|  |
| --- |
| Breaking Time |
| Book One of the Time Breaker Series |
| Susan Colarullo |

Let your soul stand cool and composed,

Before a million universes. *- Walt Whitman*

December 4, 2018

 She studied the ashen sky, her eyes squinting more out of habit than need. The sun was now reduced to a nebulous yellow orb immersed in a murky gray ocean suspended above her head. Much of its light and warmth now filtered out by a layer of dust several hundred miles thick.

 She smelled ozone. A sign that yet another heavy snow squall would roll in that afternoon. Three major storms in the span of only a few days. After months of constant exposure to the cold and snow, and in a state of semi-starvation, she’d grown increasingly unconcerned about what was happening to her. Her disappearance from the world seemed inevitable now, the struggle to survive nearly over. *This*, she thought*, is how nature makes dying easy. It makes you indifferent to your own death.*

Sophie turned as she heard Buck stumble behind her. His hooves had slipped on the icy sheet covering the trail and he’d pitched forward, his front legs now twisted beneath him. She reached out to rub his snout, bending over his long head to whisper words of encouragement. His ribs now clearly showed from beneath the matted coat, where only a few months ago they had not. Back when he was a gift left by others who had lived before her on the dying planet.

He wouldn’t survive much longer if she didn’t manage to find some forage for him. The trees were barren of leaves, the ground covered by at least five feet of packed snow. Even if she were able to dig beneath the layers of ice and snow, she knew that any remaining vegetation was contaminated. They were both sick, practically vibrating with the radioactive elements they’d ingested in their food and water. He far worse than she from the two years he’d lived in the irradiated world, to her six months.

 She still had some squirrel she’d managed to catch in one of her snares that morning, and held it in front of Buck’s nose that morning, but the deer had only stared mutely at her, deeply insulted, before lowering his head and turning away.

By the time the first crack of thunder echoed through the narrow ravines and the first flakes of snow began falling, Sophie had already rigged the plastic tarp over him, carefully concealing its bright blue color beneath pine branches she hauled on her rope sled. She built a fire using the last of the seasoned pine she’d scavenged a few days before, from a cluster of downed trees she’d spotted 30 feet upslope from the trail. The fire would do little to protect Buck from the unyielding cold. She climbed under the tarp to lay beside him and tried to provide some warmth to his backside, her lean arms draped around his emaciated neck. She heard the sounds of thunder-snow faintly echoing from other, more distant storms.

Sophie tried not to fall asleep, consciously listening to the hushed sounds of the snow and the creaking of dead trees straining beneath their added weight. But the screams of the children were never far. She heard them in the mocking cries of the scavenging birds as they swooped overhead. In the squeak of her wooden sled against freshly fallen snow. They were now a part of who she was, and who she would forever be. Until the day she’d fall to the ground one last time, overcome with exhaustion, loneliness, and grief.

She was the girl who had watched as children had been herded, much like cattle, onto a freight truck. It was only today, nearly two weeks later, that her mind began unearthing details about that day. She recalled how the truck’s exterior had been painted with large, garishly colored letters that spelled “MoreGoldInSaks” in a semi-circle above the face of Everleigh Thompson, President Benedict Thompson’s favored golden-haired child, now strangely wizened with age. And then, inexplicably, in another semi-circle bordering the image from below, the caption “Too Big To Fail”. She was the girl who cowered in the brush by the side of the dirt road and held the barrel of a loaded pistol in her mouth, slowly breathing in and out until the massive truck trundled away, leaving behind a deep pool of thick red blood.

And she was the girl who welcomed sleep as it fell across the broken landscape of her mind.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

As usual, the nightmare dissipated even before Sophie woke up. It was the same nightmare that had routinely visited her since she’d been about 12 years old. Every few months, it would roll through her head like one of those old black-and-white newsreels from the 1940s she’d viewed on YouTube while researching World War II for her AP History class. When she was younger, the nightmare skittered chaotically across her cerebral cortex, playing like old film jittering across the screen as the projector catches on ragged sprocket holes, each frame fractured with random cracks in its dried emulsion. But over the years, production values had dramatically improved. Black-and-white footage slowly transitioned to technicolor, and the colors became increasingly more vibrant. Somehow, audio quality had also improved. Sounds of the squawking from the scavenging birds and the creaking of trees under the weight of snow and ice, which had once seemed little more than vague pressure pulses in the wind, were now delivered in full Dolby stereo. And resolution on the deer had increased exponentially. Where the deer had once seemed almost cartoonish, Sophie was now able to distinguish individual hairs on its coat and look into its cloudy irises as she offered up the squirrel meat.

She’d told her mother about the recurring nightmare many times, about the snow and dead trees, the rope sled and the deer. Told her about how real it all felt, how deep the cold bit, deeper than the marrow in her bones. About how agonizing it was to watch the physical world ending and helplessly witness the animal dying without fully understanding why any of it was happening. But Sophie could never manage to find the exact words she needed to effectively communicate how it felt to be alone and afraid at the bottom of world.

Her mother didn’t seem at all concerned about the apocalyptic content of Sophie’s intermittent nightmare. “You’ve always had a pretty vivid imagination, Soph,” she’d whispered in her ear one night after climbing in bed to comfort her. Back when the nightmare had begun its long-term engagement inside of Sophie’s head.

“Yeah, but it’s all so *dark*, Mom. I don’t think it’s normal. Maybe I should see a therapist. Nobody I know has nightmares like this. The same nightmare over and over and over again, and every detail the same, every time. How is that even possible?”

Her mother would release a long sigh. “It’s not about the dream, Sophie.” She was always referring to Sophie’s nightmare as a dream. “It’s never been about the dream,” she’d murmured recently. “It’s about what you would do if you found yourself living it.”

December 11, 2018

 “She didn’t feel any pain.”

“What?”

“Your mother. She didn’t feel any pain.”

Sophie studied the two cops as they stood uneasily on her front porch. She tried to remember why they were there. It seemed important. Their asses looked predictably lumpy and misshapen in their police uniforms. It was especially a problem for the female cop.

“How could you even know that?”

Guy cop stepped forward. His mouth was moving, but the sounds it made were coming out all wrong. “By most accounts, she died instantly.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Sophie said. Her eyes fell onto the painted grey slats of the porch floor. Then over to the shiny shoes of the two uniformed strangers now shifting awkwardly before her. She wondered if she should go inside to grab her phone and call her mom. It seemed like the only way she’d be able to prove to the two self-important cops that they were at the wrong house. The only way to get them to skitter off the porch back into the cold, dense night air so that she could return to her chemistry homework.

The female cop turned to consult with her partner. “She’s clearly in shock. We should take her to the emergency room.”

“I’m not going anywhere until I speak with my mom.”

Guy cop sighed, clearly exasperated. Sophie disliked him more with each passing second. “That’s just it. You can’t. She’s gone. She was killed in a motor vehicle accident.”

Motor vehicle accident. Copspeak for car wreck.

“Yeah, no, that can’t be right,” Sophie murmured. “She left about 30 minutes ago. To go to her writing class.” She noticed a strange look fleetingly pass between the two. A secret look. “Okay, you know what? You’ve got the wrong house. So there’s *that*.”

The forehead of the female cop suddenly got all crinkly. “Honey, we need to contact your relatives. You said your dad doesn’t live here?”

“Yeah. I mean, no, he doesn’t. It’s always been just me and my mom.”

The lady cop was moving closer, her massive arms opening widely. Sophie wasn’t entirely sure she wanted to be hugged by someone wearing a holster with a real gun in it. What she really wanted was to find her cell phone and call her mother. And then get back to her homework. She had that chem exam tomorrow.

“Honey, you don’t have to believe anything right now,” whispered the female police officer as she pulled Sophie into a tight embrace. “You just have to trust us, okay? You can’t be alone tonight. Who’s your closest of kin?” She spoke gently, infinitely patient, as she slowly pivoted Sophie around and steered the teenage girl through the front door and into the dining room, where a table covered with books and papers clearly demarked the area where Sophie had been studying. “We have to find the phone number of your grandparents. Or your aunts or uncles. Do you have any aunts or uncles?”

 Sophie grabbed her phone from the dining room table where she’d been studying and handed it to the woman cop. “I have an aunt that we used to visit when I was little, but she lives in Massachusetts. Aunt Laurie. And another aunt who lives about an hour away. But I don’t know her very well. They’re both listed as contacts on my phone. Both of them under ‘A’. For aunt.”

The lady cop handed Sophie’s phone to her partner. “Okay, good. You rest for a while and then we’ll give Aunt Laurie a call, alright?” She spotted a sofa in the adjacent living room and gently guided Sophie towards it, sitting down on it with Sophie while still hugging her tightly. It was unclear to Sophie how the overweight woman managed to do this with such acute balance. Without them both sprawling forward awkwardly onto each other.

“Yeah. Okay. Can I just rest for a minute? I suddenly feel really tired.”

The female cop seemed oddly encouraged by this news. Sophie briefly wondered if she and Guy Cop had undergone some type of Death News Training, during which they’d been instructed that teenagers informed of a parent’s recent death might be overcome with profound fatigue. As if to confirm her hunch, Lady Cop turned towards her and said “That’s actually a pretty normal response.”

“Ooooh, great. Glad to hear that I’m acting so fucking *normal* after hearing about my mother’s death. Because that’s always been one of my many concerns. That I won’t act like a normal person when someone tells me that my mom has died.” She began sobbing hysterically while pushing the well-meaning stranger away.

But instead of backing off, the cop pulled her closer. “Sophie. Sophie. It’s okay. I wasn’t trying to tell you how to act. That’s not who I am. But I am going to stay here all night with you. I won’t talk, I won’t say a word. I’m just going to stay with you until one of your relatives comes to get you. Is that okay?”

Sophie nodded slowly, like a small child intent on memorizing a fact she’d recently been taught, and then dropped the side of her head onto the stranger’s shoulder as they sat next to each other on the sofa. True to her word, the cop stopped talking. Within minutes, Sophie fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

December 12, 2018

When Sophie awoke, it was still dark outside. Blue light was seeping through the large picture window in thick horizontal bands at the bottom of sky. It must have been nearly dawn. She was stretched out on the sofa beneath several layers of blankets. There were a number of people sitting on her mother’s shabby chic living room chairs and standing in the adjacent kitchen. She immediately recognized them as some of the friendlier neighbors who lived on the street. They’d brought muffins¸ tea, and coffee. Sophie saw the lady cop raising a huge mug of coffee that Mrs. Hartley had just poured, a smile on the cop’s face as she turned to meet Sophie’s gaze. But the smile was false and uneasy, powered by something other than joy or happiness. It was a smile inspired by pity.

It seemed to Sophie that everyone in the house was waiting for something important to happen. She felt something warm and soft beneath her and realized that her head was cradled in Emily’s lap. Emily was her best friend and, as usual, was trying to braid Sophie’s famously unbraidable hair. She looked up at Emily’s sideways face. “Em? What’re you doing here?”

Emily’s face looked away, still in sideways mode, evidently seeking some sort of guidance from the herd of adults milling about the room. But no one could help her. She was on her own, adrift in an unfamiliar ocean with unknowable currents and no compass to guide her. Her eyes immediately teared up. “Oh, hey Soph. You’re awake,” she mumbled, her voice catching on the word ‘awake’. “Your aunt Laurie’s flying in. She’ll be here in a few hours.”

“Oh. Okay.” It was all Sophie could manage. She continued to study the room full of people who averted their eyes every time she looked at them, people who seemed to almost wish she wasn’t there, present in her own house. It took several more minutes for Sophie to fully register what she already knew to be true as she lay looking up at her friend’s face, the coordinates of it now so oddly oriented.

That her mother had done the unforgivable. She had died.

Sophie’s world had been remapped overnight. Everything in it appeared different, as if a veil had been pulled aside to reveal life’s true starkness. Even as she lay on the couch waiting for her aunt to ring the doorbell, Sophie slowly began to inhabit this new, immutably motherless world. She tried to find comfort that it hadn’t been one of those long, drawn out deaths, like when Hayleigh Cadigan’s father took nearly three years to die of cancer.

Sophie watched as sideways words came out of Emily’s mouth, her voice soft and low and, at times, delivered with an almost sing-songy tone. As if Sophie was a young child and Emily was reading her some sort of fairy tale, heard a million times before, with the ending already known. A story as old as time. It had happened quickly and unexpectedly, Emily explained, carefully parsing her words. Sophie’s mother was driving to her writing class and some retard stoner in his twenties, apparently busy texting his girlfriend, forgot to place his foot on the brake as he approached a stop sign. He broadsided her mother’s Honda CRV, pushing it directly into the path of an oncoming 18-wheeler. She never stood a chance.

In the hours to come, Sophie would learn that the driver of the freight truck, in trying to avoid the collision, had swerved sharply. That this had sent his trailer into a trajectory that not only intersected Sophie’s mother’s car, but five other cars as well. Three people died that night, including a newborn baby girl. And retardo slacker dude? As the universe sometimes does, it failed to right itself. His head jammed neatly up into a gap in the dashboard where an old cassette tape deck used to be. He was gingerly cut out of the plastic dashboard, still alive, and transported to a local hospital trauma unit, where he continued to live on while the body of Sophie’s mother hung quietly upside down, not a mark on her, still buckled into the seat of her overturned car.

In the months to follow, Sophie would realize that people died like that all the time. Alone and upside down, their bodies tethered to upholstered seats with their hair dangling over their faces.

Sophie often found herself envisioning how the texting driver must have looked, his arms and legs flailing wildly in the air with his head jacked up into the dashboard. For some reason, she found the image hilarious. But as always, the image of her dead mother hanging upside down, her limp, dangling arms nearly touching the inside of the car roof, would firmly take hold. A weed with roots so deep that she could never entirely pull it out of the ground.

Sophie and her mother had talked several times about what would happen, where she would go, if her mom died before Sophie had a chance to fully grow up. They’d decided that Sophie should live with Aunt Laurie, her mother’s younger sister, in the Massachusetts hometown where they’d been raised. Sophie had vague memories from early childhood of an old cluttered house that smelled like rotten meat. It had been years since she and her mother had visited Laurie, or even talked with her on the phone. Far more of Sophie’s life had been spent knowing Laurie than not knowing her. And now they were virtual strangers.

In her mother’s will, it had been stipulated that Aunt Laurie was to act as Sophie’s legal guardian and receive enough money from the estate to buy a house. A house with a big yard, Sophie hoped, where she could keep her two cats without having to worry about them getting mowed down by all the ambulances careening up Main Street towards South Shore hospital at all hours of the day and night. Aunt Laurie was to receive payments every month to spend on food and clothes for Sophie, until her niece was old enough to attend college. Then her mother’s estate would pay for everything – tuition, books, clothes, living expenses, and whatever else Sophie needed to earn her degree.

It was all written into the will.

Her mother had never told her what would happen after that. Sophie guessed she’d find a job, fall in love, get married, and have kids, although her mother never had much luck in most of those departments and told Sophie not to expect too much from men. They’d always leave you hanging. Better to rely on family, she’d once said. Nobody cares about you like your family.

December 13, 2018

Sophie remembered very little of events that occurred during the days immediately following her mother’s death. The adults seemed to be in control of everything, never consulting her or asking her opinion about funeral arrangements. Aunt Laurie suggested that Sophie return to her high school to clean out her locker, take her exams, and say good-bye to her friends and teachers while funeral arrangements were made. To Sophie’s surprise, her favorite teacher Ms. Alexander had arranged a small going-away party at her house, inviting only Sophie’s closest friends. Emily was there, crying inconsolably and begging Sophie to come back and visit over spring break. Most of her other friends seemed intent on not mentioning her mother at all during the gathering. Only Hayleigh Cadigan seemed to understand that Sophie needed to talk about her mother. After the gathering was over, Hayleigh and Sophie spent several hours in Ms. Alexander’s enclosed sunporch, talking about their dead parents while somehow never once mentioning them by name. Their mutual grief momentarily tempered, they both hugged Ms. Alexander and said their goodbyes, with Sophie promising to keep in touch from her new home in Massachusetts.

Years later, Sophie’s only memories of that time were of attending her mother’s wake and funeral in what she would later describe as a fugue state. Both took place in the small upstate New York town where they’d settled a few years earlier. Sophie knew people would assume that her mother had taken a pretty bad hit from the freight truck when they came to the closed-casket funeral. But, exactly as the cops who arrived on Sophie’s porch that night had claimed, there was not a single bruise on her. Sophie knew this because her aunt brought her to the morgue to say good-bye. Amid the gleaming stainless steel of the locker-lined room, with its faintly antiseptic array of smells, Sophie had held her mother’s stiff, bony hand and kissed her unmarked face again and again. Until the coldness of her skin became too hard to ignore and her aunt’s soft sobbing gave way to such wracking wails that the morgue personnel had asked her to leave, so as not to further traumatize the parents of the newborn girl waiting outside.

The real reason that the coffin was kept closed? Her mother had always said that she didn’t want people staring at a dead version of her when there were so many other versions still alive. About this, Sophie was insistent. She only wished she knew where the still-alive versions of her mother might be.

During a lull in the wake when Sophie thought nobody was looking, she opened the bottom half of the coffin lid and slipped in a bag of her mother’s favorite chocolates. A few people glanced over in alarm as she let the heavy oak lid drop back into place, but she didn’t care. Let them think what they wanted. Her mother never went anywhere without a stash of chocolate.

The reception after the wake and funeral was at Aunt Diane’s house, only a 1-hour drive from the house where Sophie had lived with her mother, where every room looked like an exact replica of a page ripped from a Martha Stewart Living magazine. Sophie, who hadn’t been allowed any time alone to grieve her loss, watched a parade of distant relatives and strangers stream by. The ancient ones, now shrunken with age, stooped in an effort to lean over what they remembered to be a small child. Many seemed genuinely astonished when they followed the lines of her body upwards to discover a nearly grown woman staring down at them. Several placed their hands on either side of her head and looked soulfully at her face before trying to say something meaningful, despite the fact that most had never even set eyes on her before now. *Such a pretty girl*, they whispered to one another as they tottered away.

There was a lot of food, way more than at most funeral receptions Sophie recalled attending. This seemed somewhat ironic to Sophie because her mother was never a big eater. In fact, she’d suffered from all manner of digestive complaints and would have been amused at the spectacle of gluttony surrounding her death. Aunt Laurie was there, along with Aunt Diane, Uncle Steve, and of course Grampy, who by all rights should have been the next to die, being that he was 97 years old. Everyone in her mother’s immediate family had the same look on their faces – sad, but also greedily eyeing the food out from the corners of their eyes. They each weighed at least 200 lbs, which always amazed Sophie. Her mother could never break 110, on account of her delicate digestion. And Sophie was slender as a reed, her runner’s body lean and muscular.

