dogs. The nub of Knuckles' tail wiggles like a pig. He yips a few times, then flat out barks at Meghan's smiling face. Pot Roast's entire body tenses to

the energy, his anvil-shaped head pressing forward, nudging Joe's leg, then looking to me.

Knuckles barks again, insistent, pouncing like he's chasing a rubber ball.

"Has he done that before?" I ask, taking a greedy gulp of alcohol. Dad shakes his head back and forth, face shocked. No. Never. Our four sets of eyes widen and we look around the room as though caught in some forbidden act.

"Oh, that's weird," Mom says, shimmying her shoulders like she's shaking off a shawl.

"This isn't funny, Meg," I mutter aloud. Serious or not, I can't be sure. Mission complete, Knuckles saunters into his crate, rearing up when the doorbell rings.

"Don't answer it," Dad says, his voice a grunt. His eyes are so bloodshot that their sea-blue irises are otherwise unnoticeable in the tide of red.

"Whoever it is can already see me from here," I say, leaning back in my chair. Two people peer through the glass front door, which my parents thought would bring in extra light but instead makes me feel exposed and bare. "Hopefully they'll take one look at my swollen face, get the hint and go away."

My knees crack as I stand, and it dawns on me that my entire body hurts. My military knee injury rallies like a battle cry, irritated with crippling arthritis. Two months of rare, fractured sleep, shitty eating habits and too-short beds, my torso forever twisted to Meghan's bed like a conch. The only celiac-safe eatery in proximity to the hospice is a chicken wing joint, and I have consumed so many pounds of poultry in the last eight weeks that crispy chicken skin now tastes like suffering. But no one complains about arthritis in front of the cancer patient. I need vegetables and light and play and books and sleep. I want all of these things and yet none of them, all at the same time. And my parents. Our parents. I can barely stand to look at their drawn faces, sagging eyes and hands knotted without a daughter's hand to hold. I shake my head, rid



myself of the realities as I swing the door open to two people dressed in business casual, their hands folded loosely in front of them. The woman wears a knee-length skirt and light, summery cardigan, and the man's starched white collar is tight around his sweating neck. In their twenties, perhaps, still pimpled, the man with barely a beard to bother scraping a razor across, which he's done rather ineffectively according to the evidence in the razor burn on his throat. They hold pamphlets in their cupped hands. "Can I help you?"

"We were wondering if you had some time to discuss the teachings of Jehovah," says the man, his voice measured. He looks kind but tired in the fading summer light. The woman next to him, his wife, I presume by their matching rings, nods with encouragement, whether at me or her spouse, I can't be sure. The man thrusts a folded paper into my hand.

"This really isn't a good time," I say, as quietly but forcefully as I can. "We've had a death in the family." I do not, under any circumstances, want Dad to hear me whispering through the door, much less when he sees the propaganda printout.

The Meghan's Illness vs. Jehovah Witness tale is legendary in our house, and with every retelling, I wonder if I am making up new details or misinterpreting a memory that isn't mine. Meghan was three, in the throes of chemo and intense radiation, while I was a colicky newborn. Meghan was still bald, still sick looking, sporting a feeding tube as she toddled towards the front door as Mom answered the knock at the door. Likely around the same time as our fated childhood Santa photo. My parents have always been staunch supporters of freedom in worship. But when the Jehovah Witnesses knocked on the door in 1985 and saw my sick sister stumbling towards them, they informed Mom and Dad that Meghan was being punished for her sins; her egregious, cancer-producing, toddler-level sins. No one was surprised when Dad flew into a rage. The Jehovah's Witnesses never returned.

And here they are. On the day Meghan dies, stuffing my hand with their brochure about coping with death. I laugh a little despite myself. She would like this serendipitous event unfolding like the pamphlet.

“We understand,” the man says. The woman’s face is wide with compassion and I like her, somehow, want to invite her in for lemonade and distraction. “But the word of Jehovah can be a comfort in hard times.” He wiggles the paper a little with his eyebrows upturned and hopeful, making the illustrated pious man wobble in the breeze.

“Like I said, she died today. As in, actually today. Hours ago. So, we’d like to be alone.”

“Then that literature will be more applicable to you then ever,” the man answers, his head wobbling with encouragement. He looks like a bobblehead doll.

“Who is it?” Dad calls from the living room. I can hear his footsteps nearing and with it, a sense of doom and hilarity take over. I start laughing and crying at the same time, snot streaming from my nose, which is how it often started with Meghan and I, setting off one another’s laughing fits—a game of emotional telephone.

“No, I’m sorry.” I shut the door on the faces of the earnest visitors, for once, not feeling guilty at my rudeness. They take the hint and step delicately towards the next home, crossing the small grass boulevard between us and our neighbours with little hops, holding hands as they do so. When I come back to the kitchen, Dad is topping up our wine glasses. I take the drink, even though I don’t want it, dropping the pamphlet into the recycle bin.

“So?” Mom takes a gulp of her drink and dabs at her face with a tissue. “Who was it?”

“You won’t believe it.” I’m laughing still—or crying, maybe—and dammit, I feel like an asshole. My sister is dead. Dead. And to laugh, four hours later. “It was Jehovah’s Witnesses.”

“You’re kidding me,” Dad says, voice monotone. A bristle of a smile appears under his moustache.

We let our laughter spill into our wine glasses and towards the image of my sister. I bet she’s laughing too.

Back home in Trenton, Joe places the urn on the kitchen counter and puts a gentle hand on my back. “What do you think?”

He’s spent weeks making it, practicing a variety of urn shapes throughout the lessons in his pottery class. He offered a selection of tubular ones, conical ones, fat and short ones, but almost all the same tint. *It’ll be the colour of the Thompson sister eyes*, he said, with the urn’s durable glass glaze fired in the kiln. I chose the only one that felt right, with a bulbous shape that is petite, like Meghan was. I hold its cool weight in my hand, turn it over gently in the light. True to his promise, the base is a swirl of sage green with flecks of blue—the Thompson sister eyes epitomized. As a nod to our Scottish roots, the lid has a Celtic-style pattern pressed into the clay. I say nothing as I place it next to the cardboard box that contains my sister, also on the counter.