After the fiftieth relative did the whole soulful face-holding thing, Sophie was desperate to escape. She imagined sprinting to the back door of Aunt Diane’s immaculate house, throwing it open, and running through the thick northern woods until she was hopelessly lost. She kept reminding herself that it would all be over in a few hours. That if she waited long enough, she’d never have to stare into the eyes of strangers who knew nothing about her. Who knew barely more than they did about the little girl who’d grown up to become her mom.

Resigned to being a prisoner of her own mother’s funeral, Sophie sat in the corner of the living room in Aunt Diane’s overly-decorated house, next to the tiniest table she’d ever seen in her life. It was so small and fragile that it looked like it would splinter under the weight of a single glass. When Aunt Laurie came waddling up with a full plate of food and slammed it down hard on the miniature table, Sophie winced, surprised that it didn’t collapse in a heap of tinder on the floor. Instead it teetered uncertainly and then fell back in place, its skinny legs splayed out, defiantly planted into the deep carpet like those of a little kid about to erupt into a tantrum. Laurie proceeded to arrange herself on a spindly wooden armchair next to the miniature table, a chair that had evidently been chosen to match the scale of the table. Again, in clear violation of all known laws of physics, the chair didn’t immediately collapse into a pile of kindling beneath her aunt.

“That’s not for me, is it?” Sophie asked warily, eying Laurie’s heaping plate of food while stirring the Shirley Temple that some clue-free relative had said might ‘cheer you up’. He’d used those exact words, too.

“No, honey, it’s for me. But I can get you a plate,” Laurie said, starting to extricate herself from the wooden armchair. The chair actually got up with her, but Laurie quickly pushed it down, glancing around the room to see if anyone had witnessed this minor humiliation. *The kind of humiliation that must happen to her a hundred times a day*, Sophie thought.

“No, that’s okay,” replied Sophie. “I’m not hungry. Not a big eater . . . ,” her voice trailed off because this sounded vaguely like something her mother would say. Aunt Laurie must’ve thought so, too, because she smiled. She was still pretty beneath all the layers of fat.

Grampy came shuffling by, all 330 pounds of him. “Sophie? Is that you?”

“Yes, Grampy,” she sighed.

“Be good for your mother.”

He’d been saying the same exact thing to her since Sophie was two years old. It was, in fact, the only thing he’d *ever* said to her. Evidently, Grampy’s repertoire of conversation openers was quite limited.

“Uhm, Grampy, my mother is dead. Did you not get the memo?” She whispered the last part softly, so he wouldn’t hear. He looked briefly confused and shuffled away, his plate piled even higher with food than Aunt Laurie’s.

Laurie looked up at her from her plate. “Shhh,” she said, potato salad spewing out of her mouth and landing inconveniently on the tip of one of Sophie’s eyelashes. “He’s been sunsetting a little, lately. He thinks that it’s 1978, and that I’m still in high school.”

“Aunt Laurie, you *do* know that Mom never wanted her funeral service to be in a church, right?” Sophie asked, slowly chewing one of the three cherries in her fake alcoholic beverage.

“Your mom never really stipulated that in her will, Sophie.” Laurie had taken a sudden interest in a huge taco that seemed to be the centerpiece of her plate. Sophie found herself wondering how it had gone unnoticed and uneaten by her aunt for so long. “We wanted to play it safe and have a church service.”

“But Mom didn’t believe in god. She would have hated it. And she thought the Catholic Church treated women like crap. That they were misgyonic.”

“Misogynistic.”

“Yeah. That.”

Aunt Laurie looked up from her food and sighed. “Sophie? Can we please talk about something else?”

Sophie sat and watched her aunt eat, sipping her drink. The second cherry was now history, slithering down her throat. It tasted weird, like it had been sitting in a jar in Aunt Diane’s pantry a couple of decades too long.

“You know as well as I do that she hated the church,” Sophie persisted, whispering so that the people curiously examining her from across the room couldn’t hear. “You did it for Grampy. She warned me that you would.” Sophie bit the stem off the third cherry and hurled it dramatically across the table, where it bounced onto Laurie’s plate. Laurie remained so enraptured by the massive taco, that she didn’t even notice. In three gulps, the taco, along with the cherry stem, disappeared. Sophie watched speechlessly, in awe that members of her immediate family were capable of such gastronomic feats.

“It was Aunt Diane, okay?” Laurie said, impatiently, shifting herself in the grotesquely undersized chair. “Diane insisted. She wanted to be sure that your mom − you know − made it to other side alright.”

 “Made it to *what* other side? The side where she’s *dead*?” Sophie scoffed. “Because I’m pretty sure a church service isn’t going to change that.”

Sophie looked across the room and accidentally locked eyes with Madison, her second cousin. As usual, when Madison was required to interact with Sophie’s side of the family, the end of her nose curled up, making her look as if she were smelling something rotten. *Maybe*, Sophie thought idly, *she was smelling the rot of her own soul*.

Madison, like everyone on Grampy’s side of the family, was obsessed with money. She thought nothing of asking people about their salaries or talking about inheritances when people died. Sophie had been 6 or 7 years old when Madison married an international business major from a ‘good family’, which Sophie’s mother quickly realized was some sort of code. Roughly translated? It meant the groom’s family was sick rich. Madison’s wedding was a hideously overblown affair with over 2,000 guests, complete with 18-piece orchestra, nine-course meal, and ending when a helicopter descended in a cordoned off section of the hotel parking lot to whisk the couple off to their three-month honeymoon in the south of France.

Inexplicably, Aunt Diane, who never had children of her own, thought Madison was ‘golden’, and had used that exact term while dressing in the hotel room for the wedding that officially marked the beginning of Madison’s doomed marriage. Two years after the wedding extravaganza, the groom walked out on Madison, claiming that he didn’t want to be married anymore. As it turned out, it wasn’t that the groom didn’t want to be married. He just didn’t want to be married to Madison. Within a year, he had remarried a round-faced pudgy woman who bore an uncanny resemblance to his own mother. ‘How creepy is *that*?’ Sophie’s mother had shuddered.

Madison had mistaken Sophie’s idle gaze for genuine interest, and was now studying her from across the room. Too late, Sophie realized her mistake in staring at Madison for so long. She watched in horror as Madison rose up off her chair and started walking over to the table where she and Laurie sat.

“Great. Here comes money-obsessed Madison,” whispered Sophie.

“Yeah. Her mother, too. Even her grandmother, Grampy’s sister, was like that,” sneered Laurie. “Grampy said she was the most money-hungry person he’d ever known. Must be in their DNA. They’re complete philistines, too. Not a single book in their house, except for a Jackie Kennedy coffee table book.”

Before Sophie could ask what the word ‘philistine’ meant, Madison suddenly materialized next to the little table where she and Laurie sat. She’d grown heavy over the five post-divorce years she’d spent living at home with her parents and earning her coveted MBA. Given her family’s obsession with money, Sophie realized that the MBA was as inevitable as her ill-fated marriage. Somehow oblivious to her own lardaceous ass and thickening arms, Madison stared at Laurie’s wide hips and overloaded plate with utter disgust. Her nose was predictably twisted up at an odd angle. *How many joints does this girl have in her nose to be able to do such things with it?* wondered Sophie. *Did her plastic surgeon insert hinges up in there when he took the bump out?*

“Sorry your mom’s dead, Sophie,” Madison droned dutifully, making no effort to hide her extreme boredom. Her nasal delivery was even more grating than Sophie had remembered. Sophie looked up into Madison’s vacant eyes. In her child’s mind, Madison was the beautiful bride who married a prince. She hadn’t seen her since she was 5 years old, when she’d been invited to dinner and seen Madison’s room during a tour of her parent’s house. Madison’s mother had flung her bedroom door open with great fanfare, to reveal a bedroom filled with white furniture bedecked with thousands of stuffed bunny rabbits of all shapes and sizes. The entire bed was carpeted by them, carefully arranged by color and size. Larger white rabbits lay near the pillow, gradually transitioning to smaller grey ones at the foot of the bed. A white dresser and chair were also covered with multiple layers of stuffed rabbits, their dead, yellow glass eyes gazing out into the room at utter nothingness. Tiers of shelves had been installed on every wall, their only evident purpose to display hundreds more stuffed, dead-eyed rabbits. Even at the age of 5, Sophie had been deeply disturbed by the sight of thousands of stuffed rabbits jammed into the bedroom of a woman well into her twenties. It was something that could never be unseen.

As Madison slowly wove her way through the tables and chairs, Sophie saw just another nondescript, overweight woman in her mid-thirties, marketing frozen waffles and Hot Pockets to an unsuspecting American public. Sophie imagined her, post-divorce, going on dates with people she’d met on internet dating sites. She was guessing that Madison’s first question would invariably be: ‘So, how much money do you make?’ Sophie also guessed that, if the potential mate managed to get past the financial inquisition, he’d probably turn tail and make a run for it once he beheld Madison’s bizarre collection of stuffed rabbits.

“Shit happens,” shrugged Sophie. Madison appeared completely unfazed by this irreverent comment. Suddenly, a young man with an unfortunately large head and moon-shaped face came skittering over like a spider from some undetermined location, as if on cue, and stood beside Madison. Sophie briefly imagined he’d been attached to an invisible leash that Madison had tugged on.

“Oh, this is Gary, my fiancé,” said Madison, smiling in that fake way that she always did. *It was the eyes*, thought Sophie. *Madison was always forgetting to crinkle her eyes when she smiled, so her smile never looked genuine*. Her eyes were dead with thoughts of money, marketing, money, her new BMW, more money, and a house in the Hamptons. *You could see that her pupils could easily have been replaced with cartoon dollar signs*, Sophie realized, *and she would still look pretty much the same*.

“Really?” responded Sophie, hoping her tone didn’t sound too artificially animated. “I didn’t know that you were engaged.”

What Sophie really wanted to say was *Hey, at least you’re getting smarter. You picked a real fugly one this time. He won’t be going anywhere, any time soon*.

“Yes, we’re already planning the wedding,” Madison said, clearly thrilled. The groom shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, his eyes darting frenetically about Sophie’s slender shoulders and long silky brown hair. Sophie felt relieved that someone was taking this creeper out of circulation. It would be a service to all womankind.

“Mom told me what a blowout wedding you had the first time.”

Aunt Laurie glared at Sophie from across the vast expanse of the miniature table. Evidently, it was not considered good manners to bring up the subject of previously doomed marriages in the presence of a prospective groom.

“When are you planning on getting married?” asked Laurie, pretending to care. She disliked Madison and her haughty attitude almost as much as Sophie’s mother had.

“Oh, we’re not exactly sure yet!” Madison squealed, oblivious to the sarcasm dripping from Laurie’s voice. Someone really should have hung a vacancy sign on her forehead, years ago. “But no expense will be spared!”

Sophie wanted to ask *If I throw a stick, will you leave?* She suspected that Laurie would think this was hilarious but, given her new role as legal guardian, would have to pretend otherwise.

“Sounds great,” said Laurie, not bothering to hide her distinct lack of enthusiasm. What Laurie really wanted to say was, *Please don’t make me come to another one of your grotesque wedding extravaganzas, you vapid airhead*.

Sophie just had to know what Madison’s boyfriend did for a living. “So, Barry, what do you do?”

“It’s *Gary*,” he replied, visibly annoyed. “I’m the CFO of a new company that manufactures medical equipment.”

“CFO,” Laurie repeated slowly and thoughtfully as she chewed on some kind of tan-colored meat. “Doesn’t that stand for chief financial officer?” She was pretending to not know that the guy was a glorified accountant. Also clearly bored, now that her food supply was nearly depleted.

“Yes. I handle all the financial accounts.”

“How fascinating!” exclaimed Sophie, a little too ardently. She noticed that Madison was now examining her with deep suspicion, her round eyes narrowed into tiny slits.

“Well, alrighty then!” said Madison. “We’ll let you two have some time alone to plan Sophie’s move to Hingham,” she gushed, turning to walk off with her new, and hopefully permanent, meal ticket in tow. Now, little of the ‘gold’ that Aunt Diane has prophesied remained on poor, tarnished Madison. Most of it having been scratched off by the catastrophic cratering of her first marriage, the general thickening of her waist, hips, arms, and legs, and her soulless job working for a company that produced genetically modified food. Food that Madison wouldn’t feed her own children if, god forbid, she ever decided to spawn with moon-faced guy.

The thought of Madison and moon-faced dude hurling their eggs and sperm into the vast genetic pool made Sophie’s skin go cold.

“Bye, hon’”, waved Laurie, as Madison sashayed back to her chair, throwing her hips from side to side under the misguided belief that it made her look sexy. As Madison turned towards Moon Face to laugh noisily over some joke she pretended he’d cracked, Laurie looked back to Sophie with that unholy combination of hostility and curiosity that Sophie realized she so often evoked in others. “Could you have *been* any more rude?” Laurie demanded, through clenched teeth.

“Come on, Aunt Laurie,” shrugged Sophie. “Admit it. She’s everything that we’re not. Totally into money, and all the ways you can use it to elevate yourself above other, generally more talented people. Completely immersed in a business world that she despises, because she’s clueless that there are other worlds out there. Other ways to live a life.”

“You’ve been too strongly influenced by your mother.”

“I admit, Mom didn’t think much of people like Madison. Just skimming the surface of life, when there’s so much – so much . . .”

“So much what?”

“So much *mystery* to the world. So much that we don’t know.” Sophie took a deep breath before she continued. “I don’t know what life is about, Aunt Laurie? But I’m pretty sure it’s not about selling mayonnaise and toothpaste.”

Laurie was silent, taking full measure of the now nearly grown Sophie, wondering when she had morphed from the tooth-gaped girl playing with her Game Boy Advance into the half-woman poised on the precipice of adulthood. “You’re pretty jaded for a kid,” she said. But Sophie sensed an undertone of approval in her aunt’s voice.

 “I like to think I’m just perceptive for my age,” Sophie smiled. Laurie smiled back. Just like her mom had always said, Laurie had the prettiest smile in the family. “So, Aunt Laurie, when am I supposed to move in with you?”

“As soon as we pack up the stuff in your mom’s house,” Laurie mumbled as she began re-working a bare chicken bone with her teeth, trying to suck as much remaining flesh off as possible. “I already called a real estate agent. A real shark.”

“Aren’t they all?” Her mother had thought that all real estate agents were basically parasites, bottom feeders who lived off the real labors of others. Barely one step above investment bankers and financial advisors.

Laurie was, once again, startled at the adult tone of her 16-year-old niece’s remarks. “They think they can sell it pretty quickly, but they’re not going to list it until March because houses sell for way more money in the spring. It won’t really matter how long it takes to sell the house anyway. You’ll be living at my place for a while, until I can find us a bigger house to live in.”

“Does that mean I’ll be going to the high school in Hingham starting in January?” Sophie asked. She had a bad feeling about starting school in the middle of the school year, because it almost guaranteed that she’d stand out as a new student. She’d been trying to find the right time to ask Laurie if she could be home-schooled for the rest of the academic year. But her mother must have considered this possibility, because when the lawyer read the will to her and Laurie the day before the funeral, it explicitly stated that Sophie was not to be home-schooled, under any circumstances.

“I hadn’t really thought about it. But yeah, I guess you will.” Laurie stared down at her plate, and seemed genuinely shocked at the prospect of taking care of her niece.

December 18, 2018

To Sophie, it seemed like the wake, the funeral, the reception, and the moving arrangements took weeks. But only a few days had actually passed since her mother’s death. By the fifth day, Laurie announced over breakfast that they were finally finished and ready to fly back to Boston. That very afternoon, the parents of the guy responsible for killing Sophie’s mother called. Their son wanted to see Sophie. Apologize.

“You don’t have to do it, Sophie,” Laurie said as she watched Sophie end the call.

“I know. But for some reason? I want to meet the person who killed my mom.”

“Why? Why would you think that would make you feel better?”

“I never said that. I never said that it would make me feel better.”

“Then why?”

“I’m curious, that’s all.”

“You are *so* your mother’s daughter.”

“I guess. I dunno. No. She’d be the opposite. She’d be moving on.”

“His name is Ashford. His mother, I think her name is Elizabeth? She’s the one who you just talked to. She said he had brain surgery the night of the accident, and was unconscious until this morning.”

“Seriously? Ashford? My mother was killed by someone named Ashford?”

“Sophie, you don’t have to go.”

“Again, I *want* to go.”

“We’ll have to use Uber, because I already returned the rental car. And Aunt Diane’s out looking for new wallpaper, so we can’t use her car.”

 *How many times does a room need to be redecorated?* Sophie wondered, shaking her head. “And my mom’s car is −”.

“Try not to think about it,” Laurie said quietly, as she opened the Uber app on her phone and scheduled a ride to the hospital.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

As Sophie was ushered into the hospital room, Ashford’s stricken parents rushed over to greet her from their son’s bedside, where they’d been sitting the entire five days since the accident. Sophie could tell that his mother had once been a great beauty. The emotional toll of the past several days gave the cast of her skin a certain look. Like she had just stepped out of one of those old, yellowed photographs taken a century ago.

Sophie could sense, through her own profound sorrow, that both parents were frantic with grief. Not just grief about their son, but grief over how Sophie’s life and the lives of others had forever been diminished by his carelessness.

Ashford’s mother took Sophie’s face squarely in her hands. “We can never express –”

Sophie looked away, unable to meet her eyes. *Then don’t try*, she thought contemptuously.

The father gravely approached Sophie and started to kneel before her on one knee until his wife placed her hand gently on his shoulder to stop him. “If we had it in our power to change what happened –”

*Seriously? You think I don’t know that you can’t fix the huge mistake your son made and bring my mother back?* Sophie wanted to scream. But all the came out of her mouth was a small series of noises that sounded vaguely like ‘Can I talk to him now?’.

“Yes, yes, of course,” said Ashford’s father, as he grabbed Sophie’s shoulders from behind and propelled her over to his son’s bedside. “And thank you for doing us this great honor.”

*Whatever. I'm not doing it for you.*

Sophie slowly approached the bed. Ashford’s head looked like a giant beet. Like someone had decided to become insanely famous by growing the largest beet ever to exist on the face of the planet, rendered inedible by enormous quantities of growth hormones they’d had to inject. A giant beet with appendages sticking out of it. Sophie couldn’t imagine the kind of pain someone would have to endure for their head to resemble an enormous beet. She kept imagining that it was about to explode and that brain matter would be sprayed all over her and the walls of the hospital room.