“I didn’t know how much, um,” Joe says, wincing, “how much of Meghan there would, um, you know, how much there would be.”

“Didn’t know how big to make it?”

Joe scrunches his nose, shoulders raised. “I guessed.”

“It’s perfect. She’d like being in something you made for her.” Wrapped in bubble wrap is the urn Joe made for Bernard, although we have no idea what he’s chosen to do with his half of her ashes. He does not answer our texts or emails.

“You want me to stick around and help out?”

“No thanks.” I pat his hand as my eyes well. “I want to do this alone. Go have your bath.”

Once I hear the running water, I peel back the velvet bag that protects the box, which I imagine is meant to make the whole cardboard thing more palatable to family. But the velvet feels garish, over the top, like I should find a bottle of Crown Royal inside. The box itself is durable, with the plastic bag of ashes closed in a tight knot. Resting on top of the grey pile is a silver disc that notes the name of the deceased, the date of cremation and cremation number. *In case you want to travel with her at some point*, said the funeral home employee. I’d nodded at this, considered taking my sister on all the trips she’d never been on like a portable sidekick.

I look to my utensil drawer, consider a fork, but instead pluck the disc from the ash with my fingertips and set it aside, leaving dusty debris on the countertop. The countertop where I eat. Should I use a funnel? My hands? A spoon? Uncertainty takes over and eventually, after lifting the bag and placing it down again several times, I open the urn, nestle the mouth of the bag into the opening and start shaking, gently, until a pile of Meghan builds inside the pottery like a powdery mountain.

“Almost there,” I say aloud. I stop the flow of ashes and right the bag, eyeing the amount that remains. About a half a cup. But there is no more room in Joe’s creation, which makes me feel sick and a bit giddy. I stare at the urn, the waiting pile, the layer of dust that swirls around me like fireflies dancing in the light.

“Joe?” I carry my sister in my cupped palms like a sacrificial offering and push into the bathroom where Joe is submerged under a pool of scented bathwater. Tears run down my face but the emotion is uncertain. This is a common occurrence these days.

“I can’t make her fit.” I hold the urn out as evidence, the tower of human remains that makes a precarious peak. “What do I do?”

Joe sits up, the water sloshing around him. The air is hot and steamy, with a fine layer of condensation already forming on the cool ceramic. God, what if there’s a drip and then part of her ends up on the floor?

“I don’t mean to be crass,” Joe says, his naked body making the serious conversation even more bizarre, “but is there a way you can, I don’t know, push her down a little? Stuff her in there?”

We both stifle smirks. “This is weird,” I say.

“Yup.”

“But then what?” I say, placing the urn on the vanity. “Then she’ll be all over my hands. What if I push her in here and then have to wash my hands and wash her down the drain? It could be her nose, or a hand or something.” Already, a charcoal crust has formed underneath my pointer finger and thumbnails, from where I plucked the ID disc from the ash. A shiver passes through my body.

Joe steps from the bath, his lithe body glistening with damp. “I’ll come out and help. We’ll figure it out.”

“I said I wanted to be alone,” I snap, suddenly crying hard, stomping back out to the kitchen. I turn on my heel instantly and return to the bathroom. Joe is already climbing back into the water with resignation. “I’m sorry. That was asshole. You’ve done this nice thing and I was an asshole.”

“It’s fine,” Joe says, his voice full of compassion. “I understand.”

“You’re too good to me.”

“I’d be the asshole if I wasn’t.”

Back in the kitchen, I place the urn on the counter again, pace like a predator stalking its prey. Then I commit, make my hand a flat paddle and press, press, press into the ash, leaving my fingerprints on her identity. The ash is shockingly smooth, even though I’ve read that cremated remains can be the opposite, full of sharp nubs of bone. Bone. All she was in the end was bone. My tears mix with her ashes until there is a dirty slop of sister on the counter and my hands but finally, I am able to slip the contents into the pot, easing the lid into place with a gentle click.

My hands are devastating evidence, lined with filth in the cracks and pores of my skin. The last time they looked like this was in basic training, the filth of carbon streaking everything, the sense that I would never be able to rid myself of this deeply embedded experience. But it had felt good then, too, to clean and scrub but know a residue was still there, assured in its pervasiveness. She is with me, on me, everywhere, and I shake and sob as I take pump after pump of dish soap and make frothy grey lather in my palms.

Later, Joe seals the urn with a smooth bead of silicone. I place the pot on the floor of my carpeted office and wrap my entire body around it, curling my fetal shape into what’s left. She cannot be hurt here, in my office, in a house that is hours away from Bernard, while I nestle her into my tender underbelly.

I am so tired. Since puberty, caring for Meghan has been a full-time job. From bad men, bad choices, bad goals, bad self-image. From car accidents and addicts, from parents and bullies. From cancer. Sometimes, the battle was saving her from herself. The weight of that warriorhood has sunk me into the office floor. Tugging at my throat is the knowledge that she is forever divided between two families, pulled between peace and war.

I stroke the urn, the ceramic smooth like a worry stone. She may be cold or scared or who the fuck knows but I am here, Meghan. Always, I am here. And even if I cannot save you, I will never leave.

September, 2018

Two weeks since everything was the same and yet different. I press back into the velour car seat while Joe navigates Newfoundland's rolling roads. The trip was booked nine months prior, but Meghan made me promise to come because I'd need a vacation, she insisted, even if vacationing felt crass, somehow impolite. But standing at the edge of Canada, gasping back grief amongst Jellybean row houses, I wonder why I've bothered when all I think of is my sister; dead, brownish mucous dripping from her "o" shaped mouth.

"Well, that was something, wasn't it?" Joe says as he drives, his cheeks red and wind whipped.