The beet said ‘fit on’. Someone pushed her down into a chair next to the bed. She’d never seen anything so strange in her life. A beet tethered to all kind of tubes and monitors. Inappropriately, she wanted to laugh.

The beet’s head pivoted towards her and said “Mmph sur-hee.”

“What?”

“He said he’s sorry,” his mother said helpfully, from somewhere behind Sophie.

Sophie never cut her gaze, even for one second, away from the beet’s head. She could barely make out the eyes, which looked like tiny recessed holes, the flesh around them oddly puckered inward. Like tiny little anuses that had sprung from his ass and migrated up his back to take root on his face. It reminded Sophie of President Benedict Thompson’s grotesque mouth as he spewed his hateful rhetoric.

The mangled mouth on the beet had so many sutures in it, it appeared to have been embroidered onto the bottom of Ashford’s face. The overall effect was that of an inexpertly crafted doll on display at an elementary school. An elementary school for the mentally challenged.

“Well, Ashford, I’m going to guess that’s kind of a given.”

The beet and his parents all looked at each other, startled. They seemed mildly surprised at the orphaned girl’s obvious intellect and maturity.

“You can’t drive for shit,” she added, gratuitously. Sophie hadn’t planned on saying this. Hadn’t even really thought at all about what she might say.

“I ow.”

“He said – ,” began his father.

But Sophie gestured him away impatiently. “I *know* what he said.” She turned back to Ashford The Human Beet. “The cops. They found your cell phone.”

The beet stared at her intently. At least, she thought it did, but she couldn’t be sure that any light could actually enter his puckered anus eyes.

“In the phone display? It said ‘I love’, and then the rest of it was blank. ‘Cause you hadn’t finished the text.”

The beet nodded. An ancient beet, nodding sagely.

“I’m dying to know. Was it beer? Were you going to text the word ‘beer’?”

Ashford’s father was suddenly at her side. “Young lady –”

She pushed him away. “Ooh, wait, no! Lemme guess! Was it ‘weed’? Do you *love weed*, Ass-ford?”

The father was now pulling at her, tugging at her arm, and Sophie was batting him away. “His name is *Ashford*. Now, we know that you’re upset, young lady. But he was not drunk and he most definitely was not high when this happened. You agreed to come and listen to our son try and apologize.”

“Us okay, da,” droned the beet.

Silence. Sophie wondered why she’d agreed to come here. She was vaguely cognizant of vengeful feelings residing deep inside of her, several layers beneath the pain that had come to define her over the past several days. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she’d been fantasizing about murdering the man who had killed her mother. The man who had extinguished the life of an infant, a tiny baby who’d never even get to celebrate her first birthday. These fantasies involved stabbing Ashford in the neck, near the carotid artery, with a few quick strokes of a box cutter the movers had thoughtfully left behind in her mother’s house. While Laurie was applying make-up after scheduling the Uber ride to the hospital, Sophie had quickly searched the internet for illustrations showing where the artery was located. In her coat pocket, she fingered the box cutter, trying to recall the simple anatomical diagram that had displayed across her laptop screen as she stood in Aunt Diane’s kitchen. She caressed the cool, rounded end of the compartment where the sharp blades were stored, and fingered the small knob that slid the blade out from inside its protective metal casing.

But no, Sophie decided. It was better that Ashford live. That he get up every morning for the next 60 or 70 years and remember what he had done. That he spend the next 25,000 mornings, waking up to remember what he’d done to her mother, the newborn girl, and a young family returning home from a day of snowboarding at a nearby ski resort. 25,000 nights of remembering before he shut his eyes to finally drift off to asleep and escape all the remembering. Every time he fell in love with a woman, he’d have to tell her his horrible story. He’d need to tell his own kids when they got old enough, so that they wouldn’t find out about it by stumbling on the news story about the horrific accident that would remain cached on the internet for decades. Or worse, from a kid at school or on the bus. All his life, he’d be known as ‘the guy who killed that little baby and the mother of that teenage girl in New York’. Until one day when he, too, would go to his own grave.

“I us gun tet hu.”

“You were going to text me?” asked an astonished Sophie.

Ashford’s mother quietly sidled over to the bed and locked eyes with Sophie. “He was going to text the *word* ‘you’. To his girlfriend. To tell her that he loved her.”

Sophie looked calmly up at the beautiful woman’s ravaged face, and changed her mind. She was about to give her a weak smile and ask if she could have a minute more alone with her son. Ashford, the human beet. She thrust the metal blade out of the casing and felt its razor sharp edge.

But then Sophie saw something in his mother’s face. She’d been mistaken. The grief she’d sensed earlier as she’d walked into the room ran deep, a precipice of grief that Ashford’s mother balanced near the brink of. She stood before Sophie, teetering close to the edge of her own private abyss. Was the grief for Ashford? Was Ashford dying, too?

“Oh,” said Sophie, simply. “I didn’t know.”

Ashford’s mother looked over at her, pleading with her eyes. As if Sophie could have pulled her back from the abyss, if only she’d chosen to. Following some kind of slow-motion choreography that only she knew the secret steps to, Ashford’s mother’s knees buckled slightly beneath her as she staggered backwards, careening into an EKG monitor. She disappeared from view as she tripped over her own legs and stumbled onto the floor. Now, all Sophie could hear was Ashford’s mother sobbing over the occasional beeps of the various machines her son was wired into. She felt oddly unmoved.

“Mump?” said Ashford.

“Just keep talking to him,” Ashford’s father urged Sophie as he rushed over to help his wife. His disembodied voice rose from the floor, a slight tremor at the word ‘talking’ suggesting that he, too, was inhabiting his own personal hell.

 “Uh, okay.” Sophie turned back to Ashford, retracting the box-cutter blade into its steel casing. “Your father’s telling me to keep talking to you.”

“Whups gun uhn?”

“It’s fine,” Sophie lied reassuringly, looking down at the chaotic scene unfolding on the opposite side of the bed. She turned back to Ashford. She wanted to say: *It sounds like they know you’re about to die, but evidently don’t think that this might be an important piece of information to pass onto you.*

Sophie saw what a beet would look like, if it could smile. “They must have you cranked up on all kinds of drugs. For the pain?”

Ashford nodded, then reached for a small pad of paper and pen that were resting on his bedside table. On it he wrote: *You look like you’re split into a million fragments of glass, and from each fragment, there are tiny little flowers and blades of grass growing, and then from each flower and blade of glass there are waterfalls and rainbows cascading out of them. And more stuff within the waterfalls and rainbows. Unicorns, mostly.*

He handed her the notepad and watched patiently as she read.

“Whoa. Are you saying that you’re hallucinating?”

The beet nodded, and said something that sounded vaguely like ‘sweet’.

Ashford’s parents were now out in the hallway, the father trying to console a mother whose grief knew no bounds. Sophie understood that she had to get this right. Because if she didn’t, those thousands of mornings of waking up and remembering would become *her* moments of deepest regret.

“Ashford? I won’t lie to you. What happened was horrible. I really miss my mom. And I will for the rest of my life.”

She began to cry, which surprised her because until now she’d felt so full of rage that her sadness over her mother’s death seemed muted. Not real. Like the kind of sadness you felt when you graduated from middle school. A page of a book turned to reveal a larger meaning.

 “But it’s not like I’m 8 years old,” she continued. “It leaves a big hole in your life when you lose a parent and you’re only 8 years old.”

The beet nodded gravely. Everything she was saying was a lie. Not only was the hole left by her mother’s death gapingly huge, it was growing larger with each passing day.

“I’m 16. And I have family to take care of me. Well, actually, it’s just my aunt. But it’ll be okay. *I’ll* be okay.”

The beet started crying from somewhere around the puckered anus holes where its eyes were supposed to be.

“Yan koo. Yan kooooo.”

Sophie sensed Ashford’s parents standing behind her. When she turned to meet his mother’s eyes, it was clear that she was making every effort to control the features on her face so that her son couldn’t guess the true source of her pain. She grabbed Sophie’s hand and squeezed it, then leaned over until her mouth was inches from Sophie’s ear.

“Thank you, Sophie. So generous of you. Thank you.”

Sophie lingered a few more minutes, re-assuring Ashford that he hadn’t totally destroyed what was left of her childhood, careful to avoid any mention of the tiny baby and entire family of snowboarders he’d also killed. And through it all, her right hand remained firmly gripped around the box cutter in her pocket.

She knew that it was now time to go. Time to go and live the rest of her life – without a mother to celebrate her high school graduation, help her move into her college dorm, walk her down the aisle at her own wedding, and hold her babies.

Aunt Laurie watched from a chair in the hallway as Ashford’s mother carefully buttoned Sophie’s coat and gave her a peck on her cheek. As if they’d always known each other. As if the trajectories of their lives had always been hurtling towards each other’s, destined to intersect at this exact moment in time.

“Do you want to know a secret?” Ashford’s mother asked, her beautiful old doe eyes managing to sparkle from behind their wall of pain. “If Ashford had been a girl, I was going to name him Sophie.”

Sophie smiled and looked away. She didn’t know how to respond. *Seriously? Because that would have been a whole lot more normal than naming your kid Assfuck. Or Asshole. Oh, wait, I'm so sorry −Ashford.* Then she felt bad for thinking up this response. This woman had never hurt her. What was wrong with her? “I really hope he’ll be okay,” she murmured. This wasn’t a lie. Sophie truly liked this woman.

Ashford’s mom gave her a resigned look, but it contained a small capsule of hope. A fire burning inside of a cold dark room at the bottom of the world. “The doctors were able to surgically place shunts in his brain to prevent fluid from accumulating in his skull. But there are fragments of bone in his brain. They removed most of them, but some are too small to even be visible. If a bone fragment gets dislodged, it could shred a blood vessel in his brain and cause it to rupture.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. That’s just − I’m so sorry.”

“Just go home, honey. Be with your family. Your mother’s family. If I could trade my life for your mother’s, I would. Please know that.”

Sophie teared up as she turned to leave. She wished that she didn’t have to move to Massachusetts. Then maybe she could have Ashford’s mom as a mother. It seemed only fair, since he’d taken her real mother away. But no, then Ashford would be her brother. Too weird to think about, even for Sophie.

The Uber ride back to Aunt Diane’s house was a confusing time for Sophie. She wanted to hate Ashford and his parents. But she kept thinking about his mother’s kind deer eyes.

At 8 am the next morning, Sophie’s cell phone display lit up. It was Ashford’s mother. In a calm and resigned voice, she told Sophie that her son had died several hours after Sophie and Laurie had left the hospital. A bone fragment had entered his bloodstream and caused a major blood vessel in his brain to rupture. He’d passed away instantly. *No doubt*, thought Sophie, *surfing out on a wave of broken prismatic glass, rainbows, and unicorns.*

When she ended the call up, Sophie looked at Diane’s perfect clock in Diane’s perfect hallway. She felt strangely unmoved by Ashford’s death, and considered the phone call merely opportune timing. Nothing more, nothing less. She and Aunt Laurie had to get up at 8 anyway, to meet with the estate lawyer and the realtor. It had a certain kind of a poetic justice to it, a twisted logic.

All the hate now gone from her, but nothing in its place. She was glad she hadn’t slashed Ashford to death. He was just another stoner screw-up who happened to be doing something deeply ill-advised, something several million other people did every day without getting caught. That her mother and a newborn baby had been there to pay the price was a random occurrence. If not her mother, then someone else driving by at exactly the same moment would have been killed. And the children and relatives of *that* person would have recently attended a funeral, a funeral Sophie would know nothing about. It was just the way the world worked. Once you accepted the randomness, you could pretty much accept anything that happened.

Sophie’s possessions and her mother’s shabby-chic furnishings, books, clothing, and kitchen appliances had been loaded onto moving pods and were headed to Massachusetts, where they would be placed in temporary storage. Sophie had packed her duffel bag with clothing and other things she’d need over the next few weeks. When she was finally packed and ready to go to the Albany airport, Sophie shoved animal tranquilizers down the throats of her two cats, Atticus and Oliver, and pushed them into their pet carriers. The panicked cats, now sensing that they were about to embark on a dreaded trip in the metal contraption that humans often moved around in, went into full panic mode. As soon as the Uber driver drove up, the cats were loaded into the back seat for the ride to the airport, where they’d travel in the cargo hold of the plane.

Sophie couldn’t believe it. A mere six days after her mother had died, she was flying to her new home in Massachusetts with her Aunt Laurie sitting beside her.

“Listen, Sophie. I realize that you haven’t seen my house in a few years,” Laurie said, as she feverishly upwrapped an enormous hoagie she’d bought in the airport terminal before they’d boarded the plane.

“Actually, it was much longer ago than that. I was only five,” Sophie calculated. “After what Mom saw, she didn’t think it was safe to go back. You know, from a hygienic standpoint.”

“Well, I’ve gotten better. But I’ll still never be as clean as she was.”

“My mom was not that clean. She was clean in a normal way, like everyone else.”

Laurie spent the short flight from Albany to Boston recounting events from the childhood she’d shared with Sophie’s mother, laughing over some of their more outrageous escapades. Their old neighborhood, located in two adjoining cul de sacs, had been surrounded by swamps and fields, providing a wealth of adventures for the two sisters and their friends. They’d built forts around the rim of a field beneath oak trees, picked huge buckets of warm blackberries, scrambled over rocks deposited by retreating glaciers tens of thousands of years before they’d been born, caught tadpoles and frogs from a small stream that drained a nearby moraine, and spent long summer nights catching fireflies in large pickle jars as their parents held backyard barbeques. They’d even once built a raft, which Sophie’s mother had famously tried to float across a deep swamp behind Carrie Wilson’s house, ill-advisedly loaded with all of their dolls and stuffed animals.

“It was a miracle she didn’t drown,” shuddered Laurie. “She got sucked into the mud at the bottom of the swamp, and almost couldn’t get out.”

“That’s not physically possible, Aunt Laurie. Mud can’t suck you down. Quick-sand, maybe. But not mud.”

“Well, *this* mud did. Sucked the raft down, too. We never saw it again. It’s probably still there, at the bottom of the swamp.”

“Why did you guys pick so many blackberries? Didn’t eating so many all at once make you sick?”

“We didn’t eat them all. I think our mother’s probably froze them. I don’t know why we picked so many. Your mother was always doing stuff like that. Once she got started doing something, it was like she couldn’t stop until she took it to completion. This look came over her, and you could tell she was on a mission to get it done. It was almost − compulsive.”

Sophie didn’t like to hear her mother cast in a negative light. For so long, it had just been the two of them. She didn’t want to believe that her mother might have been flawed in some way.

“I can think of worse ways to be,” Sophie sniffed.

“I didn’t mean anything, Sophie. We all have our − idiosyncrasies.”

“Can’t we just talk about something else?”

“We’re already landing.”

“Wow. Really? That was fast.” Sophie and her mother hadn’t done much flying after they’d moved to upstate New York. Her mother taught at the university in the small college town where they lived, and was always too busy preparing lectures and trying to publish papers. The only trips that Sophie could recall involving flights were to Florida, where she and her mother had visited Disney World two times since Sophie had turned eight.

As they dragged Sophie’s duffel bag and cat carriers into the airport concourse elevator and headed towards the parking garage, Sophie could see that Aunt Laurie was already out of breath. She imagined Laurie having a heart attack and keeling over, her head cracking open on the hard cement floor of the parking garage, her brains spilling out, and Sophie trying to push Laurie’s brain tissue back inside. Strange, what the death of someone you love can do to the way you think. Everywhere you go, you begin to see death’s possibility.

Laurie’s 2003 Toyota Camry was parked in the airport garage like some drunken pilot had left it there, crooked and sticking out far beyond the ends of the white painted lines. Sophie half expected the driver’s door to be swung wide open and the engine still running, the keys dangling in the ignition. But no. Her aunt had had the presence of mind, despite the death of her older sister, to turn the ignition off and lock the car door.

As soon as they got into the car, Sophie realized how ugly things might get. Ancient McDonald’s fries and containers littered the floor. An unidentified object that appeared to be the mummified remains of a cat protruded from under a mountain of debris in the back seat. One of the rear windows of the car looked as if it had been completely shattered, possibly years before Sophie was even born. It was now held dubiously together with duct tape, some of which was trailing down on the concrete floor of the parking garage. A few unfortunate birds, long dead, were stuck to the tape. Sophie cringed as she thought about the hundreds of miles of asphalt the bird carcasses had likely been dragged. Two of the car tires were so low that the rims were sitting on the concrete.

“Uhm, Aunt Laurie?”

“Yeah, hon’,” Laurie replied absently, focused on trying to cram Sophie’s duffel bag into the back seat, between what looked to be an old ceiling light fixture and a urine-stained oriental carpet runner.

“You might want to put some air in your tires? And really soon.” As they pulled out of the airport parking garage, Sophie could hear the scrape of the rims against the pavement. “You really don’t hear that?” Sophie asked, incredulously. “You don’t hear that you’re riding on your tire rims?”

Laurie shook her head. “No.”

It took almost a half hour of pleading to convince Laurie to pull into a gas station and allow Sophie to fill the tires with air. The mechanic she found in one of the garage bays got under the chassis, took one look, and shook his head. “No”, he said, “There’s nothing I can do to salvage the wheels. He could only inflate the tires, but the front wheels, and maybe even the axle, would probably need to be replaced. Laurie had evidently been driving like that for months, possibly even years.

So it was back in the car with the fossilized fries, the dead cat and the two alive ones, the urine-soaked carpet, the retro light fixture, and an aunt who appeared more bat-shit crazy to Sophie with each passing minute. Sophie looked over at Laurie occasionally as she drove, wondering what had happened to her. Sure, Aunt Laurie had always been a bit eccentric, but so was Sophie’s mom. What was it about their family that had so broken Laurie, but had compelled Sophie’s mother to strive to achieve? Or were there things about her mother − deeply buried flaws − that Sophie had never noticed? It almost didn’t matter now. Her mother was gone, she was in the care of her aunt, and somehow it would all work out. She *had* to believe that.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

 By the time the car lurched to a stop in front of Laurie’s house, it was dark outside and a light icy rain had begun to fall. As Sophie got out of the car and struggled to reclaim her duffel bag from the vortex of rubble in the back seat, she began to discern the vaguely menacing outlines of other items lying inside the car. Items that she hadn’t spotted before now. Was that a part of a piano, a keyboard maybe? And over there, with a wick sticking out the top − could that be an old kerosene heater?