Now that I have a signal, I press send on my text message to Mom. It's showcases Joe and me on the edge of Cape Spear, where a few months earlier, a woman made the news by plunging to her death when she ignored the countless signs to stay clear of the cliffs.

*Don't linger near the edge*, Mom had yelled into the phone that morning while I pulled the cell from my ear and winced. Since we landed days ago, my raging head cold has turned into a raging ear infection and my whole head aches.

*See!* My message says. The text includes a photo, Joe and I with our faces pressed tight into forced grins. *Not dead fish bait at the bottom of the ocean!*

She replies with a heart emoji. Mom has only recently started employing emojis. Three weeks ago, Meghan and I were laughing about this new tendency, along with Mom's tendency to call town streets "the main drag," and employing slang like "vacay." *Is Mom a secret Valley*



*Girl, or what?* Meghan whispered, and we had laughed until Meghan clutched her tumour and groaned. I can hear it, that aching, even now.

I stare out at the ocean and want to collapse into tears. Instead, I hold my sobs in my throat so that I don't hamper another part of this vacation.

"I definitely need to see a doctor." I rub at my jaw, where the pain is spreading from ear to everywhere.

"We'll be going through Gander in a few hours. We can stop there, ya?"

"I'll consider it a tour of medical services across Canada."

"They'll give you some antibiotics and get the ball rolling," Joe says, patting my hand. "You'll be better in no time."

I say nothing. For days, I have been mistaking the pain for a physical manifestation of grief. The gentle undulation of the car lulls me to sleep, and I wake only as we arrive at the Gander hospital emergency room. It's raining so hard that I can't believe I've not woken to the pounding of drops on the roof.

"Thought I'd drop you here and I'll go get groceries. That okay?"

"You forget my depressingly familiarity with hospitals. I'll be fine. I'll text when I'm done."

Once inside, I register, the receptionist only mildly stumped by my Ontario health card and sit to wait my turn in the relatively empty emergency department. Two teenage girls are huddled inwards to one another, their raincoats dripping puddles around their ankles. I quickly learn that the one with the heavy eye makeup is having contractions.

“It’ll be ‘dem Braxton Hicks,” says the other, her multicoloured hair knotted into two horns at the top of her head. “When did your big sister ever lie to ya?” She takes her sister’s hand, and I notice now a tiny baby bump underneath her t-shirt.

“Kelly Thompson?” A woman comes out of the locked emergency doors and looks to the teens, then me. “You’re up!”

I relay my symptoms and hop up onto the exam table. “This ear be right burstin’!” says the nurse practitioner after peering inside my ear canal with a lighted device. “You lets it get awfully far gone.”

“I don’t think I’ve been taking very good care of myself lately,” I mutter. I’d known the pain wasn’t just clogged ears from the plane, but I had wanted to sit with it, let it remind me I was still here.

“Well now, you take this and get yourself better then.”

She writes me a script for penicillin, and I sit in the hospital lobby and wait for Joe. Our next stop at Gros Morne National Park, where I want to get lost amongst moose and scrubby landscapes and sparse population. I want to read the page of a book without falling asleep or weeping.

“Quite the day out there? Isn’t it?” says an elderly man sitting next to me. He gestures with his chin towards the expansive windows, where rain falls in torrents across the rugged rock. We can barely see across the road except for a span of pines that bend sideways in the wind. “The kind of weather that soaks you in seconds!”

“I’m not minding it too much,” I say. It suits my mood, although I don’t voice this. I want to be wrung out like a sopping sweater, squeezing out every drop.

“Ah, you’re from away then. Whereabouts?” He gently slaps me on the shoulder, the other hand firmly gripped around his cane. Veins line his hands like a purplish road map punctuated with liver spots of history. I’d been told to expect Maritimers to be a next level of friendly, and had hungered for it before arriving and finding for the first time in my life, I want nothing to do with friendly. I want to be as alone as I feel.

“Ontario. Toronto area, but I’m an army brat. Moved around.”

“Ah, I once lived out that way but no longer. Me, now, I live on Fogo. You know Fogo? Been a fisherman all me life. It’s in me bones. Fred’s the name.” He stretches out his hand and I shake it and smile back at his semi-toothless grin. Fred, in his pageboy hat, looks like a caricature stereotype of a Newfoundlander. All that’s missing is a cod dangling from one arm and a nor’easter in the other.

“I’m Kelly. So nice to meet you.”

“Kelly, it’s a pleasure. I’m waiting on my niece. She’s taking me back after my check up with the surgeon. Got me a new knee, you see?” Fred lifts his trouser leg to reveal a shiny line of staples that swirl around his joint. “Good as new!”

Meghan had staples like that, a longer more painful line that would never heal. I think of us giggling as I tugged them free after her surgery, wielding the removal tool like a light sabre as the metallic hooks released from her skin. *You’re enjoying this too much*, she said, smirking up at me while she held her shirt to her chin and watched.

“Your knee feels better then, after surgery?”

“By far, by far, girly. I’m a new man.” He slaps his good knee, as though testing his own mettle. “You waiting on someone? Need a ride somewhere?”

“Oh, that’s nice of you, thank you. But my husband is coming. He’s just running some errands before he picks me back up. We have a long drive ahead.”

“Where you off to then?”

“Gros Morne. My husband wants to do some hiking and I plan on getting some writing done. I’m a writer.” Edits due. On my book. Edits that Meghan will never see. The book that she will never hold. My publisher said to wait, that the deadline could be pushed as long as I needed, but I owe this to Meghan, right? I owe her working through whatever hurts to make something beautiful instead. And nothing has changed. Nothing at all.

Fred nods pensively, as though he can imagine a career typing away, creating art, while he provided tangible, nourishing fish from the waters of the Atlantic. “It’s good to be married. He a good man, your husband?”

“The best. The best of men.” My smile betrays me.

“Ah, my Mary. Now she was a good wife. She was a good cook, too. Mind you, nothing fancy. She didn’t do fancy. But always had the seasoning just right. Never too much salt. You can wreck a meal with too much salt, dontcha know. Mary, I lost her now, eight years ago. To the cancer. Terrible disease.” At this, Fred’s eyes well up and he pulls a handkerchief from his pocket to dab at his face. But he turns to me then, does not masculinize his grief, eight years running. He faces me so I can see the tears still brimming, join him in mourning, and then he takes my hands in his and holds them, giving gentle pats. The touch from a stranger should feel awkward, but his callouses scrape at my wounds like a salve, peeling back layers until I am bared in the lobby amongst the strangers.

“My sister.” I gulp. Take a breath. “She just died of cancer. Two weeks ago.”

“Mere weeks! Oh my, dear Kelly.” He brings my hands to his chest and gives them a squeeze. “She musta been some young by the looks of you.”

“Thirty-seven. Just turned.” I let my own tears fall, splashing the vinyl armrest between us.

“Cancer, it be a nasty beast.” Our heads bob in unison.

Doctors are paged over the intercom. Families stumble in from the rain, shaking drops from their raincoats and umbrellas until there is a tidal pool in the entryway. But despite the hustle, somehow there is only Fred and I, hands gripped in one another’s. Strangers who aren’t strangers at all.

A horn honks politely, two quick taps. A young woman leans over the steering wheel of a sedan and waves through the window, a swirl of red hair falling in loose curls. Fred waves back. “That’s my niece there. She’s a good girl.” He sniffles and returns my hands to my lap like he is putting a kitten there and not part of my own body. “You take care now, Kelly. You come to Fogo anytime and I’ll see you right. Just on the northwest edge of the island is where you’ll find me.”

I stand and hug my new companion in the lobby of the Gander emergency room, the last place I expected to find comfort outside of the penicillin bottle. I watch him drive away in the little red car and let myself cry until Joe arrives. I plop into the rental, turn up the heat, and offer my hand to be squeezed by a very good man who will one day regale his friends with details of meals well-made, with the right touch of salt.

That night, I have a nightmare about scattering Meghan’s ashes, an event we have planned for a week after my return. We want to set her free from a cliff in Grundy Lake Provincial Park, the

home of our last family camping trip destination, a time where she seemed peaceful and happy as she read young adult novels and fed chipmunks. In my dream, she was cast into the wind only to splash back into our faces, and above us, in the air, she cries at yet another indignity. I wake up sweating and call our parents.

“I’m not ready,” I gasp. “I’m not ready to let her go.”

“Neither are we, Moo,” says Mom’s voice in the dark. “Neither are we.”

September, 2018

“Ready for your first day back to work?” Joe asks. He stands at the door and puts on his combat boots.

“It’s not like I have to bust out my business suit.” I’m still in my pajamas, which Joe and I jokingly call my work outfit.

“Still.” He kisses me. It is the first workday since Meghan’s death, since vacation, since time consoling my parents. First day back to real life. To cooking and writing articles and keeping schedules. “It’ll be hard.” He squeezes me. Smells of cologne and Tide and home. I hold on to the sleeve of his uniform tunic, unwilling to let go.

I look to my phone, which is silent and without purpose. My sister’s chipper voice will not perk my morning, and the absence of it will strain my heart.

“That’s what the therapy is for.” I smile wanly. “Got an appointment at ten.”

“Have a good day, okay?” Joe kisses both Pot Roast and me and we watch him drive away from the front window.

“We can do this, right, puppy?” I kiss Pot Roast’s nose and he lets out an appreciative grunt. I flick on the television to something irrelevant, slurping my coffee even long after it’s gone cold. Fifteen minutes before my appointment, I throw on sweatpants and a t-shirt, not caring for once that I am not wearing makeup, not showered, my hair sticking up in seventeen different directions. Tears will flow, I know this, so I don’t bother with mascara or blush or anything else that might adorn me. I will enter the battle brave and clean.

I sob through the entire session, at one point, having to put my head between my legs to catch my breath. My doctor offers me a warm can of Perrier and hands over sympathetic tissues. An hour later, I stumble home with swollen eyes and trembling hands.

When I enter the house, Pot Roast is smacking his lips, handmade paper strewn across the living room area rug. There are tiny beads, bits of sequin glittering on the laminate, and pops of magenta fabric cast about. The materials are colours are eerily familiar, although it takes me a moment to coalesce, a knot forming in my esophagus—it is remnants of Meghan's journal and my agonized, handwritten letters to her. Eaten by the dog.

“What did you do?” I wail like a banshee and drop to my knees to collect the scraps, my hands vibrating as I carry the beads, sequins and paper bits to the counter to try to put them back together. Some pages still remain, dangling oddly from the linen cording, but I realize they are only the pages without ink, the ones blank of tears and sadness. Pot Roast bounces to my place in the kitchen, elated simply because I am home and not because he vanquished the emotions I gave voice to on the page. His tail whips back and forth, smacking my legs and the counter.

Yesterday, I typed all the letters onto my computer, the desire for permanence overriding my romantic ideal behind the pen and paper. *Have you considered writing to her?* my therapist just asked an hour ago. *It can be healing.*

“They're not gone,” I whisper aloud, like I need to convince myself. The letters still exist. They are triple saved on various devices, but what is all of this without the physical representation in the ugly beaded book I both hate and love?

“Why, Roast?” My voice is strained, primal, and far too loud. Pot Roast cowers with his tail between his legs, ears flattened aerodynamically, unaccustomed to being yelled at. His eyes



turn from me to the book, me to the book. He skitters, head down, eyes upwards and full of understanding and something else, too. I have scared him, and I hate myself for it.

Did he smell Meghan on the pages? Did he want to offer me a cleansing service in which we write letters to loved ones who hurt us and then burn them in a bucket like bad rom com? In all the books I've read on grief and addiction, there was always a recommendation to spill feelings into letters, and sometimes to burn them, casting ash into air. But I don't want ash. I already have more ash than I can manage.