Suddenly, it dawned on Sophie.

“Aunt Laurie? Do you, like, go to the dump to find stuff?”

“Sometimes. And then I fix things up and sell them on eBay.” Laurie stated this matter-of-factly as she rummaged around in the detritus of her purse. As if it was the most normal thing in the world. As if everybody drove to municipal dumps to fill their car with random junk.

“Uh, okay. That’s cool, I guess. But don’t you have a job? I mean, it’s Tuesday. Don’t you have to go to work tomorrow?” Sophie had, by now, given up on extricating her bag from the mass of hazardous waste flowing out of the back seat of Laurie’s car. She was convinced that the pile of extruding debris was emitting all manner of dangerous radiation, and had decided that she’d rather live without her stuff than die trying to retrieve it. Instead, she carefully pulled both cat carriers out and began hauling them, one at a time, up the stone walkway towards Laurie’s ramshackle Victorian house. To protect her cats from the freezing rain, she placed the carriers on the warped wooden floor of the old wrap-around porch.

Long forgotten memories of visits she’d made to the house as a very young child suddenly flooded her senses. A spectral image of her mother and Aunt Laurie sitting on the porch at night drinking wine as Sophie caught fireflies in the front yard flashed across her mind, only to immediately dissipate. The smell of old wood and wallpaper when you stepped through the door of the old house. Ghosts of memories, cast up like shipwrecked artifacts on a beach. Long-buried feelings of family. Of belonging.

Laurie squinted at Sophie through the darkness. “Didn’t your mom tell you? I work out of my house now.”

“Oh.” Her mother had most definitely *not* told her this. She had mentioned something about Laurie not being able to hold a job and thinking about doing phone sex. At the time, when Sophie was only 10 years old, she’d envisioned Aunt Laurie kissing a phone. She did not have a good feeling about any of this newly unearthed information.

“I thought you worked in advertising. How do you do that out of your house?”

“I found a way,” Laurie replied, smiling cryptically. “And don’t you worry about money, Sophie. Your mom planned really well.”

“She *was* a planner.”

After five days of giant talking beetheads, casseroles, potato-salad-encrusted eyelashes, priests, psychiatrists, strangers with pitiful stares, and hours spent packing her own long-forgotten baby clothes, it finally hit Sophie. Her mother was gone. Forever. She began sobbing from the place where she used to cry when she was a small child. The grimness of a world that no longer contained her mother was too much to bear. Laurie rushed over with Sophie’s duffel bag, dropping it on the porch, and wrapped Sophie in a bear hug, pinning her arms to her sides so she couldn’t thrash out at the world. She began rocking Sophie back and forth from one foot to the other as they stood on the porch. From a distance, Sophie thought fleetingly, they probably resembled two dancing penguins.

After a few minutes, as they grew too tired to stand and cry and rock at the same time, Laurie sat Sophie down on the porch steps and held her close, running her fingers through her wet, matted hair, stroking her face, and sobbing “I miss her, too, honey,” over and over, until Sophie felt a peace falling over her like soft, wet snow.

“She tried so hard to be a good mom, tried so much harder than other adults to be good at everything she did. Now she’s gone. And the others, the ones who didn’t try nearly as hard, the stupid mothers who were always redecorating their kitchens, and shopping, they still get to walk the planet.” Laurie still had an arm around Sophie and kept rocking her back and forth as they sat on the porch steps. “The thing about Mom? She wasn’t anything like the other mothers,” Sophie hiccupped. “She didn’t have one of those calendars taped to the refrigerator where she plotted out dinner strategy for the entire month like all the mothers on our street did. And she knew stuff. About the way the world worked. About how many species were disappearing from the planet every day. But she was socially awkward. Maybe even a little autistic. And the other mothers were afraid of her for that. For being different. For being socially inept. And for not wanting to sit in her kitchen all day planning dinner, and not reading those stupid parenting magazines. For not wanting to do whatever it is that stay-at-home moms do all day, which neither of us could ever quite figure out.”

Aunt Laurie sighed, nodded, and looked down at the ground as she started to tear up again. “Yeah, your mother *was* different. That’s for sure.” Sophie turned to her aunt. She knew that there was a long, shared history between her mother and her aunt, that they had been close as children and had spent countless days playing outdoors with a large tribe of neighborhood kids. Her aunt knew her mother in an entirely different way than Sophie ever would, and she was anxious to mine this cache of information. Information that existed completely independently of her, regarding things that had happened long before Sophie had even been born.

They sat on the porch for over an hour, talking and remembering things about Sophie’s mother. When Sophie started dozing off mid-sentence, the fatigue of the past several days finally setting in, Laurie decided it was time to get her young niece to bed. She heaved herself off the porch steps and looked back to the car, its tires once again deflated and the rims resting on the driveway pavement. Sophie’s cats, who’d been drugged into a stupor prior to the flight, were only now awakening from their drug-induced slumber. Laurie and Sophie spent another 15 minutes under the porch lights, doubled over in laughter, as they watched both cats stagger about in their carriers, repeatedly hitting their heads on the sides, falling over, getting up, and falling over again.

 When Laurie opened the door of her house without using any keys, Sophie was appalled. Her aunt hadn’t even bothered to lock the house, and had been gone for nearly a week! As Sophie began to follow Laurie through the door and into the entryway of the house, Sophie took one look inside and recoiled back against the door jamb. The entire first floor of Laurie’s house appeared to be filled to the rafters with piles of absolute junk.

“Oh. My. God,” Sophie whispered under her breath as Laurie continued ahead of her. As far as the eye could see were rolls of carpet remnants, old vinyl records, and musty towers of yellowing paperbacks and newspapers listing dangerously from great heights, ready to topple over with the slightest bump. Display shelves were nailed to the walls at odd angles and crammed full with old ceramic figurines. There was an enormous jewelry box made to look like a sand castle, old stereo equipment, shoeboxes full of Nokia cell phones and Sony walkmans, and countless other items one would only find in landfills. Junk was spilling out of garbage bags and stacked high in cartons, some nearly touching the 12-foot high ceiling.

Sophie stopped dead in her tracks. There was a name for people like this. *Hoarder.* It was in the psychiatric journals, her mother had told her. Her mom knew what was wrong with Aunt Laurie, but she hadn’t talked about it in front of Sophie very much. Whenever Aunt Laurie’s name had come up in conversation, her mother would suddenly get very quiet and very still. Sophie now understood why. Laurie had a problem that Sophie’s mother knew she’d never be able to solve.

One picture in a frame on a small table caught Sophie’s eye. It was a photo taken many years earlier, of three little girls standing on a wind-swept beach, presumably somewhere on Cape Cod. Sophie realized that the little girl in the middle of the photo was Laurie, her lithe brown body swaddled in a white terry-cloth robe, her feet planted firmly in the sand with her tiny toes pointing daintily outwards, her sweet urchin face with the familiar smile beaming back to Sophie from across the decades.

As they walked towards the staircase with the cat carriers, Aunt Laurie handed Sophie something that looked like yellowing newspaper peeled from the bottom of a canary cage. “Take a shower, Sophie. You must be so tired. I’m putting your stuff in my bedroom. You can sleep there. I always sleep on the living room couch anyway.” She put the cat carrier containing Atticus down at the bottom of the stairs, before proceeding to drag Sophie’s duffel bag up the old wooden staircase. As the edges of the bag caught on the stacks of paperbacks that lined the stairs, hundreds of books began cascading down into the foyer, hitting Sophie’s ankles and shins as she jumped backwards. Laurie continued hauling the bag up the stairs, seemingly oblivious to the avalanche she’d created.

When Laurie finally reached the top of the stairs, Sophie heard a loud noise and looked up to see an old dehumidifier crashing down the staircase, its plastic pieces separating mid-air as it bounced repeatedly off the wooden steps. She quickly pushed Atticus’ carrier away from the staircase with her feet, while still holding Oliver’s carrier. The dehumidifier came to rest next to a pile of bird feeders, precisely where Sophie had been standing before she’d instinctively flung herself, along with Oliver, against a set of old tires carefully stacked against the opposite wall.

“You okay?”, shouted Laurie, still struggling with the duffel bag.

“Uhm, yeah. I guess. Your dehumidifier isn’t, though.”

“It’s okay, it never worked anyway.”

Sophie, who didn’t find this piece of news at all surprising, crouched down to open the door to Oliver’s carrier, and then let Atticus out as well. She’d had the foresight to pack cat food in her bag, but she knew the cats wouldn’t be immediately hungry after the trauma of a long flight and several hours spent riding in a car. As Laurie disappeared up the stairs, Sophie quickly fashioned a litter box out of a cardboard carton that she’d found next to the staircase, filling it with potting soil she discovered in a planter that contained what appeared to be the remains of a long-dead ficus tree. Sophie made sure to put each of her cats in the litter box to ensure that they knew where it was before gingerly following Laurie up the stairs.

As she slowly climbed the stairs, Sophie glanced down to examine the ‘towel’ more closely, and was alarmed to discover that she actually *was* holding a piece of old newspaper. A page from the Boston Globe dated Friday, July 8, 2005, to be more precise. Did Laurie not realize that she had just handed Sophie a piece of newspaper instead of a towel?

Sophie slowly made her way up the stairs, grabbing the railing as she occasionally slipped on a paperback. Once she reached the top of the stairs, she stumbled through a maze of random objects as she walked to the end of the long hallway, made narrow by the endless stacks of junk that she guessed had not been moved in many years. When she entered the room that she remembered to be the bathroom, she recoiled in horror. Huge sections of tile had separated from the walls, laying in pieces on the filthy floor. Half of the ceiling plaster had also separated and was hanging down so low that Sophie had to duck her head to avoid touching it.

She spotted a large bucket next to the toilet. A wisp of a dream of a memory from her toddlerhood ascended to the surface of her consciousness: her mother using a bucket, filled with water from the bathroom sink, to flush Sophie’s poop down the toilet.

As she rushed back towards the door in an attempt to escape the bathroom rubble, Sophie began skidding on deep pools of water that had been left ponding in depressions where tiles were missing on the floor. She reached out to grab a towel rack, but one end of the rack was duct-taped to the wall and couldn’t support her weight. She fell hard onto the tile floor.

“Aunt Laurie!”

“What is it, honey?” Laurie asked as she walked down the hallway towards the bathroom, kicking a garbage bag oozing some kind of rank, putrefying waste against the wall.

“Seriously? You never even fixed the toilet? After, what ‒ 11 years? You truly have never gotten around to fixing the toilet?”

Laurie backed away when she saw the look of utter revulsion on Sophie’s face. Jagged pieces of pain cut across Laurie’s eyes, but Sophie could tell that it was a familiar kind of pain, one that she’d long ago grown accustomed to. Suddenly, Sophie remembered the horrific fights, her mother crying and asking why Laurie couldn’t fix the toilet and the tiles, pushing money into Laurie’s hands and pleading with her to fix the house so they’d have a place to stay when they came to visit. Begging her to be normal. But Laurie would just take the money and buy donuts, pizza, and more little treasures at the thrift store down the street. Sophie now understood why she and her mother had stopped coming to visit.

As Sophie began excavating each fragment of these early painful memories, Aunt Laurie watched her, much like a small animal would watch a much larger one crossing its path. Sophie realized that Laurie had probably forgotten, years before, to be deeply ashamed about anything she did or was. And here Sophie was, reminding her to feel ashamed all over again. She wondered if some small part of her aunt recalled what it was like to have a clean house, a boyfriend, a car that didn’t have dead birds trailing behind it on streamers made out of duct tape.

Too late, Sophie recognized that she had no right to question any of it. But there was no going back. The damage was done. Aunt Laurie turned away, her head bent low, and walked back down the hallway, and then down the stairs into the living room, where she made her way through the dunes of detritus to lay on her sofa. A sofa so old that the foam stuffing was poking out from the upholstery in all directions, giving it the odd look of a nest for some fantastically large bird. She lay down on it, pulled her knees up to her chest, and started rocking back and forth like a small child.

*I should take the shower*, Sophie thought. *That way, she’ll think I’m not completely disgusted*. But as soon as Sophie turned the shower faucet, as soon as she heard the groaning and belching of the pipes and saw the splatter of brown water coming directly at her face, she realized that living with Aunt Laurie in this house for even a few months could pose serious risks to her health and safety.

This was why her mother gave up, why she never came around again. And here was Sophie, pulling aside the curtain once again to let Aunt Laurie see herself as the world saw her. *Could Aunt Laurie ever forgive me?* Sophie thought. *I’m only 16 years old. Doesn’t that count for something?* And if Laurie didn’t want Sophie now, where would she go? She’d rather be an orphan than live with Aunt Diane in MarthaLand.

Sophie did her best to shower. There was, of course, no soap, not even near the sink. She was basically rubbing herself with some type of rank wastewater, pumped from the bowels of an old tank in the ancient cellar, with a washcloth that smelled like rotten eggs. By now, she was crying softly, trying hard not to think of the history of the wastewater – specifically, where it had started its long journey to Laurie’s showerhead – and drying her face and body off with the old sheet of the Boston Globe from 2005. She made her way cautiously across the pooled water over to the sink and wiped the steam off the mirror. Black newsprint announcing an old sale at Filene’s fanned across her face. *Blowout Sale Friday through Sunday, July 15-17! 30% Off All Women’s Swimwear!*

Sophie wondered: what is the exact sequence of events that transforms the little girl with the sweetly goofy face, standing next to her sisters on a windswept Cape Cod beach, to an overweight middle-aged woman with a house full of junk pilfered from the dump, with barely enough sense to keep herself safe and clean? And most importantly, why would her mother have entrusted her only child to an adult who can barely take care of herself?

After a few minutes, Sophie crept quietly into Laurie’s bedroom and found her duffel bag lying on the bed. She zipped it open, grabbed her nightgown, and slowly pulled it over her damp, dirty body. But when she tried to dry her wet hair using the edge of the bedspread, she noticed that it smelled like stale cat urine and belatedly realized that now, she too would smell like stale cat urine. In defeat, Sophie sat on the urine stained bedspread and began to softly weep again, but quickly realized that she needed to check on the welfare of Atticus and Oliver. On the drive from the airport, she’d asked Laurie to pull into the parking lot of a convenience store so that she could buy several cans of cat food, which she’d shoved into her duffle bag in the backseat of the car. She grabbed one of the cans from the opened duffle and quietly tip-toed down the stairs to check on them.

When Sophie found them, both cats appeared to be thoroughly enjoying the complex symphony of smells emanating from every conceivable opening, hole, fissure, crack, vent, slit, and nook and cranny of this strange new house they’d suddenly found themselves in. They were mewling in orgasmic delight as they investigated every savory, malodorous smell in the unfamiliar halls and rooms. Sophie grabbed a bowl she spotted teetering atop one of the stacks of newspaper piles, opened the flip top of the cat food can, and dumped its contents into the bowl, but neither cat seemed interested in eating. They were far too enraptured by the pungent cacophony of odors that defined their new home.

With her cats seemingly content, Sophie wandered uncertainly into the living room where Laurie now lay rocking back and forth like a baby trying to comfort herself. Sophie remembered her mother telling her that this was the method Laurie used to soothe herself. That you just had to accept it, and that once you did, you hardly noticed it anymore. Sophie realized that this was likely how her mother and her two aunts survived their dysfunctional childhood. They just pretended that everything was normal, even when it clearly wasn’t.

What was she supposed to do now? She had to say goodnight, pretend everything was normal. “I’m so sorry, Aunt Laurie,” Sophie said, her voice breaking.

“Like I said, you areyour mother’s daughter.”

“I don’t even know what that means,” Sophie sobbed. She wanted to love this wreck of a woman, this woman who had built forts and ridden her blue bike to the penny-candy store and caught tadpoles with her mother when they were children, but she didn’t have a clue how to do it. “Can I come and sleep next to you on the sofa? I’m really feeling scared and alone right now.”

Laurie didn’t move, and didn’t say a word. Sophie fell onto the pieces of foam splaying up out of the sofa, and snuggled up against her. The stench of cat urine from the rolled up carpeting and of decaying food from the adjacent kitchen wafted over them. She tried to stay awake, breathing through her mouth to avoid having to experience the cruel assault on her olfactory senses. There she was, sitting amid the ashes of her aunt’s life, and there was absolutely nothing she could do about it. Finally, at around 5 am, Sophie fell into an exhausted sleep, surrendering to the strange, foreign vapors that now invaded her hair, her lungs, her every pore.

June, 2019

As the weeks dragged on with no word from Luc, Sophie grew increasingly despondent. Her grades suffered. Several teachers pulled her aside to voice concern over her plummeting test scores and declining performance. Even her coach approached her about her inconsistent running times. She shrugged them off. They knew nothing of her loss and despair. They were mere stock characters in another kind of movie ‒ a black comedy where she was the lonely school outcast who spent her life waiting for someone who didn’t even exist anymore.

Disciples of the Kardashian Brigade renewed their torment of Sophie, increasingly intent on finding new and innovative ways to humiliate Sophie. Just as Heather had predicted, none of the girls involved in the Pig Blood Incident were punished for their criminal actions. Those with wealthy parents simply hired high-priced legal thugs who quickly dispatched all criminal charges filed against them by Detective Sullivan. Those whose parents couldn’t afford to hire expensive lawyers created a GoFundMe campaign, called “That Time When Sophie Juliani Forgot Her Tampons And Made Everyone Else Suffer For It”, collecting more than enough in donations to hire their own less pricey, but equally effective, legal talent. Detective Sullivan had recently called Sophie to apologize that he wasn’t able to make any of the charges stick, in spite of the fact that the Massachusetts Department of Public Health had determined the pig’s blood brought onto school grounds that day constituted an immediate threat to public health and safety.

With the warmer weather, Sophie’s friends began spending many hours at Suicide Garden, drawn by the mystery of the events that had happened within its walls since the high school had been built in 1964. During Sophie’s and Luc’s first visit in early April, they’d built a fire, told ghost stories, and tried to find the blood splatter on the brick walls where the architect had blown his brains out. Sophie strongly doubted that he’d killed himself over a lost love. *People lose love every day and don’t shoot themselves*, she reasoned. Something far more traumatic happened to him. But she kept her opinion to herself.