During her surgical recovery at my house, back at Christmas, Pot Roast transformed into Meghan's furry guardian. He slept in her room, careful not to jostle her on their shared bed, barked when she needed something, and sat on her feet while she used the toilet. When she cried, overcome with fear, he would lean his hefty head back and let her bury the anxiety between strands of his fur. And when she asked to see him just days before her death, he'd delicately climbed onto the hospice bed and nestled himself under her hand when she was too weak to lift her own arm. They fell asleep like that, connected, Pot Roast's back legs dangling off the edge like windchimes. They had a thing, these two.

I take the dog's brindled cheeks in my hand, still shaking, my eyes wet, and I kiss his face. "I'm sorry, buddy. Always in cahoots you two, weren't you? Still protecting your Auntie?" He wags his tail in response, keen to get back on my good side. "I'm so sorry." I whisper it over and over, the beefy dog leaning into me with trust, licking my face.

Fall leaves turn orange and red glimmers on trees, filtering through the windows. I don't mind the executor tasks that can be done from home and the safety of my sweatpants, but once I leave the front door, I crave a sign that explains away my unshaven legs, my dog hair-covered clothes, my hair sticking on end. *My sister just died*. I picture the sign in a witty font, some macabre graphic to give people the gist. On a t-shirt, perhaps. Because people should know, shouldn't they? They should stop the world moving to make space for all this hurt.

At home, my stomach rumbles and I mindlessly eat Halloween candy for breakfast. Meghan's estate management has been a shockingly easy process, which upsets me somehow, like she had a life barely worth processing. No house bills with her name on it. No savings.

I swallow sticky nougat and glance at my computer. I haven't written anything in weeks. Whenever I try, my mind stalls. *Try to focus on physical tasks*, my therapist had said when I complained about my uncooperative brain. *A day at a time*. Outside, our lawn, neglected over the summer, is covered in weeds. I crave this physical task above all, the satisfying snap of the weed puller when an invasive seed has its roots snapped.

Outside, I survey the yard with my gloved hands on my hips, tools in hand before setting to work. The pile of weeds is endless. Each time I bend to pick up one of the root plugs, I groan, my body and brain sharing agony. After an hour, I face the lawn to assess my progress and feel a bubble of tears lingering, frustrated with the insidiousness, the persistence of things that should not exist. Wind whips stray leaves into a tornado on the road. I blow my nose over and over until the tissue breaks and I fling it into the plastic bag of weeds I've collected.

"I'm stopping," I say to no one but the air. I've been doing this a lot lately, openly narrating my mundane functions as a means of grounding, calming. "I'll just pick these ones up." My eyes water in the wind, which has turned sharp and biting, and I keep swiping at my face, my

hair, smearing dirt from my gardening gloves. When did I last wash my hair? Have I changed my pants recently? My neighbour walks by with her yappy rescued chihuahua and briefly pauses like she might engage me in conversation, then seems to think better of it and moves on.

The final patch is nearly cleaned up, with five huge bags of weed plugs to show for my efforts. “Nearly done,” I mutter. Out the corner of my eye is a glimmer of yellow and black, near the windows at the front of the house. Litter, likely. After gusts of wind or bad weather, I often have to patrol our lawn for errant recycling and garbage that rolls down our suburban street like tumbleweeds. I drag the bag behind me, so heavy now, and find not garbage but a yellow finch, dead. Its eyes are still clear but have gone glassy and blank, the wee body a stiff board. Many of these birds dip into the birdhouse I nailed to the yard fence, zipping and diving through the air. Now, lifeless in the grass, cast aside. Mourned by no one.

I scoop the animal into my hand with delicacy, cooing and petting its small head with my gloved fingertip. “There, there, little guy.” Death, it seems is everywhere, and fucking hell, I’ve known this all along, but tears spill from my face, drip into the ground where they disappear instantly in the crispy, hole-filled grass. I lay the bird ceremoniously in the yard waste bag, where it sits atop a bed of crab grass and dandelion puffs. “I’m so sorry, fella. So sorry.” I take off my glove and stroke his smooth feathers with my knuckle. The bird is cold to the touch, hard like a pebble.

Meghan would have made the bird a tiny coffin out of a matchbox, then buried it complete with funeral rites and a presiding spiritualist for proper sendoff into the afterlife. She would have cried big heaving breaths until I led her back to reality, where things—birds, animals, sisters, mothers—die daily. It wouldn’t have voiced it but I would have liked a funeral for Meg, enjoyed the formulaic procession through grief, with eulogies and mourners and

predictable patterns that I've seen in all the movies. A funeral would mean an end to something, a start of something new. But instead, what remains of my sister is in my office. There was no funeral for me to martyrize her like all her friends do on Facebook, as though she were faultless in her existence as abused wife, drug addict, occasional shitty human being.

My fingers ache with cold and I abandon my project and flee inside, leaning against the front door and heaving with relief as I dial the phone, like I've shut out a murderer mid pursuit.

"Mom?" I gasp for air as I stalk to the kitchen sink and wash my hands over and over. Too much soap. Too much everything. We're used to one another's panicked phone calls at strange times of day and night, as if we're testing respective aliveness.

"You okay, Moo?" My tears set off her own. These days, it doesn't matter the reason. One of us cries and its kicks in the natural response. "Moo, you okay?"

"A dead bird," I gasp. "On my lawn. He was so little. Young, I think." I have no way of knowing whether or not the bird was young, old, male or female. My avian knowledge barely informed me it was a finch, and yet its youth seems something knowable to me, some greater injustice to his untimely meeting with my shiny glass window.

"You won't believe this," Mom says. "I found dead bird on the front step this morning."

I laugh, blow my nose into my dishtowel without realizing it is, in fact, the dishtowel. "Meghan has a weird sense of humour up there."

"She knew we'd get it," Mom responds.

I don't know what message my sister is sending. I am tired of always trying to figure her out.