Night after night, the Faceless Anarchists visited the Garden and spent hours rehashing old stories of multigenerational loss. It seemed that everyone had experienced at least one tragic event in their family history that could be traced, in some way, to Suicide Garden. Distant relatives who had suffered any senseless misfortune in the Garden were mythologized during these nightly sessions. Someone’s uncle had come to the Garden one cold winter night after being diagnosed with terminal cancer, his sole purpose to intentionally die from exposure after writing a note explaining where his family could find his body. After he drank a fifth of vodka and swallowed an entire vial of prescription pain killers, he lay on his back spread-eagled in the snow to let the cold claim him. Word was that, back in the seventies, someone’s brother had tortured and killed cats and small dogs within the walls of the Garden, then buried their tiny bodies deep beneath its floor. Despite multiple efforts to unearth the remains of various canine and feline souls that were believed to have died violently on the sacred ground of the Garden, none had ever been recovered.

Not many stories came close to the epic tragedy of Sophie’s aunt. Sophie recounted everything she remembered from that night when Laurie had first mentioned Suicide Garden. How Laurie had been a virgin when she’d had sex in the Garden and became pregnant during her senior year of high school. How she had eventually miscarried the baby. Everyone seemed fascinated with the toilet miscarriage, the burial of the stillborn child in the town forest by Sophie’s aunt and mother, and the pile of rocks and red headband they’d used to demark the town forest grave inexplicably appearing on the ground inside the walls of the garden. Due to the immediacy of Sophie’s story − the fact that she actually knew the people who had experienced it and that all of them except her mother were still alive − she was conferred a great deal of respect during these secret outings. As many times as she told the story, it never lost its ability to shock and sadden everyone around the fire, particularly the girls.

In June, Kaylee and Sevyn began routinely showing up at the pool where Sophie worked. Their sole intent was to harass her. They’d pretend to be drowning, then smack her in the face as she frantically swam up to rescue them. They placed huge orders of fries at the snack bar under her name, then feign innocence when she confronted them about it. Their pranks were stupid, juvenile, sophomoric. She tried to ignore them, but in her fragile emotional state, she was concerned that one day soon, she might overreact and get herself into more trouble than she was already in. She’d had enough of the devotees of the KB *and* their mothers — grown women who, inexplicably, were allowed to maintain the “Sophie Juliani Forgot Her Tampons” GoFundMe campaign page long after their children’s legal bills had been paid, and despite her aunt’s repeated threats to file a lawsuit.

 “Just quit the job,” Heather suggested one night at the Garden when Sophie confided to her about the harassment. “Do you really need the cash that bad? Didn’t your mother leave you with tons of money?”

Sophie shrugged. She’d long ago gotten used to Heather’s lack of tact. Now, more often than not, she found it amusing. “Not really. I mean, she left a lot of money, but it’s all in a trust.”

“What’s a trust?”

“I’m not really sure. My aunt tried to explain it to me, and I pretended to understand, but I really didn’t. Something about the money being held by some people called trustees? And if me or Laurie need anything more than the monthly allowance, we have to prove that we need it somehow? And then the trustees decide whether to give us the money for what we want.”

“Sounds kinda weird. It’s not *their* money. And they don’t even know you.”

“I think that’s the point. If they knew us, they couldn’t be impartial about whether we should have the money. It’s so we don’t spend the money, or gamble it away. My mom was also probably afraid that I’d meet some guy who’d want to marry me just to be able to get the money.”

“Who *wouldn’t* want to marry you, Sophie?”

“Heather. I’m not − I’m not that great.”

“Sophie,” said Heather, in her distinctly exasperated tone. “You could be a freakin’ model. Maybe you’re not that pretty from far away. But once people see you up close, they’re all entranced and shit. Not *me*, or anything,” she rushed to say. “I don’t go that way.”

The manner in which Heather spoke the last sentence made Sophie think that Heather did, in fact, go that way, but this wasn’t the time or the place to question her about it.

“Anyway, I think it was my mom’s way of protecting the money so that my children could use it, and then their children. Like, a legacy.”

“How did a scientist like your mom have so much money? Aren’t scientists kind of underpaid?”

“She was married when she was in her twenties. To a professor of hers. Some guy named Donald Ross? I guess he came from some serious money. Anyway, he was a lot older than her and he died of cancer about 5 years after they got married. He didn’t have any kids and so he left her all of his money. My mom started investing it in the stock market. And it just kind of grew.”

“Wow.”

“I know. It’s kind of weird. She never told me she had that much money. And what money she was willing to admit she had? She seemed *ashamed* of it sometimes. Once, she even called it blood money, because she’d made mistakes when she was younger and didn’t know what kinds of companies she was investing in. Enormous, environmentally destructive chemical companies, like Lucifent. And companies who use overseas child labor. But by the time she found out, it was too late. She’d already made money off them. I think she felt really guilty and gave a lot of it away to charities.”

“Can you use any of it to go to college?”

“What? Oh, yeah. Definitely. The trustees know exactly how much I’m allowed to spend on college. I mean, it depends on what school I get accepted to, I guess. But it’s set aside, in a whole different account. In a college fund.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes, listening to Ian play his acoustic guitar. When he put it down, Sophie grabbed it and started picking at the strings.

“Sophie,” said Ian, a look of surprise on his face. “I didn’t know that you played.”

“Yeah,” Sophie whispered, her head bent over the frets as she hammered on a string. “I took cello and piano lessons and ended up quitting both. So when I asked for guitar lessons, my mom told me that she’d pay as long as I promised to never quit. I wanted to quit so many times, but she wouldn’t let me. Said she wasn’t going to raise a quitter.”

As she played, Sophie realized that she *had* quit. She’d never arranged to take lessons once she moved to Hingham. Would her mother be disappointed? Sophie vowed to look on the bulletin board at the town library and find a guitar teacher that summer. She could pay for the lessons herself if she kept her life-guard job. Or maybe the trustees could give her the money for lessons. She’d have to ask Laurie.

Suddenly, they heard the sound of high-pitched giggling outside the external walls of the Garden. Surrounded by deeper, distinctly male voices. Sophie and Heather looked at each other and knew, at precisely the same moment, who the giggling voice belonged to. Kaylee.

“Ian!” whispered Heather. “We need to keep them out! Keep them away from Sophie!”

“But that’s who they’re here for,” droned Tristan Hemingway, lazily, through his weed-induced fog. Sophie had always distrusted Tristan. He was in the drama club, and extremely full of himself. To Sophie, even his name sounded contrived.

Ian turned around and locked eyes with Tristan. “So, we’re just supposed to let them mess with her even more than they already have?”

“Uh, yeah?” came Tristan’s response.

“Thanks, Tristan!” Sophie said, a sarcastic smile plastered on her face. “Good to know you’re so here for me.”

“If you’d only let me *smash* you, Sophie, I could definitely change my mind about the situation.”

“The Situation?” shouted Ian, his face now contorted in rage. “The Situation is that you need to remove your baked ass from here right now! We pledged to help each other! We promised that if anyone was having problems, we’d all be here for them. When your dad died, Tristan? We were here for you! When Heather’s brother got arrested for trying to rob that convenience store, and then got killed in prison? We were all here for her! This was the agreement we made when we started coming to Suicide together.”

“Fuck you! And fuck Suicide Fucking Garden!” screamed Tristan, pushing himself away from the wall that he’d been reclining against. “I’m not putting myself on the line for this girl. You can’t tap that. Her own boyfriend couldn’t even tap it. Why do you think he left?”

Ian’s fist landed squarely on Tristan’s open mouth just as he finished his question. Almost immediately, blood began gushing from Tristan’s split lip.

“Shit!” bellowed Tristan as he staggered back, more surprised than hurt. Nobody had seen Ian hit anyone since the third grade. It was completely out of character.

During the screaming match between Ian and Tristan and the ensuing punch, Heather had somehow managed to climb the rope ladder to the top of the outside wall. Now she was teetering on top of the wall, drunk and out of breath.

“She’s coming,” Heather whispered down, pulling out her asthma inhaler. “Kaylee’s climbing the wall. With Sevyn and some of the football players.”

“Who told them?” shouted Ian. “Which one of you *told* them?”

Years earlier, several resourceful students, now long graduated from Hingham High and with young families, had devised a way to sneak into Suicide Garden. They’d hammered pitons into the side of the school building, close to an old drainpipe that dangled down from the roof along the wall at the back end of the school. The pitons had been placed behind the pipe so skillfully that, from more than a few feet away, it was hard to detect them. They were placed roughly a foot apart all the way up the drainpipe, making it possible for even the most overweight students to scale the outside wall. Information about the existence of the pitons was carefully passed down from one class to the next, but only certain students were deemed worthy of this valuable information. It was forbidden to share this knowledge with jocks, cheerleaders, or any of their sycophantic followers.

“Ian!” Heather hissed down from her perch 18 feet above. “I *warned* you that way too many people know about the pitons.”

“We don’t even have any weapons,” murmured Ian. Sophie looked over and couldn’t believe that he was actually scanning the area around him. For weapons.

“You *actually* think that there’s going to be a fight here tonight? With weapons? Seriously?” asked Sophie, dumbfounded. “What, you think we’re characters in ‘West Side Story’, and our two *gangs* are about to have a rumble?”

“Rumble?” laughed Ian. “I like it! This will be the name of my first band.”

Nobody seemed to understand Sophie’s references to the ‘West Side Story’ movie. The only reason Sophie even knew what the word ‘rumble’ meant was because Sarah had wanted Sophie to see the young Natalie Wood perform, and had streamed the 1961 film for her on Netflix. They’d watched it together one cold February night with Luc, bundled up on the sofa and drinking hot chocolate and wine. Before Luc had gone. Before. And now, after. Time, in Sophie’s world, was now forever bisected into The Before and The After.

Heather was using the rope ladder to slowly lower her massive bulk back down into the dark wild of the garden, but everyone could hear that she was having difficulty breathing. As she made it to the bottom and reeled away from the ladder, she pulled her inhaler out of her jeans pocket again and used it until the wheezing sounds subsided. Sophie and Ian exchanged worried looks.

“Sophie? Can we come down and play?” came a squeaky high-pitched giggling voice from the top of the wall. Sophie instantly recognized Kaylee’s voice, even with every word slurred from apparent intake of too much alcohol.

“Whatever,” replied Sophie. “But since you’re already kind of like an insect? You won’t even need to use the ladder. Just use that sticky stuff that comes out of your mouth to adhere yourself onto the side of the wall.”

Kaylee’s deadpan response: “Heh. You’re always *so* funny, Sophie.”

“Can I put some sticky stuff in your mouth when you get down here, Kaylee?” Tristan asked, a distinctly lecherous tone in his voice. Evidently, Tristan had quickly recovered from the hit he’d taken from Ian. Tristan was going to live to see another sunrise.

“Ew, no?” replied Kaylee. “Anything that’s been in Sophie’s mouth? Is definitely not going into mine.” When she thrust a foot over the edge of the wall, one of her three-inch heels dropped directly onto the head of Melanie, who had quietly been taking in the entire scene as it unfolded before her disbelieving eyes.

“Owww!” yelled Melanie. “Why are you wearing high heels on a rope ladder, Kaylee?”

“I *told* you guys she was stupid,” snorted Sophie. “Like, not just school stupid. Totally lacking-in-common-sense stupid.”

All necks were craned, all eyes watching, as the rope ladder delivering Kaylee into the warm steamy darkness of Suicide Garden swung dangerously away from the wall and then back towards it again, slamming Kaylee hard against the brick. Everyone stood, hypnotized by sheer spectacle of it all.

“Kaylee, you *idiot*!” screamed Sophie. “You have to move slowly, and keep your weight centered exactly over the middle of the rung, or it will swing out like that!”

“I thought rich people were supposed to be smart as fuck,” Heather intoned in a detached manner, watching Kaylee descend the ladder as if it were all just a bad dream happening only inside of her head.

“Exactly,” sighed Sophie.

“Maybe she’ll fall. And land on her head. And die. And we can finally be free of her,” whispered Heather.

Sophie peered over at Heather, her outline barely visible now that nobody was stoking the fire and its embers lay dying. “Are you serious? If she gets hurt, do you know how bad that’ll look? How much trouble we’ll all be in?”

“Yeah. Sophie’s right,” nodded Ian, gazing upwards, still fully entranced by the sight of Kaylee suspended on a rope ladder that was repeatedly slamming her with great force against the brick wall, fifteen feet off the ground.

Sophie had seen enough. “Oh my god! Do I have to do *everything* around here?” She stormed over to the bottom of the rope ladder, which was now skipping about in the dirt, and put her full weight on the rung just above the ground. Evidently, at the exact moment that Kaylee’s other shoe fell off her foot.

“Owww!” screamed Sophie as the stiletto heel bounced off her temple, barely missing her right eye. “Do you actually sharpen those things?”

“Heh,” laughed Kaylee, too drunk to even sense that she was in grave physical danger. “You really are so *funny*, Sophie. Those heels are diamond-encrusted.”

“That’s so sick, even for you, Kaylee. Fucking diamond-encrusted high heels,” said Sophie, shaking her head. “Only in ‘Merika.” She held the ladder steady by placing her full wait on the bottom rung and holding tight to the sides of the ladder. With the rope finally stabilized by Sophie’s weight, Kaylee once again began her graceless descent down. But even Sophie couldn’t resist the urge to move the ladder in unexpected ways every 15 seconds, to catch Kaylee off balance and prolong her drunken sky ballet. “Good to know that your dad’s salary from ToxicDrugster is being put to good use.”

 “No, no Sophie,” deadpanned Heather, shaking her head. “You got it wrong. I think he works for ZombieJunkie.”

“PharmaBurton,” Kaylee corrected. “My dad’s the CEO at PharmaBurton.”

Heather laughed. “Oh, yeah, that sounds *sooo* much better. Weren’t those guys involved in Whitewater?”

“No,” said Kaylee. “That was HalliBurton.”

“But you get that they’re basically the same people, right?” Heather sneered into the darkness.

“What? No. You know what Heather?” slurred Kaylee, now stuck on the fifth rung of the rope ladder for no apparent reason. “I don’t care!”

Tristan had snagged both of Kaylee’s shoes and was picking the diamonds off them near the fire, now roaring back to life after he’d tossed several pieces of seasoned wood into the pit.

 “Oh, great,” sighed Sophie, as the light from the fire made Kaylee more visible. “She’s wearing a fucking dress! She put on a dress and high heels before coming out to scale the walls of Suicide Garden! Did I really not see enough cottage-cheese ass at the pool today for one lifetime? I swear, it’s beyond all human endurance –”

“Lemme help!” shouted Tristan, bounding over and grabbing one side of the rope ladder. Predictably, this sent Kaylee slamming back into the wall again.

Kaylee, drunk as she was, knew what Tristan was trying to do. “TRISTAN? WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT NO SERIOUSLY. SERIOUSLY.”

“Tristan, let go! Slowly!” screamed Sophie, pushing him away from the ladder.

Tristan did as he was told, but continued craning his neck upward and angling his head for a better view, getting in Sophie’s way. Heather finally came lumbering over and pushed him to the side.

“Just stand a little over to the right, Tristan,” Heather said calmly. “You can see plenty. Her ass is big enough to see from pretty much anywhere down here. Including the northern hemisphere. And space.”

“Oh, like your own lardaceous ass isn’t enormous, Heather?” remarked Will Linderfelt, a geek standing quietly over near where the architect had blown his brains out several decades ago. Near it, but never on it. It was policy.

“Which is exactly *why*,” snapped Heather, “it would never even *occur* to me to wear a fucking *dress* with fucking *heels* to climb down a motherfucking *ladder*, *asshole*.”

“It’s not like I planned on doing this, dumbass,” Kaylee shouted down to Heather. “We had some beers and I decided it might be fun to come over to your loser garden where some loser guy killed himself a million years ago. And also, so I could further traumatize sweet Sophie.”

Kaylee finally made it down to the bottom rung. When she jumped off the ladder onto the dirt, she beamed with pride, as if she’d just stuck the landing on a triple vault and won an Olympic gold medal in gymnastics. Sevyn climbed down soon after, wearing sensible Converses. Two football players that Sophie had occasionally seen in the school hallways followed. She didn’t know their names. To her, they were just a couple of Kaylee’s mouth-breathing simian goons.

Kaylee immediately began walking unsteadily around in the garden. All the boys had mysteriously moved to the perimeter of the garden. This was a girl’s fight, and they knew it.

“Are there dead people buried here?” she asked no one in particular.

Sophie had already walked away from the ladder to put as much distance between her and Kaylee as possible. “Uhm, I’m going to go with ‘No?’”.

“How do you know for sure, Sophie? Why do you always act like you know everything?”

“Well, I *do* know that you need a permit to bury a dead person. I doubt a permit was ever issued to bury anyone down in a school garden. It would seem a bit, uhm, I dunno – inappropriate?”

“Really? What if someone was murdered? And the murdering guy? He chopped the body up into pieces and hauled all the pieces down here, one by one?”

“When you say the murdering guy, do you mean the *murderer*?” Heather asked, placing her face roughly five inches away from Kaylee’s and speaking slowly, as if she were talking to the village idiot.

“Shut up, you lesbian fucktard,” smirked Kaylee.

“What makes you think I’m gay?”

“Uhm, everything?”

“What exactly do you want, Kaylee Cocksucker?” Heather demanded. “Why the fuck are you even down here?”

“No reason, really. Just wanted to see where our beautiful little hot-house flower Sophie spends her free time, now that Luc’s gone missing.”

Sophie had started walking in a circle around Kaylee as soon as she’d begun talking about dead people. At first, she did it to calm herself down, but after a few revolutions, Sophie realized that this was actually freaking Kaylee out, even in her drunken state. So she kept doing it, making the circle a little tighter with each pass.

“Actually, there are probably a lot of little pieces of dead person down here,” Sophie said thoughtfully. “I heard that they had to scrape pieces of the architect’s brain off the brick walls. That it took them weeks, and that the pieces were so tiny, *microscopic* really, that they were never quite sure whether they got it all. And if so much of him got *sprayed* all over the wall, how much of him do you think misted out onto the dirt and the flowers and plants? Makes you kind of wonder just how much of him is still down here, doesn’t it?”

Kaylee looked genuinely uneasy. “You guys actually lay in the dirt and on the plants?” she asked incredulously.

“Yep,” Sophie replied. “We got him all over us.” She started towards Kaylee, her forearm extended out in front of her, acting as if she were about to rub it all over Kaylee’s face.

“But it’s been a really long time. He’s all decayed away by now.”

“DNA never really decays,” Sophie whispered malevolently. She wasn’t exactly sure whether this was true. It was something she’d definitely feel compelled to look up when she returned home tonight, though. Somehow, it seemed important.

“And I’m going to guess that most of the DNA is right over there, right where the guy shot himself,” Heather said, pointing to the spot that was clearly demarked as a special zone, where none of them ever stood. It had been dug up with shovels so many times and marked with countless stones and crosses over the generations, that it was clear where its boundaries lay.