2019

The needle pokes in and out of my arm at rapid speed, leaving a trail of ink embedded in my skin. Rock music filters through the speakers in a gentle murmur. The room is comfortable, too, with everything painted black, Japanese block prints framed on the walls and a huge television playing something on mute. I lay splayed on my stomach across what looks like a dentist chair, back of my arm bared.

“This is turning out really nice,” the artist says. He looks younger than I expected from his impressive portfolio—early twenties, maybe—and yet he is covered in art from his scalp to his fingertips. Pale blonde bristle dusts his upper lip, and a line of expensive-looking rings circle each finger. He’s wearing a Gucci watch, huge black t-shirt that nearly comes to his knees, Vans sneakers. He wipes away excess ink with a paper towel, leaving a black smear across my elbow before the buzz of the needle returns.

“I’m super excited about it,” I say, to convince myself, perhaps. I am excited, now that it’s happening, but have spent months nervous about the commitment, often having nightmares in which I accidentally get a bicep tat of a question mark or some other meaningless punctuation, then wake regretting it.

“My sister would love this.”

“The picture itself?” He changes needles and starts filling in with detail and shade. The pain is delicious, barely registering. I’ve been sleeping for most of the six-hour appointment, waking only when the sharp barbs inch closer to my armpit.

“Just the fact that I’m getting one, I guess. I never thought I’d commit to one picture for life.”

“Was she all tatted up then?” His voice is a soft elocution, like that of someone on a meditation app.

“Not really. She had three, one while underage. They were all super ugly, if I’m honest. I spent most of my teen years helping her hide it from my parents.”

“What else are sisters for?”

“We found you together, actually. My sister and I.”

“Oh?” He does not ask for more details as he shades the letters.

I hold the image in my mind. Meghan and I in her hospice bed, cruising through Instagram. *What about this artist? What about this idea?* When I called and booked, discovered the three-month wait, we had looked at each other and known she would be dead before the appointment came. *The art will be there when I can’t*, she’d said, and I’d cracked some joke about how dramatic she was being before leaving the room to sob.

“Yeah. Sneaky bitch said that me getting a tattoo was her dying wish.”

“Ah, good sisterly move. A final act of peer pressure.”

A swell of sadness takes hold and a rush of shame over this cliché, dead-honouring tradition I’m wading through. The artist snaps off his glove and squirts a spray of distilled water on my arm, then swipes over and over at the tender skin until it shines new. He reveals my chosen design like a Rembrandt discovered under the streaky oil of some unknown work.

“I’m going to guess by this design that you’re a writer?”

“My book comes out in a few months.”

“Your sister never got to read it?”

I shake my head. “No.” I just sent the dedication off to my editor for the final copyedit. *To my sister, Meghan. My biggest fan. My tiny defender. You always said I could, and the result is all for you.*

The artist smears some ointment across my skin and places his tools on the plastic-covered tray. “All done. Go take a look.”

I stand, my legs wobbly underneath me. In the mirror, my arm reveals the picture Meghan and I devised in a gradient of blacks and greys. My tricep now sports an antique Corona typewriter atop an open book, letters spraying out from the keyboard to spell *Meg*. I want to touch it, my hand going to the open wound. I want to press and poke, feel the pain and the heat that radiates from it until it swallows me up and replaces the other pains left behind.

“My sister would love this.” It is all I can manage.

“It’s a great way to honour her. Besides, you won’t need to hide yours from your parents. You’re all grown up.” He bares dimpled cheeks and leaves me alone in the room to stare at my new self in the mirror.

“Well, Meg,” I say aloud. “I better still like this when I’m all old and wrinkly.”

If she were here, Meghan would tell me it wouldn’t matter, that moods change, feelings change, but that these changes don’t negate our wants from the past or our dreams of what could be. Nothing is permanent, even a tattoo. She would laugh, throw her head back all carefree while stretched out in the chair next to me, requesting some off-the-rack design from the newbie artist no one trusted yet because, *who cares! Give it a try!* She would tell me not to worry. She would say I need to relax. She would take my hand and say it would all be okay, and I would listen, even if we both know it wouldn’t be.

2019

Headphones are tucked into my ears and I listen to the recordings over and over, having found them on Meghan's phone once I started my executor tasks. I listen in the bathtub on speakerphone, in the living room on surround sound, through my tinny headphones while running errands. The hunger for confirmation of my suspicions makes me feel dirty and deceitful. All those years of lies to cover Bernard's behaviour made it so that separating Meghan's personal truths from facts was like straining onions from soup. The flavour already tainted everything.

*You're such a stupid, fucking idiot.*

*He'll be lucky if he remembers you existed,* he says of Sam.

*Every conversation we have is, 'You're not doing enough. I'm not getting enough help,'* his voice says in a singsong mock. *What the fuck?*

*Are you that dense? Do I have to get you a fucking dictionary?*

And then Meghan, quiet and feigning defiance: *I can't have the kids watching their dad treat their mother like this when she's dying.*

Worst of all, Sam interjecting. *Mommy? Play-Doh?*

There are five or six of them and I listen to the worst of the recordings now, standing in line at Canada Post, moving ahead a customer at a time. Sun pours in from the old aluminum-framed windows, glinting off the displays of Canadian Mint coins. I turn up the volume, close my eyes to Sam's words, Meghan's tears. It is this section of the clip that does me in, my nephew's innocent voice. I imagine him holding up the plastic tubs of multicoloured clay, his



eyebrows raised and questioning, trying to make sense of the constant anger and bitterness between his parents. I grit my teeth, rage swelling like proofing dough.

And there are emails, too, written a month after they were married, in which Meghan asks Bernard why he would hit her with a closed fist, followed by empty promises to leave. Instead, she made another child with him. Did she know I would find her breadcrumb trail? Hope for it, even?