“How do you know he was standing there when he pulled the trigger?” asked Kaylee, her faced comically screwed up in suspicion.

“Because, freakshow. Will over there literally went and looked at the crime scene photos,” Heather said scornfully. “The ones on file at the police station.”

“Okay, that’s just creepy,” shuddered Ian. “Even *I* didn’t know that anyone here had done that.”

“Has anyone actually stood there?” asked Sevyn who, until now, had been curiously absent from the discussion.

“No. Nobody I know of, anyway,” responded Will. “And I never actually looked at the crime scene photos, *Heather*. Somebody else did. It’s just information that older students pass along to younger students. Through word of mouth.”

“Yeah, that makes you seem a *whole* lot less creepy to us now, Will,” Heather said, her voice thick with sarcasm.

“I dare you to stand on it, Sophie,” Kaylee said, her voice oddly casual.

“What?”

“Stand on it.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s weird. And it’s disrespectful to the architect. He must’ve been in a lot of emotional pain to do what he did.”

“No need to get all *emo* on me,” Kaylee said as she strolled over to the spot, hesitated for a fraction of a second, and then stepped into the depression. She stood very quietly for a second. And then something happened.

Kaylee’s face seemed to become transformed before everyone’s eyes. It lit up with joy, darkened with sorrow, lost all its hard angles, and then took them back on again. She spoke several different languages and flashed a hundred emotions, all within the span of forty seconds. When it was over, a serenity that Sophie had never seen in anyone before slowly fell across Kaylee’s face. And then suddenly her knees buckled beneath her and she dropped vertically to the ground, lying in the depression like a limp rag doll.

Tristan started slow clapping.

“Bravo, Kaylee!” he said, clearly impressed. “That was an incredible performance! You really need to join the Drama Club! You could play opposite me in next year’s musical!”

“Dude,” scoffed Heather. “You don’t have to talk her into joining the Glee Club to get laid. She’ll fuck you senseless either way.”

“It’s called the *Drama* Club, Heather. And I meant it. That was actually pretty good.”

Heather shrugged. “Whatever.” Even she had to admit that it was pretty good acting, though.

They all waited for Kaylee to raise her head off the ground and start laughing in her signature high-pitched squeal. But nothing.

“She’s just messing with our heads,” mumbled Sophie.

“No. Something’s wrong,” Sevyn said, and in the tenor of her voice they could hear the rising sound of panic. She ran over to Kaylee, careful not to step into the depression, put her arms under Kaylee’s armpits, pulled hard to slide her torso out of the hole, knelt down beside her, and pressed her ear up against Kaylee’s chest, exactly as she’d been trained to do in the CPR training class offered during sophomore year.

“Her heart’s beating, and she’s warm,” Sevyn reported. She grabbed Kaylee’s wrist. “I got a pulse.”

“Kaylee,” demanded Sophie, walking over and standing next to Kaylee’s head. “Stop this. It’s not funny anymore.”

The two football players immediately high-tailed it over to the rope ladder. “Fuck outta here,” one of them yelled, before they both scampered back up the wall like a couple of cockroaches.

“Are you getting help?” Sevyn yelled up, before they disappeared into the warm summer sky.

“I’m going to guess that’s a *no*?” said Heather.

The rope was still swinging from the energy expended by the two primates who’d just made their escape from the crime scene at Suicide Garden.

“Does anyone have a working cell phone?” asked Ian, nervously. “Mine’s dead.” Heather handed him hers and Ian walked over towards the once-again dying embers of the fire to find more light.

But as Ian punched ‘9’, Kaylee moaned. Softly at first, and then progressively louder. Her eyes remained closed.

“Kaylee!” said Sevyn. “Are you okay?”

Sophie pushed Sevyn aside and knelt next to the girl she hated most in the world. “Clearly she’s not. Kaylee, wake the fuck up! What happened? What did you see?”

“I saw everything.”

“Uh, okay? By everything, you mean, like, the guy’s suicide?”

“No. No, Sophie. I saw what everything *means*.”

“What is she talking about?” Sevyn asked anxiously, peering closely at Kaylee’s face.

Kaylee suddenly opened her eyes. They were not the same eyes that Sophie had grown accustomed to over the past six months. All the hate and meanness had gone out of them.

Kaylee grabbed Sophie’s arm. “I get it now. I understand.”

Sophie recoiled from Kaylee’s touch, standing up and pulling away from her grasp.

“Get what? What is it that you get, Kaylee?” asked Sevyn.

“I’m so, so sorry, Sophie.”

“What?”

“I said I’m sorry.”

“Is this some kind of trick?” Sophie asked.

“No,” Kaylee said, groggily. “I didn’t know.”

“Didn’t know what?” Sophie asked in exasperation. She turned to Sevyn. “What is going on with her?”

“I don’t know,” responded Sevyn. “She looks different, though, doesn’t she? Almost like a different person.”

“Yeah,” agreed Sophie. “She really does.”

Kaylee reached out blindly and grabbed Sophie’s arm again. “Come stand in it. Stand in the hole.”

“No. Absolutely not. You passed out when you stepped in there.”

“No. You don’t get it. It will make you see.”

“See what?”

“See everything.”

“Okay, you know what? I’m getting out of here, and I’m going home to my aunt’s new house, and I’m taking a warm bath in my brand new pink bathroom –”

“You’re so kidding, right?” asked Heather.

“About what?”

“You actually have a pink bathroom?”

“Shut up. I can if I want to. Besides, it’s not really pink. It’s more of a dusty rose.”

“Oooh, I love that color,” gushed Melanie. “Kind of like salmon?”

“Yeah. Kind of. Except less orangy. More mauve to it. Like red clay. Or Terracotta.”

“Will you two shut the *fuck* up about the *fucking* color of Sophie’s *fucking* bathroom already?” shouted Ian. “In her own extremely inept way, Kaylee is trying to tell us something. And all you can talk about is the exact shade of pink in your girlie asshat bathroom? What is *wrong* with you?”

Sophie looked hurt. Ian had never spoken to her like that. But maybe he was right. Something extraordinary had happened to Kaylee tonight.

Kaylee began moving around now, trying to push herself up off the ground and drag her legs out of the depression. When she finally stumbled to her feet and climbed out, she grabbed both of Sophie’s arms and stared intently into her eyes. Sophie was astonished to find that Kaylee did indeed look like an entirely different person. She had the same exact features as before, yet she was almost beautiful.

“You have to trust me on this, Sophie.”

Sophie was facing Kaylee, her back towards the depression. “Kaylee? Why are you touching me like that? Why are you touching me *at all*?”

“Do you trust me?”

“Oddly, yes.”

Kaylee grabbed one of Sophie’s shoulders and pulled hard, forcing her off balance, and then used the entire weight of her body to push on Sophie’s other shoulder, causing her to lurch backwards to maintain her balance. Backwards into the depression. Sophie heard herself shout ‘No!’ before it all went silent.

From within the deep silence, she could see every conceivable color flash around her at exactly the same moment. Every event that had ever happened to her or anyone or anything else flashed before her in a vast array, and they were all happening *right now*. They were all occurring at exactly the same moment. Time meant nothing. She felt herself bouncing around and visiting all the moments that had ever been and would ever be for her. Her mother existed in one of the nows and she smiled at Sophie and said ‘Do you see?’ She saw Grammy as a beautiful young woman, wearing a hat shaped like a pill, looking sad and saying ‘I’m sorry’ over and over. Then she saw herself, first as a baby and then as an old woman, and somehow the old woman was holding the baby and both were smiling at her from the exact same now. She saw that her life had been a series of visits to the different nows. But she also saw that the order in which she had lived the moments wasn’t the only possible order. There were many other ways of visiting the events that made just as much sense if you used a different set of rules. There were other versions of her in the vast array, versions where she had siblings, or was a championship snowboarder, or was in love with a boy who wasn’t Luc. Those versions seemed to lie in parts of the array that she instinctively knew she didn’t have any way of reaching.

She went further into the void and saw different moments for all the other people and animals that had ever lived, and she saw that every moment that had ever occurred persisted, still suspended in the fabric of the universe, all waiting to be visited and revisited, for all eternity. Sophie realized that there was no such thing as death. A joyous peace fell over her as she kissed her mother and held Luc’s little sister’s hand and cradled Aunt Laurie’s baby in her arms.

She starting seeing other arrays, filled with beings and creatures that she’d never even seen before. Were these the life forms that would have evolved on Earth under a different set of physical conditions? She felt as if she could almost reach out and touch them, become a part of their events, but of course this would never be possible. She was unsure how she knew this. She just did.

And then she saw Luc, saw him as an old man bending over a woman in a church and kissing the side of her head. Then he was young again and sitting in the cab of a large semi-tractor trailer hurtling down a wide highway, the driver gesticulating wildly as he spoke to Luc while a red-haired woman’s head peering out from the back of the cab. Then she saw him again, as he watched a young President Kennedy coming out of a church on Cape Cod, standing next to a little girl who was her mom. She saw that Luc wouldn’t be visiting his moments the same way that everyone else did, but it didn’t make her feel sad. She also saw that she, too, would be visiting moments in a way that was wrong, out of order.

She saw herself, not much older than she was right now, surrounded by a group of emaciated people dressed in rags. They were closely examining her shoes and whispering about them among themselves. Then she was hiking through a snow-covered forest wearing an old burlap sack over her clothes, her face caked with dirt and tears and snot and thinned with hunger, calling back to a large deer that followed closely behind. Another glimpse of herself, exhausted and crying, kneeling by the side of a road while a large brightly painted truck idled nearby. And then she was some kind of slave, walking down a fashion runway dressed in filthy rags, with clean, well-dressed people bidding on her. Then cutting the stomach of a young Hispanic woman in the back of a filthy mini-van and pulling a newborn baby out of her.

It was all receding now, and as hard as Sophie fought to stay in this netherworld, she knew that she was not supposed to see any of this. She understood that a curtain had accidently been pulled aside, and that she had violated a fundamental law of nature. Did this mean she was about to die?

When Sophie regained consciousness, the first thing she saw was Heather’s face looming anxiously above hers, suspended only inches away. The dark starless sky formed a backdrop that made Heather’s porcelain skin seem almost ethereal in its white cast.

“Sophie!” Heather was saying, but no sound was coming out of her mouth. Just a kind of deep vibration that Sophie could feel through the warm humid air between them. And then Heather was softly slapping Sophie’s face, while Sophie idly wondered why Heather would think that this was, in any way, a useful thing to do.

“Why would you think slapping my face is going to help?” Sophie asked. But she must have only thought that she’d asked it, because she couldn’t get her mouth to move and nobody reacted to what she’d said. A sea of anxious, disembodied heads continued to float above her.

And then she closed her eyes again. She preferred the other place, but she didn’t remember where it was or even why she’d liked it so much.

Open. Close. Open again. Nothing had changed. She was still stuck back in the world again.

“Sophie.” It was Kaylee, kneeling beside her. Sophie looked up. It was true, Kaylee’s face had changed. Was Sophie changed, too?

“Kaylee. I saw it. I saw it, too. But now I don’t remember what I saw.”

Kaylee started crying. “Me neither.”

“Then why’d you push me in the hole?”

“I knew that it was important. I just didn’t know how, or why.”

“Somehow, it gave everything a kind of sense. And it made me less afraid.”

“I know.”

Sophie turned onto her side and, after a few seconds, pushed off the trampled undergrowth beneath her into a kneeling position. She and Kaylee were face-to-face, staring at each other on the thick mat of weeds and flowering plants covering much of the floor of Suicide Garden.

“Kaylee, we’ve got to remember! It’s important that we remember!”

“Maybe you’re not supposed to remember!” shouted Ian from someplace off to the side, near the fire. “Did it occur to you that maybe you saw something that you weren’t supposed to see?”

Everyone fell silent.

“Just be glad that you’re not dead,” Ian said, shaking his head and pacing back and forth near the fire, which someone had stoked to near-bonfire levels. “You’re both idiots, you know that don’t you? Messing around with things that you don’t understand −”

“Oh, and you *do*?” snapped Heather.

It sounded like Ian said ‘At least I understand what we don’t understand’. But he said it very quietly and the words ricocheted off the brick walls, making them sound like they were echoing from both nowhere and everywhere.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” This time it was Melanie. Sweet, shy Melanie.

“That there are limits to what we can perceive,” Ian shrugged, sitting down in the vegetation next to the fire. “We’re basically big stupid apes. We haven’t begun to use even a fraction of our brains to figure out what’s real and what isn’t.”

They sat silently, pretending to understand what Ian was saying.

“Do I look different?” Sophie asked Kaylee.

“No. Not really.”

“That’s because you didn’t have the anywhere near the amount of meanness in you that Kaylee did,” snorted Heather.

Kaylee stood up. “You’re probably right.”

“What?”

“You’re right, Heather. I don’t feel jealous anymore. Jealous of Sophie. Jealous of anyone, really. I just feel – accepting. More accepting, anyway.”

“Oh. Great. I’m so *happy* for you,” Heather said, caustically. “Considering that you’re sick rich and everything, my guess is that maybe it should be kind of easy for you to feel so *accepting*. Why’d it take you the last ten fucking years to *accept* your horrible fate in life?”

“Heather, I’m truly sorry,” Kaylee whispered, standing perfectly still and staring at the ground near her bare feet.

“Sorry for what, bitch?”

“Heather?” Sophie whispered. “She’s trying to apologize.”

“Apologize for what?”

“For turning against you. You were the best friend I ever had. All these years, I’ve never been able to find as good a friend as you were to me when we were little.”

“Aww, that’s too bad. Because the friends I have now? Are *way* more loyal than you’ll ever be. And, I might add, infinitely more interesting.”

“Yeah. I can see that,” Kaylee said, her voice breaking as she looked around at the people studying her from just outside the perimeter of the light cast by the roaring fire. “I’m glad for you.”

“Whatever. You need to leave now. And you need to take your *associate* with you.” Heather jutted her chin over in Sevyn’s direction.

“Yeah. Okay.” Kaylee slowly began making her way over to the rope ladder, but Sevyn didn’t move. As Kaylee began to reach for the ladder, Melanie approached her shyly, holding the ridiculously high-heeled shoes in her hands, now devoid of any diamonds thanks to Tristan’s handiwork.

“Don’t forget these.”

Kaylee looked at them and laughed. “They really do look like weapons, don’t they?”

Melanie smiled. She liked the new Kaylee way more than the old one, but found herself wondering how long it would take for her to revert to her former vindictive self.

“I don’t want them anymore.”

“But they’re Dolce and Gabbana,” Sophie protested. She knew this because Laurie had found a pair similar to them at the dump. They were brand new and still in their original box, so Laurie had been able to sell them on eBay for $600.

“You can have them, Sophie.”

Sophie laughed, pulling her legs out from her kneeling position and sitting cross-legged between two ostentatiously blossoming plants. “I can’t walk in 3-inch heels! I tried once, but I kept pitching forward and falling down.”

“Heather?”

“Are you fucking kidding me? I wear size 10. Those are made for a midget.”

“Melanie. You have small feet. Take them. Please?”

“My mom would probably like them more than me,” said Melanie. But given the way she clutched them against her chest like treasured objects, everyone could clearly see that she coveted the shoes. “Thanks.”

Kaylee began struggling with the rope ladder, again forgetting to distribute her weight evenly across the rung. Melanie dropped the shoes where she stood and rushed over to help her, with Sophie following closely behind. Only Heather and Sevyn, among the girls, refused to help. They watched as Kaylee lurched up the ladder, no more graceful going up than she’d been coming down. Much to his credit, Tristan didn’t even try to catch a glimpse of crotch. Once she finally made it to the top, she turned and gave a little wave before she disappeared.

Sophie found herself idly wondering whether Kaylee, without the help of her beefy football drones, would even know how to use the rappel line that had been rigged to the outside wall to get safely to the ground. *Oh well*, thought Sophie, *she’ll figure it out*. “Heather, you didn’t have to make her leave,” she said softly.

“Actually, yeah, I did. And Sevyn needs to leave now, too.”

Sophie glanced over at Sevyn. “I don’t see why.”

“You know what, Sophie? You don’t need to see why! *You* are a newcomer here! *We* inherited this place, me and Ian and the others! Not you. You play by our rules or you get out!”

Sophie became visibly angry and stumbled to her feet. It was the first time she’d stood since stepping into the depression marking the place where the architect had died, and she swayed unsteadily.

“What the hell is going on with you, Heather?” Sophie screamed.

“Nothing is going on. This is *me*. Being *me*.”

“But you’re not being you. You’re being mean. *You’re* the mean one now. It’s like you and Kaylee switched personalities or something.”

“Yeah, you know what Sophie? I think that you’re possibly confusing the plot of ‘Freaky Friday’ with real life. Try living in the real world for once. It can be extremely enlightening.”

“I *do* live in the real world! My mother died six months ago! It doesn’t get much realer than that!”

“Oh. Yeah. That,” Heather murmured, looking down at her feet in shame.

“Yeah, Heather. *That*. I keep wondering where is this magical world that you constantly tell me I’m living in? The one where my mom is still alive? And my boyfriend isn’t living in a different state? Because I’d really like to go and live in that world.” Sophie spun around to face the wall so that nobody could see her eyes flooding with tears and then ran over to the ladder. Unlike Kaylee, Sophie knew how to use it without anyone having to anchor it down.

Heather watched as the girl she loved, the girl that she dreamt about almost every night, gracefully climbed the primitive ladder and disappeared over the lip of the wall. A few seconds later, they all heard the dull thump as Sophie finished rappelling down the external wall and dropped to the ground. Heather allowed herself a small, nearly indiscernible smile as she pictured Sophie running through the thick, warm summer night air, past the football field, past the town library, and towards her dusty-rose colored bathroom in her aunt’s brand-new house. Not pink. Not even salmon. Dusty rose.

July 18, 2019

The reconstruction of Luc and Malta occurred over the course of several unbearably painful seconds. They both reconstituted on the bedroom floor of a house neither of them had ever set foot inside. Their skins and fur and hair clotted together first, containers waiting for the rest of them to arrive. Muscle and fat and blood vessels soon followed, and brain tissue rapidly filled the insides of their respective cranial cavities, where it was quickly rewired with neurons. Consciousness surfaced soon after, as if it, too, had a mass of its own. The pain was excruciating. Luc screamed in agony while Malta emitted an unholy howl that brought the household dog, a large golden retriever, bounding into the room. Several seconds passed as the three mammals stared at one another, more than enough time for the dog to realize that the cat might make an interesting toy to play with.