I'd sat with the recordings for weeks before downloading them and sending them off to the crown prosecutor in Bernard's upcoming court case. As soon as I pressed send, I wondered if this was something to regret, if Meghan wanted my silence and complicity as much as Bernard demanded hers. Was this an act of revenge on my part, an act to protect the children? And each time I saw a photo of the kids as I scrolled through my phone, I knew I'd made the decision I hoped would keep them safe while allowing me to sleep.

I move ahead in line, step towards the counter and lay my documents out like a fan of efficiency. To get Meghan's mail forwarded to me, I have to bring in a copy of the will, her death certificate, my identification. Being executor is a sweet pain I crave, because it is checklists and facts, paperwork and financials. It is decisions that can distract me, aimless without a patient to care for, a sister to share with.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," says the employee, scanning the will. "How old was your sister?"

"Thirty-seven." I stare out the window at that brilliant cascade of light.

The clerk shakes her head. "Too young to die."

There are so many injustices. This death, this suffering, is just one of many.

"Well," the clerk says with a thwack of stamp on paper. "She knew you'd look after her and her estate affairs. I'm sure that gave her comfort."

I nod at the woman, clench my fists as she pats the forms into an envelope and hands me a receipt. I collect my papers and shuffle towards the door, rushing past an elderly man and not bothering to hold the door as I zap my key fob and slump into the front seat.

Then the tears come, as they do often, without reprieve. I have spilled my salty pain all over town. In the grocery store. At the hairdressers. While picking up prescriptions meant to keep my mood in check. I make no apologies for the crying, don't bother working to make others comfortable with my grief. I watched that effort eat my sister alive faster than the cancer. My grief is a fact, verifiable.

I mop my face with my sleeve and take a few deep breaths, ignoring the looks of concern from people who walk past, then drop the paperwork into the passenger seat, nodding at my ability to complete one task today. One thing, and then another, and then another. All I could do was give comfort. It is one more truth that I mentally record for later, when I know I will need it most.

I stare at the phone for a long time before picking it up to make the call. When Mary's face fills the screen, indicating the call is in connection, I take some deep breaths, stroke Pot Roast's chunky neck while he stretches lazily across my lap.

"Kelly, hello." Mary's voice is even and aloof.

"Hi Mary. I'm hoping we could arrange a time where my mom, dad and I can spend some time with the kids. And from what I gather, they still live with you?" I hate having to ask this question. I hate the uncertainty of where Lily and Sam grow up, what they eat, who they spend time with, because it feels like we've been scrubbed clean from their lives the moment Meghan died. We haven't seen them in months, and the one time I got to speak to Sam, he'd

been convinced I was Meghan, excited and then devastated. I'd never before hated how much I sounded like my sister.

"Right, well." She pauses and I try to imagine whatever it is she's doing. Making dinner? Prepping lunches? Taking her own careful, considered breaths? "The kids are still with me during the week. They spend weekends with their father sometimes." Bernard still isn't allowed to be alone with the children, not until his court date in the spring.

"We don't care what day of the week it is." I want to make it as easy for Mary and Bernard as possible, difficult to say no, because there have already been so many no's that I worry the children will have forgotten our faces. "We'll make it work regardless."

"Well, I think it would be best if your family dealt with me instead of Bernard directly."

"Whatever works." I turn my eyes to the ceiling. More breaths. Whatever it takes to pacify.

"It's hard though, for everyone."

"Yes." This much I can agree too.

She clears her throat, the phone speaker scraping up against something. "And we have concerns, actually. Sam wants to be just like his daddy, like all little boys, and the other day, Sam said that his daddy was a bad man. He heard that from someone and it certainly wouldn't come from us. We don't feel comfortable with the children being influenced in that way."

I've disliked Mary since the moment I met her, never taken to her pushiness, which I tried to respect her role as a protective single mom, but I've learned it's simple abrasiveness. And yet there is this tender part of me that understands what she's saying, can make sense of her fear. I worry about the kids being turned against us, too. "Maybe Sam thinks daddy is a bad man because he saw daddy get arrested on the front lawn," I snap, then try to reel myself in. "Mary,

do you honestly think we would badmouth their father? Even if we hate him, we'd never do that to the kids. Ever." It feels good to say this word: hate. I mouth it over and over, feel the way it presents on my lips, extending the 'a' as if I were about to break into song.

"It's very difficult, Kelly, with your family against ours, basically, in court."

"It is, yes. But the kids don't need to know that."

"Your dad just seems to hate Bernard so much."

I resist the urge to throw the phone at the wall. "Mary, try to imagine your son being screamed at, punched, and threatened while he was dying. Try to imagine how that must feel for all of us knowing that's how Meghan died."

"Well, he was sick," Mary responds, all matter-a-fact without a hint of irony. Her dismissiveness piques something deep inside me but I know this is the last instance in which I will make this argument. It will never matter again. And for the first time, I see this whole separate hell from Mary's eyes, watching a son she raised become someone she doesn't particularly like, but loves as much as we love Meghan. It is a parent's lot in life to protect their young, despite bad decisions, bad behaviours, abuse. And now, to be essentially navigating parenthood at sixty without much in the way of support. I may not like Mary, but I respect her.

"Whether he was sick or not doesn't matter to us, those of us who love her. Those who watched what it did to her and watched her die."

Mary is silent on the other end. I hear something tapping, the ding of a clock. "How about a visit sometime in the new year? After the holidays?"

It is too far away. It is too little. But it is something. "That would be great. Thank you."

When Bernard gets through his trial with a slap on the wrist and a fine, I try to not let it bother me, instead focusing on the children. I try not to judge the girlfriend Bernard brings to court, the way Mary pays the fine by whipping out her chequebook the moment the plea deal is ratified, or Bernard's smirk in Dad's direction when the judge's gavel whacked the plate in front of him. I try to let go of the hate. I try over and over and over, because Meghan would want that of me. Meghan was a fountain of forgiveness, even when it wasn't deserved. Sometimes, I want to be more like my sister.