But Luc was faster than the dog. He scooped Malta up in his arms, even as she dug her claws into his freshly reconstituted skin. The dog began to hop vertically several feet in the air, all four paws landing on the floor at the same time, excited beyond all measure at the plaything that the human seemed to be purposefully depriving him of.

“Down!” Luc shouted. “Down! Sit!” Fortunately, the dog had been well-trained and obeyed immediately. “Lie!” ordered Luc, and the retriever instantly dropped its belly onto the hardwood floor, looking away from Luc to soften the humiliation. No other sounds filled the house, except for the click of an electric clock sitting on the night stand next to the bed. It read 1:00, and afternoon sun filled what appeared to be a young child’s bedroom. A working household, Luc guessed, one where the mom actually holds a real job and the kids are still at school or camp. Luc felt relieved. Another lucky break when it most counted.

Malta, however, did not share Luc’s sense of relief. She shrieked with fear, not sure whether to trust this new incarnation of Luc, and afraid that he was about to deliver her to the jaws of the large canine lying patiently in wait on the floor. Luc clutched the cat to his chest but also held onto her by the loose skin on the back of her neck, trying to ignore the depth to which she had plunged her claws into his flesh. They were so buried so deep that they were beginning to draw blood.

“Okay, Malt, we’re going to leave now,” Luc whispered, starting to bend towards the dog to give it a gentle pat on the head, then stopping when he realized that this would only serve to further torment both the dog and Malta. The cat had become increasingly more agitated, her claws digging ever deeper into his tender, freshly reformed tissue, but the dog seemed resigned to lying on the floor, utterly and inexplicably catless. It was a particularly large dog, even for a retriever. Everything about it was thick: head, limbs, flanks. The moist tongue that hung slack from its giant jaw was like a thick slice of juicy ham. Luc decided to call the dog Maximus. Maximus sank his head deep into the gap between his two front paws and released a loud sigh, looking up at Luc with wide soulful eyes. *Some watchdog*, thought Luc.

Still holding firmly onto Malta and intent on denying the pain, Luc ran into a hallway and down the adjacent stairs. The wide foyer on the first floor flowed into several doorless rooms, one of them an updated kitchen with the obligatory granite countertops and stainless steel appliances. Luc spotted an outside door in the kitchen at the rear of the house. Better to leave through the back than the front, Luc reasoned, in case a neighbor happened to be glancing at the house as he left. He looked down at the kitchen table, spotting a newspaper and reading the date, July 18 2019, in its upper right margin. Nearly three months after the April day when he’d been lying in his bed, fantasizing about the coming day with Sophie and his friends at Nantasket. Yet he’d been living in 2014 for only a month! Which meant that time passed about three times slower in 2014 than it did in 2019.

At the moment, Luc’s priority was to keep Malta calm or risk losing her again. He loved her, of course, but she also represented valuable proof that he had, in fact, traveled to a point in time before she’d been run over in 2014. Her painful reconstitution, the presence of a dog whose tongue she could still smell lying in wait somewhere in the house, and the strange movements of the vaguely familiar human who carried her had taken an immense toll on Malta. Her screeching meows were now escalating to alarming new heights.

Luc realized that he should have looked in the upstairs bathroom for a sedative to calm the cat. Why not go back upstairs and look? The house was obviously empty. He could push Malta into the bathroom he’d spotted next to the kitchen, then close the door before heading back upstairs. Poking his head in to make sure that the window in the bathroom was shut, he gently placed the cat on the floor, scratched behind her left ear, and softly reassured her. “Don’t worry, Malta. I’ll be back in a second. The dog can’t get at you in here.” He quickly shut the door, the cat’s cries now amplified as they ricocheted off the hard bathroom tiles. Running back up the stairs, Luc was surprised to see that the retriever had remained exactly where he’d ordered it to lay down. He quickly located the master bedroom. If anyone had sedatives, it would be the parents. Adults seemed to need them to get through the stressful business of earning money and coming home to spouses they no longer loved.

The medicine cabinet in the bathroom that opened into the master bedroom was stocked with several vials of medication, many of which Luc didn’t recognize. Sure enough, one was labeled ‘valium’, with an advisory that the patient to take ‘As Needed’. Luc knew that this meant you should pop one whenever you feel that the demands of modern life were once again getting to be too much for you to bear. He grabbed the entire vial, reasoning that, if he ever traveled in time again, he may need sedatives to drug animals that could pose a threat to him. He grabbed another vial labeled ‘vicodin’, which he vaguely remembered had been prescribed to his father as a pain killer when he’d fractured a femur in a misguided attempt to master snowboarding.

On his second trip down the stairs, Luc lost his footing and slipped onto his butt near the top, sliding several stairs down. The sudden racket renewed the interest of the complacent retriever, who sensed that some sort of hugely entertaining game was unfairly being played in his absence. By the time Luc made it to the bottom of the staircase, the dog had bounded out of the bedroom and down the stairs, barking loudly. He wondered why it hadn’t occurred to him to close the door to the bedroom where the dog had quietly been laying for several minutes. *It’s seriously time to figure out where the owners of this house stash their dog treats*, Luc thought as he re-entered the kitchen and heard Malta’s pitiful wails reverberating off the tiled bathroom walls. Clutching the bottles of pharmaceuticals in his right hand, he opened and closed the kitchen cabinets until − bingo! − he found a box of dog biscuits. Although it had already been opened, it was nearly full. Luc spun around and playfully shook the box high above the dog’s large square head. Maximus almost instantly started doing a strangely appealing doggie dance, twirling around in a circle on two legs, his front paws rhythmically punching the air like a boxer. Luc realized that it was the dog’s way of maintaining his balance while teetering on his hind legs. It was then he also noticed that Maximus was, in fact, a male retriever.

“Maximus! Dude! Consider me impressed!” laughed Luc. He opened the top flap of the box and swung it in an outward arc that sent the entire contents skittering across the kitchen floor. The dog yelped in orgiastic ecstasy and proceeded to pounce on the delicious biscuits, oblivious to the tantalizing sounds of the mewling cat behind the door just a few feet away. Luc realized that he only had a few minutes before the retriever finished scarfing down all the biscuits and shifted his focus back onto Malta. He pushed the bathroom door slightly open and slid through, closing it quickly behind him.

At first, Luc couldn’t see the cat. When he noticed that the shower curtain appeared to be moving, he peered more closely and saw Malta’s terrified green eyes staring out at him from a sea of swirling, mottled brown fabric, her fur a near perfect match.

“Awww, Malta,” Luc whispered as he gently removed her claws from the curtains. “It’s okay. I got ya. I got ya.” He felt her claws quickly sink once again into his arms and chest. He’d never seen her this scared. She needed to be sedated before he took her out of the house, or she’d run off. Luc vowed that he was never going to lose Malta again. She’d been Kelsey’s cat, and when Malta had been killed only a year after Kelsey died, he and his parents had taken the loss hard.

Luc read the dosage on the label of the vial of valium. 10 mg. The cat probably weighed roughly 5% of what a typical adult weighed. He bit a tablet in half, then in half again, until a small speck of medication was left on his fingertips, then waited until Malta opened her mouth to begin another round of screeching, popped it deep into the back of her throat, and shoved the vial into his shorts pocket. Slowly, over the course of several minutes, as he held Malta, she seemed to become calmer. Her claws retracted until she became sufficiently subdued for Luc to delicately detach her from his flesh and place her on the floor. He put his ear against the door, trying to determine whether the dog was still in the kitchen.

Not only was Maximums still in the vicinity, he was now panting, quite loudly, immediately outside the bathroom door, waiting for his new playmates to rejoin him. Luc heard the oddly amplified sounds of the retriever slobbering water out of a bowl and padding off into another part of the house, evidently coming to the belated conclusion that the nice human who had given him so many biscuits presented no particular danger to him or his territory and was probably not that much fun to play with anyway.

Malta looked up at him from the bathroom floor with zen-like calm. The same bored indifference to his presence returned to her eyes. Time to grab her and make a run for it, but not before finding something to put her in and placing the empty biscuit box in the trash or, better yet, back in the cabinet. The next time someone went for the box and discovered it empty, they’d just assume that one of the kids had forgotten to throw the box out.

“Okay, Malta. I’m going to find something to put you in,” Luc said, turning to the cat and showing her his bloodied arms. As if she could appreciate what she was seeing. And yet, she almost seemed to be examining his arm. She appeared to be aware of the damage she’d inflicted on the human, and even a bit concerned. Was Luc imagining this? Or had she taken on human characteristics when they had moved to 2019 together? He picked the cat off the floor and stared directly into her eyes. She blinked back serenely at him. *Nothing especially human about how she was looking or acting now*, thought Luc. But how had their particles remained separate when they’d travelled to the present together? Their DNA must be so incompatible that when their molecules rearranged themselves back into cat and human, no mixing had occurred. Despite the distinct feeling that his sense of vision and hearing were now both noticeably heightened, Luc had to believe this.

He poked his head out the bathroom door, holding Malta in his arms. She was so relaxed, she was practically purring. He began opening closets to see if he could find an empty box large enough to fit her inside. It was only when he began searching other rooms on the first floor that he found what he needed ─ a small empty carton in the laundry room. He opened the dryer and grabbed a frayed towel that he was fairly certain wouldn’t be missed, using it to cushion the bottom of the box, and then opened the door to the bathroom where Malta waited. She looked up at him, her clownish face calm and trusting. “I'm taking you home, but you have to be quiet and stay in the box. Okay?” When he placed her inside, she acted as if being put in a box was perfectly normal and after a few quick turns, settled onto the old towel.

Luc put the box on the kitchen table in case the dog returned, then grabbed the empty biscuit box and shoved it back in the cabinet, checking to see if any biscuit remnants had been left on the floor. The dog had eaten every last crumb. Luc was surprised at how adept he was getting at covering his tracks. He was done here, and needed to leave quickly. If there were young kids living in the house, or if the mom only worked part-time, it was just a matter of time before someone came home and discovered a stranger in their house. Inexplicably holding a box containing a cat.

“Good girl,” Luc whispered, closing all but one of the flaps and lifting the box off the table. As he crept stealthily towards the back door, he could hear the dog blowing biscuit farts in the next room. Since when had his hearing become so acute that he could hear a dog farting from the next room? What was even more disturbing was that Luc could actually smell the dog farts. The world was beginning to overwhelm his senses, but he knew better than to stop and waste precious time considering why. He needed to vacate the premises, and fast.

Luc exited through the back door carrying the box of Malta, and calmly walked around the side of the house to the curb. He instantly recognized the street he was on. The wormhole had bounced him back to Hingham from Philadelphia. His parent’s current house was only about a quarter mile from here. He grew excited at the prospect of returning home, seeing his parents and Sophie, and finally feeling safe again.

As Luc walked, he reveled in the hot summer sun as he periodically peeked into the box to check on Malta, unsure whether he’d given her too large a dose of the tranquilizer. But her breathing was steady, and she seemed peaceful and content. He regretted not checking the refrigerator in the house they’d landed in for some ham or cheese to feed her. After several minutes, Luc spotted the familiar roof of his parent’s house peeking about the trees. As he approached the house, he was relieved to see the name ‘DeForest’ on the mailbox. Everything was exactly as it should be in 2019.

Malta, now snoozing peacefully, didn’t awaken as Luc leaned slightly over to grab the fake rock hidden among the shrubs along the side of the house. He immediately recognized that the rock had the exact same deep scratch in the plastic casing that he’d noticed on the fake rock that he’d just used to enter their old house outside of Philadelphia in 2014. Luc froze for a few seconds, immobilized by the thought of how touching the same rock keyholder 5 years apart, within a period of less than a day, was even remotely possible. But he didn’t have the luxury of pondering the mysteries of wormholes and time travel while standing at the door. If his mother was right, and their house was under surveillance, he needed to get inside the house with Malta as soon as possible. He pulled out the key to the side door, unlocked it, and quickly closed it behind him as he entered the mudroom.

After weeks spent homeless on the streets of Hingham, alone and terrified, foraging for food and evading the police as winter began setting in, Luc wept with relief as he carefully placed the box containing Malta on the floor and lay down, pressed his face against the cool floor tile. He instinctively reached up into the box to make sure she was still inside, and began stroking the top of her head. Still zoned out on the sedative, she purred contentedly.

Luc estimated that it was about 2:30. Now that he was safe, his ravenous hunger began to dominate his thoughts. He pushed himself off the floor and walked into the kitchen, intending to raid the junk food drawer that his father had hopefully kept stocked with his favorite carbs during his absence. But instead, he opened the cabinet where his parents stored the tuna. There were several cans of it. *Malta will flip when she smells this*, thought Luc. He used the electric can opener to open a can, drained the water into the sink, brought the can back into the mudroom, and placed it on the floor next to the box. Within a few seconds, Malta’s head poked out of the box. She still seemed dazed by the sedative, so he reached in and carefully pulled her out. Although still groggy and barely able to stand, Malta scarfed the entire can of tuna down in less than a minute. Luc had to fight hard against a sudden compulsion to push her aside and eat the tuna himself. Instead, he returned to the kitchen and opened the three remaining cans. With his head bent over the sink, he proceeded to eat all of it, not even realizing that he was using his tongue instead of his fingers to dig the salty fish from each can.

He went back into the mudroom to check on Malta again. She’d left the mudroom and was now weaving uncertainly through the unfamiliar kitchen and into the vaulted family room, occasionally stopping to delicately sniff the familiar furnishings and area rugs. She hardly took notice of the kitten that his parents had adopted when they’d first moved to Massachusetts. Once Malta convinced herself that this was an acceptable facsimile of her old surroundings, she hopped onto the familiar sofa and with infinite precision located the perfect spot, plopped herself down, and fell into a deep slumber.

As soon as Luc was certain that Malta was fine, he returned to the kitchen and attacked the snack drawer with complete abandon, but after several minutes of eating the carbohydrate-laden food, he realized that what he most craved was meat. And not just any meat. He wanted a raw, bloody steak. He dug unto the freezer and found one, defrosted it in the microwave, pulled out the red hunk of meat, threw it onto the granite countertop of the kitchen island, and tore into it like a ravenous animal. When he was finished, he looked down and saw that blood had dripped down his tee shirt and from his hands onto the floor. He’d never craved raw meat like that before. Again, thoughts of how his and Malta’s molecular clouds might have mixed passed fleetingly through his mind.

He walked over to where the cat lay on the sofa and examined her closely as she slept. For Malta, even a small number of exchanged molecules would have had a large effect on her, given her small size. *No*, Luc thought. *She was still close to 100% feline*. But he viewed this as a learning experience. He vowed to himself that if he ever traveled again, and felt the now-familiar rush heralding a phase change, he’d be sure to push away any living creature or person he happened to be in physical contact with.

His appetite temporarily sated, and with Malta safely sleeping in their family room, Luc realized that he should first contact Sophie and ask how his parents had handled his prolonged absence. He was also desperate to find out whether Sophie’s mother had survived to 2019 and, if so, whether Sophie was even a student at Hingham High. Luc found his cell phone upstairs in his bedroom. His parents had left it on his bedside table, exactly where it had been the morning he’d disappeared, but it was no longer charged. He found his charger in his desk, and plugged it into the phone, but he didn’t want to wait for it to charge. He walked down the hall into his parent’s bedroom and picked up the landline receiver, slowly punching Sophie’s cell phone number while silently thanking his father for insisting that they maintain a landline in case cell phone towers stopped transmitting during a national emergency.

As Luc heard the phone ring, he prayed that the voicemail greeting would be hers and not belong to some stranger, because that would be positive proof that Sophie had, in fact, moved to Hingham. But some small part of him hoped that a stranger would instead answer, indicating that Sophie *had* warned her mother about the writing class, that her mother was alive, and that Sophie still lived with her in upstate New York. He’d just have to find a way to meet her, that’s all. He’d drive out to her mother’s house as soon as he passed his driver’s license exam and find some excuse to introduce himself to her.

Luc’s heart was pounding hard. He kept telling himself that it didn’t matter, that he knew her old address in New York and would find her, even if she’d never moved to Hingham. That he’d be happy to know that her mother was still alive, gratified that he’d had something to do with that, and excited to see her again. When the voicemail greeting began, Luc was overjoyed to discover that it was Sophie’s sweet voice flooding his senses. But his joy was quickly replaced with a feeling of profound sadness. The fact she had a working Massachusetts cell phone number meant that her mother had died, after all. That his ordeal in 2014 had all been for nothing.

Luc was now so confused that he wasn’t sure what to say in his voicemail message. He left a long message, but when he ended the call, he couldn’t remember even half of what he’d said. All he remembered was that he’d told Sophie he was back. Back in 2019. He looked at the time displayed on his cell. It was now 2:55 pm.

He called his mother to announce that he was back, but when he was informed that she was in court for the day and wouldn’t be out until 5:00, he asked to leave a message and left a long heartfelt voicemail telling his mother that he’d finally returned and was fine. His father answered on the first ring.

“Dad? It’s me. I’m back! I’m finally back!” Luc yelled into the phone.

“Luc? Luc?? Is that really you?”

“Yeah! It’s me! I’m back. And I’m fine.”

“Oh, my god, Luc! This a freakin’ miracle! And you’re okay?”

“Yeah, Dad, all in one piece, mostly.”

“Sophie showed us your letter. Did you do it? Did you really meet her when she was only 12 years old?”

“Yeah. It felt pretty weird, actually.”

“Jesus, Luc. We missed you so much. We were so *scared*. We thought that we’d never see you again. And yet you’re alive, and you’re alright. It’s a freakin’ miracle!” His father began to sob.

 “I know, Dad. I’m so sorry. I really missed you and Mom. It was a really scary four weeks. I got lucky, though. I stayed in an empty metal shed in someone’s backyard. But I felt really lonely. And the cops had started noticing me loitering around town. I almost got arrested for being homeless. It got so bad that I finally took a train down to Philadelphia and went to our old house. You and Mom weren’t home, and I was only there for a few minutes before I disintegrated.”

“How does that make any sense? How did the same wormhole dump you in Massachusetts and then pick you up and bring you to Pennsylvania?”

“I don’t know, Dad. Maybe it was two different wormholes?”

“It doesn’t matter. What’s important is that you’re safe and sound, and back home!”

“All I kept thinking was that the only way I’d ever see you guys again was to wait a few years until the younger version of me, the one living with you and Mom in Philly, became a teenager and began looking more like me.”

 “None of that matters now, Luc. Just keep calling your mother. I’ll be leaving here right away, okay? You just sit tight, Luc. I love you, son.”