2019

I check the rear-view mirror obsessively, looking for signs that I've not buckled my niece and nephew's car seats properly. I googled the procedure before I left the house, watched a few YouTube videos, but I'm still uncertain. All of this—the diaper bag, the mini monkey-printed mittens, the plasticky buckles of their winter coats—feels uncertain. Mary had waved us off kindly from her front step, looking tired.

“Who wants to sing a song?” I ask, my voice high and tight. The kids appear totally fine. Older yes, but not wary or concerned about the direction we head in, the uncertainty we face. My parents and I, however, are nervous, simultaneously craving time with the children and yet barely able to stand it—these walking, talking, Meghan look-a-likes that are not her, can never be her, and yet are her all at once.

“Hello back there?” In the mirror, Lily smiles shyly, but still hasn't spoken. Sam stares out the window pensively. “No one wants to sing for Auntie?”

“Auntie,” Sam says, his voice serious. But he does not make eye contact. “My mommy is in heaven.” He is all matter-a-fact, emotionless. A typical four-year-old comprehension of death.

I swallow hard, keep my eyes on the lane in front of me, try not to be thrown by the randomness of his statement while also recognizing it's the proverbial elephant in the car. The yellow line warbles. “I know, Piggie. We miss Mommy, don't we?”

He bobs his head. “She's an angel now.”

“Yes.” The word squeaks from my lips as a few tears do, too. I swipe at my face, annoyed. *Keep your shit together, Kelly.* “You know, your mommy was Auntie's sister. Just like Lily is your sister.”

“You have sister?” He’s interested now, leaning forward against the confines of his booster seat. He smiles at this idea of me having a sibling, his eyes full of wonder as though he can’t imagine someone as old as me with a mini relation in tow. His eyes are the same colour as Meghan’s. As mine.

“That’s right. Auntie’s sister was your mommy.”

“I’m sorry your sister died, Auntie.” And then he reaches across the expanse of my father’s Lincoln and takes his sister’s mittened hand.

I pull over to the shoulder, the tires skidding against gravel. I can barely breathe, my throat tight, my hands shaking. And it’s cold. Or hot. Maybe both. Sun glares off the snow, cascading around the interior. Where are my sunglasses? What time is it?

“Are we at Grandpa’s now, Auntie?”

I turn to face Sam, his eyes bright. “Almost, buddy. We’re almost there.”

When we get to Mom and Dad’s house, Sam and Lily launch into my parents’ arms. They do not play strange with us. They do not cry or complain. They do not get upset about being in the home they have only ever visited with their mother. Instead, we complete puzzles, play hide and go seek, colour outside lines. I watch Mom and Dad’s faces fill with the exact duplicity of emotion I feel, torn between joy and devastation.

Sam slaps puzzle pieces in place at the kitchen table, his eyebrows meeting in the middle as he concentrates. He pauses every once in a while to bring Lily a toy she might want, a crayon colour she should see, and holds these things out to her like little offerings.

“Thank you, So-So,” Lily says, smiling at him. So-So for Sam, and he gives her a hug before he returns to his spot next to Dad, role of big brother sufficiently executed. They will look after one another. They will whisper secrets in the dark at night, in their room, and welcome one

another to play, maybe until puberty hits. It'll be rocky then, for a while, I want to warn them, but they'll return to their siblinghood.

Lily and I play on the floor at Mom's feet on the living room carpet, and I help Lily balance wooden blocks on top of another. When the tower reaches her desired height, she topples it over and we laugh together as I poke her round toddler belly. And I feel it then, the tug of love for her, the feeling that before this moment had felt somehow impossible. She did not kill my sister, but rather, gave her another reason to live.

Lily takes in the scene around her—the plastic train set, the soft covered books, the trucks and plush animals—and pushes hair from her face like a woman on a mission, toddling over to the entertainment cabinet where the photo of Meghan still sits and Knuckles has taken to barking at on the daily. In the picture, Meghan's hair remains shoulder-length and bouncy. Her cheeks are rosy and plump and freckles spray across her nose and cheeks. She is my opposite, to look at.

"Mama." Lily takes the photo from the cabinet and presses it to her chest. "Mama." She holds the frame in the air now, triumphant. Mom, Dad and I watch like movie characters, our eyes welled, hands in fists.

"That's right, sweetie," I say, the only one capable of uttering a word. "That's Mommy."

She waddles to my side, having spent most of the day glued to me, a little human Velcro piece. Whatever stood between a potential bond with her has melted away with Meghan's death.

"Mama?" Lily holds the photo to me as if asking a question. *You? Mommy?* No, no that can't be it because Meghan and I look nothing alike, right? Or, maybe she's saying, *Where is she? Where is this person?* Yet I sound like my sister, maybe smell like our shared childhood and whispered secrets. Perhaps these are tangible qualities to be sensed by those unjaded by remembered loss.



I pull my niece into my arms and snuggle her shaggy curls. I don't correct her. Don't offer her an answer to the question she did not ask. We are content for the day to let the words remain unsaid, unknown, comforted that there is a Mommy, somewhere, here and there and everywhere in between.

July, 2018

Oh Kelly, I don't even know where to start. A letter seems so impersonal for all that you have done for me.

I know you don't look back on our childhood with any great fondness, but I do. Moments of giggles under the blankets, our walks to the corner store where I would buy Doritos. I was always so jealous of your ability to save your treats. Even as we would make our way back, I would already be jealous, knowing anything I got would be gone before we hit the door.—Your gumballs always lasted for days. How did you do that?

You were so damn cute, Kelly. I always thought that if we were twins, I wanted us to look like you. You may have been envious of my feet, but I was envious of your everything.

I love you so much, Kelly.

You know I knew you were going to become a famous writer when you were little. You wrote a novel and I read that book and it hit me no different than one by my favourite writers. I knew then that you had magic in your writing. You have this ability to draw people in and make them feel a part of it. I brag to anyone who will listen. But then anyone who reads your stuff knows what I am saying.

Meghan ends with a promise to finish at another time. She never does get the chance. But she didn't need to. With my sister, I always know how it ends.