“Love you too, Dad.”

“We’ll figure this out, okay?” On the word ‘out’, Luc heard his father’s voice break again. But he quickly recovered and ended the call before Luc had a chance to say anything more in response. His father didn’t sound very confident about figuring out how to prevent Luc from moving through time. He was, after all, just a geologist. Luc knew that his father had to believe that everything was fixable if he wanted to maintain his sanity. He returned to the sofa and held Malta, waiting for his mother and Sophie to return his calls and for his father to drive home.

Luc spent the next hour alternating between checking on the cat and grazing from the refrigerator, drawn to the protein-rich meats in the freezer and the cheeses in the cold-cut drawer of the refrigerator. At 3:50, he heard his cell phone ring tone from his bedroom. He bounded up the staircase and into his bedroom. The incoming contact number was Sophie’s!

Luc hit the accept button. “Sophie?” he asked, tentatively.

“Luc! Oh my god, I can’t believe that you found your way back! And that I'm actually talking to you!.” She began softly weeping.

“I’m just happy that you know me! So, you still live in Hingham?”

“Yes! Did you go to 2014?”

“Yeah, Sophie. I did.”

“Oh.”

“So your mom?”

A long pause. “I guess it didn’t work,” said Sophie, her voice reduced to a soft whisper. “Nothing changed.”

Luc felt his eyes well up with tears. But they were tears of guilty gratitude. Guilt over the fact that Sophie’s mother had died and that Sophie had been forced to move to Hingham and enter his life. “I’m so sorry, Sophie. I really, really tried. I showed you the letter, and told you that you had written it to yourself in the future. You threw it down on the sidewalk and said that it wasn’t even your handwriting.”

“Yeah, I think I *do* remember the handwriting not looking right, and being suspicious of it.”

“It probably didn’t help that I was so scared about having just traveled four years backward in time. I’m sure I came off as pretty desperate. And you were just a kid.”

“I guess it’s true what all the physicists claim. That the past can’t be changed. That it’s a physical impossibility.”

“But it *can* be changed, Sophie. I *did* change something. I brought our cat Malta back. She was hit by a car in 2014 and dies, a year after Kelsey. I was holding her when I started to travel back to 2019.”

“That’s − that’s great! Right? Your parents will be thrilled.”

“My mom especially. She was closer to Malta than Dad ever was. We’ve had Malta since before Kelsey died.”

“Aww, that’s so freakin’ cool. We should contact physicists at all the universities. To tell them that the Grandfather Clause isn’t an immutable law of quantum physics.”

“My parent’s won’t go for that. My mom is convinced that we’re already being watched.”

“Yeah, I know. We talked about that a lot whenever I came to visit.” An awkward pause.

“So, how’d they take it? When you told them that I was travelling through time?”

“Not well at all. At first, your mom blamed me. She thought I was being selfish, letting you try go back in time to try and save my mom and everything. And she was right.”

“But there’s nothing she could have done to prevent it. She gets that, right?”

“Yeah, but she was still really pissed. I mean, I don’t blame her. She’s already lost one child. I’d be pissed, too.”

“Kelsey’s death nearly killed her. I think it probably took years off her life. And there’s an anger in her now. An anger that wasn’t there before Kelsey died.”

Despite never having met Kelsey, Sophie felt acute sorrow descend over her. Luc’s family had endured far more adversity than Sophie had. She’d forgiven Sarah for slapping her across the face, and had made a conscious decision near the beginning of the call not to mention the incident to Luc. “I’m coming right over, okay? I have to find someone to replace me, though. I’m life guarding at the country club pool.”

It had never even occurred to Luc to ask Sophie if she was a good swimmer during the 4 months he’d known her. Apparently, she was. Luc realized that he didn’t really know Sophie at all. “Wow, Sophie, that’s great! That you got a summer job life-guarding. But can you bring some meat? We’re almost out of meat.”

But in her haste to get to his house, Sophie had already hit the END button on her phone. Luc was talking to air. He checked on Malta again and went back to rooting around in the refrigerator. He found an unopened bag of long-forgotten frozen shrimp in the back of the freezer, defrosted it in the microwave, and scarfed it down, exoskeletons and all. At roughly 4:15, the kitchen phone rang. The caller ID displayed the name of his mother’s firm.

“Luc? Luc?”

“Hi, Mom.”

“Oh my god! You’re alive! You’re *alive*!”

“Yeah, Mom! I don’t know how, or even why, but I somehow made it back.”

“Sophie told us everything. She showed us your note. Honey, you should have told us *before* it happened.”

“But you couldn’t have helped me. You couldn’t have changed anything.”

“I’m just relieved that you didn’t end up like Chad.”

“So Sophie told you everything?”

“Yeah. She told us her aunt mentioned that a boy claiming to be you showed up at her house in 2014 looking for her. And that you said you were 17 at the time.”

“At first, we thought her aunt was crazy! She’s got some psychiatric issues, so we thought she was just making it all up. But then Sophie started remembering a guy who looked a lot like me, following her home from school one day when she was 12 and telling her to not let her mother enroll in a writing class. The class she was driving to when she was killed in the accident. And once we heard the news that Chad had been shot by a bullet made of metal that hadn’t been invented yet? We kind of put it all together and it seemed obvious that I was going to travel to 2014.”

“Oh my god, Luc, I can’t believe that you’re okay. How did you survive? Where did you sleep?”

“I lived in an old metal shed in someone’s backyard in Hingham for almost a month, wandering around at night trying to snag the end of the wormhole to get back to the present. I finally got so scared that I decided to take the train to find you and Dad in Philadelphia. It turns out that the end of the wormhole − or maybe it was the another wormhole? − was near our old house. I was only there for a few minutes before I phased back. To 2019. To the present. Oh, and Mom? I have a surprise for you! I’ll show you when you get home. I don’t want you to lose concentration while you’re driving.”

“Uh, okay? I’ll be home in about 45 minutes. I cancelled all my appointments. I love you so much, Luc! We’ll figure this out, okay? We’ll contact the best scientists to help us figure this all out.”

“’Kay, Mom. Love you.”

Luc realized that he needed to clean himself up. After checking on Malta again, he went upstairs to shower and change into clean clothes. Yet oddly, standing under a shower of water didn’t appeal to him. At all. In fact, the idea of water pouring down on him was downright frightening. He knew that he smelled bad from weeks of not showering. He knew that his hair was a greasy, matted mess and that he had to clean himself up. So he forced himself to stand under the showerhead, pummeled by the wet spray of water. It felt like agony.

When he returned downstairs, he focused his attention once again on the refrigerator, seeking out every last piece of meat, chicken, and fish in the freezer. He nuked every pound of it in the microwave on a large platter and then jumped up on the island, squatting on the granite countertop as he ate off steaming plates of partially cooked animal tissue. He lost all sense of time, as he hunched over the bloody raw protein, practically ramming his entire face into the plate. For the first time in his life, he heard the distinct sound of his mother’s car from all the way down the street. When she turned into the driveway, he was running out the door, red and brown juices from eating the plate of animal tissue staining the entire front of his newly changed shirt. She flew out of the car, and ran towards Luc, slamming herself against him and wrapping her arms around his chest. Then she took his face in her hands and kissed every inch of it, murmuring ’my sweet boy’ over and over until she noticed that Luc’s clothing was covered in blood.

“Honey, what happened? Are you injured?”

He smiled down at her. “No. I’m just starving. I’ve been microwaving all the steak and hamburger in the freezer. For some reason, I’ve been craving meat ever since I got back.”

Luc took his mother by the hand and began pulling her up the walkway to the door. Just then, his father’s car peeled around the corner, and slammed crazily up onto the sidewalk curb before turning into the driveway. His father, who didn’t seem to realize that he was driving like a lunatic, bounced out of the car, his face happier than Luc had seen it in years. He barreled over to Luc, squeezing him in a bear hug and lifting Luc’s feet several inches off the ground.

“Luc! Jesus, you’re home! You’re really, really home!”

“Dad!” Luc couldn’t believe his father was still strong enough to pull him off the ground. It made him feel like a little kid again. “Have you been lifting weights since I’ve been gone?”

“What?” David laughed, stepping back to take in the sight of his son. “No. No, I’m just so happy you’re alright. What the hell have you been eating?”

“Meat,” laughed Sarah. “Partially-cooked, from the looks of it.”

David threw his head back and laughed. “I don’t care!” He kissed Luc’s forehead three times, making a loud smacking noise with each kiss. Then grabbed him again, lifted him off the ground, and spun him around several times before putting him down. “So, is it true?” He was putting his arm around Luc’s shoulders as they began walking towards the side door of the house. “Did you actually meet Sophie when she was only 12 years old?”

“Uh, yeah. Sort of. Only she didn’t really like me very much.”

David suddenly stopped beaming and took a quick look around. “We’ve got to get you inside.” He’d grabbed Luc by the arm and began hustling him towards the house.

 “Okay. But why?”

“Because, Luc. Because if it’s true, if you really did go into the past, then you’re a person of great interest.”

 Sarah was right behind them, her signature high heels clicking on the driveway. “Don’t scare him, David.”

“Yeah. You’re right. Let’s get you inside and give you a bath, just like when you were a kid.”

“Dad, I’m 17! I’m pretty sure I don’t need my parents bathing me.”

“But you smell like dead animals, with all that blood all over you.”

“Nah, I’m pretty sure that’s from being homeless for a month. I took a long shower earlier, but evidently the smell of homelessness still permeates me.”

David watched with some alarm as Luc jumped up on the kitchen island and hunkered there on all fours as soon as they entered the kitchen.

Sarah froze. She’d never before seen anyone execute such a seamless vault from 4 feet off the floor. “Luc? That’s, uhm – that’s kind of *new*.” She glanced over to David, as if to confirm that she wasn’t imagining that their son had hopped up on the counter on all fours. “Are you trying to be funny?”

Luc glanced from one parent to the other, noticing the growing looks of revulsion on their faces. Only then did he look down at himself and see that he was crouched over like an animal on the countertop. He immediately vaulted onto the floor and stood as straight as he could manage. He’d have to remember to never jump up on a countertop again. As he looked into his parent’s clearly horrified faces, he realized that he’d have to quickly fabricate an explanation for his odd behavior. “That’s probably from having to live on the run for so many weeks. Because the cops had noticed me. Noticed that I was homeless. So I had to hide in that shed? And in bushes, sometimes? So I was always crouching, trying to stay out of sight.”

The terrified looks on his parents faces still hadn’t dissipated. Luc again made a mental note to himself to never jump up onto countertops, or onto *any* flat surfaces, on all fours, ever again.

“Luc,” his mother whispered. Meat was strewn around the counter tops and island, and there was a substantial amount of blood splattered across many of the white cabinets.

 “What the hell happened here?” David asked, clearly shocked at the sight of all the meat and blood.

“I guess I was just really, really hungry. Being gone for a month and everything. I was literally going through people’s trash for food.”

Sarah put a hand over her mouth. “Oh, god, honey. No.”

“Yeah. Because once the cops noticed me, the waitresses at the diner were calling them as soon as I stepped inside.”

David pulled one of the high-backed chairs away from the kitchen island and steered his son over to it, forcing him down onto it. “So, you experienced the last three months as only a month?”

“I guess so. It’s been three whole months here?”

“Yeah. That makes sense, though,” said David. “Because time at the end of a wormhole that exists in 2014 is moving more slowly than the end in 2019. But not *that* much more slowly. Just three times more slowly.”

 “So, I missed the rest of the school year? Are they going to let me go back to school in September? As a senior?”

His parents exchanged meaningful glances.

“What,” said Luc.

“Honey,” Sarah mumbled, walking over to where Luc sat to embrace him, tilting her face against the top of his head. “You missed 7 weeks of school” she said, gently stroking his face.

“But I can make it up, can’t I?”

“We’ll have to see,” David said.

“C’mon. Let’s get you cleaned up,” urged Sarah, leading Luc into the family room and towards the staircase.

“Oh, Mom, I almost forgot. Look who I brought back with me!” Luc walked over to Malta, still snoozing on the sofa. He made a flourishing gesture, like a magician, presenting the cat to her.

“Is that −? That can’t be,” murmured Sarah, visibly recoiling from what she saw.

As if on cue, Malta raised her head and looked up, first at the human who had brought her here. She then directed her clownish gaze over to Sarah’s familiar shape.

“Oh my god! It’s Malta!” shouted David, running over to the cat and scooping her up in his arms. Malta just looked bored. She never did like the big smelly one with the yellow hair. She stared directly into Sarah’s eyes. *This* was the one that Malta loved.

“No,” Sarah said simply, backing away. She seemed genuinely repulsed by what she saw. “This is not right. Not right at all.”

“But you love Malta, Mom.”

“But how can Malta be alive and dead at the same time?” she asked, turning to Luc.

“Why are you looking at me like I’m some kind of monster? I didn’t do it on purpose! I was holding her in 2014 when I phased back here. And so she came back with me. I thought you’d be thrilled.”

“But what about that car running her down after Kelsey died? What about those memories, of finding her in the street and rushing her to the veterinary hospital? Are they real? Or is *this* real?”

“Mom, I don’t know!” Luc was beginning to truly appreciate the intrinsic paradox of changing the past.

David walked over to Sarah, holding Malta. “Can’t you just be happy that Luc spared her from that horrible accident?”

“Yeah, Mom. Malta totally bypassed 2014, when those stupid drunk kids mowed her down with their car.”

Sarah didn’t know what to think. She watched warily as David approached her holding the cat in his arms. It *was* Malta. Sarah had probably cared for a half dozen cats during her lifetime, but Malta had always been her favorite. Did it really matter that none of it made any sense?

“Malta,” she sighed, as she took the cat in her arms and pushed her face into the cat’s belly, sniffing her fur. Malta licked her cheek, near Sarah’s right ear, purring loudly, clearly familiar with her smell and touch.

“It’s her alright,” Sarah stated simply. She slowly walked over to the sofa holding Malta and sat down. “David, can you get me a glass of wine?”

“Sure, hon’. Sure.” When he returned, he was carrying three glasses and an entire bottle of wine. He poured a small amount of wine into one of the glasses, and poured the other two full. Then he sat down on the other side of Luc.

“Here’s to our son, the first time-traveler I’ve ever had the pleasure of knowing,” David announced, holding his glass in front of him until Sarah and Luc picked up their glasses and clinked them against his.

Sarah drank the entire glass and then placed it back on the coffee table while she continued cradling Malta in her arms. “Luc, I can’t imagine the unending stamina it must have taken for you to survive a month on the streets during a New England fall. Thank god you came back before winter. Winter would’ve been hard.”

“Ha!” David bellowed. “Did you know that ‘Unending Stamina’ used to be my stripper name?”

Sarah threw her head back and laughed, poured herself another glass of wine, and grabbed one of Luc’s hands, holding tightly. As if this would somehow ground him in the present. But they all knew things were never going to be the same for their family, ever again.

“We’ll find some way to deal with this, Sarah,” whispered David. “I promise.”

The empty promises were just that. Platitudes that meant nothing. They were mere mortals, powerless against invisible, unmeasurable forces, and governed by laws that would always be just beyond their understanding. They sat staring at one another, lost in their own thoughts, drinking the wine while Sarah stroked the cat that was now both alive and dead in all of their memories.

When Sophie finally arrived, she didn’t even bother to knock. She ran through the front door and immediately raced over to Luc, oblivious to the fact that his parents were sitting on either side of him and that he reeked of beef, chicken, and tuna. Climbing onto the couch and straddling Luc’s lap, she kissed him long and hard. Even the cat was looking from one human to another, seemingly scandalized by her behavior.

“Uhm, sorry,” said Sophie, giddily. “I can’t help it. I missed him so much. I never thought I’d see him again.”

“It’s fine,” giggled Sarah. “Right now you could tell me that Thompson has decided to impose martial law if he doesn’t win the election in 2020, and I’d be okay with it.”

“I often find myself wondering how he manages to be such a tremendous president, despite those crippling bone spurs,” added David, laughing.

A small face looked up at Sophie from Sarah’s lap. It was the face of the goofiest cat Sophie had ever seen. She leaned forward and peered at the cat. “Is this Malta? The cat who died a few years ago?” She’d seen the cat with the distinctively clown-like face in a photo. Kelsey had been holding her.

“Why, yes. Yes, it is,” responded David, not even bothering to note how preposterous it was that Malta was alive again. “Luc brought her back from his . . . trip.”

“So then, does this mean that she didn’t she get run over and killed before you guys moved here?”

David shifted on the couch, looking decidedly uncomfortable. “Affirmative,” he replied in a robotic voice that was meant to be funny, but only added to the general freakiness of the situation.

“Sooo. What happened to the Malta who *did* get run over?” asked Sophie, clearly baffled as she eyed the strangely alert cat who seemed to be examining Sophie’s every move.

“That’s the $64,000 question,” shrugged David.

“According to what I’ve read, they both exist,” Luc explained. “In different universes.”

“So, you basically stole her from a universe other than the one she died in?”

“Uhm, yeah, Mom. I guess I did.”

“I place Malta squarely nowhere on the very long list of things that we need to be worrying about right now,” said David. “Right alongside solving the looming avocado shortage.”

Luc laughed, but Sophie looked confused. “Wait. Does that mean that my mother could still be alive in another universe?”

“Yes, I think so,” said Luc.

“And your sister?”

David leaned forward, deep in thought, and then looked over at Sophie. “I *do* think Kelsey and your mom are still alive in other universes. Based on what I’ve read, it’s the only way the paradox can be resolved.”

“We’ve been doing a lot of reading since you’ve been gone,” said Sarah, stroking her beloved Malta. “About how the universe splits every time a decision is made. And whenever some random physical event occurs. It’s kind of hard to wrap your head around, though. That we exist in multiple versions, in many universes $-$ inside the multiverse.” They all sat pondering the meaning of the cat’s existence in the context of their new, multi-universe paradigm of the world.

“Hah! Schrodinger’s cat!” shouted David, after he took a particularly long sip of the wine. Sarah gave him a quizzical look.

“It’s a thought experiment, Mom,” explained Luc. “Used in quantum physics.” The reeking Mr. Davis has included it in their AP physics curriculum.

Sarah smiled. “That’s all I need to know. I probably wouldn’t understand it anyway.”

“And lawyers are supposed to be the smart ones,” said David, smirking.

“Shut up,” Sarah said, smiling sweetly. “You wouldn’t know a disposition if someone rammed it up your −”

“Mom! Can we keep things civil?”

 “I’m thinking that we should leave these two alone,” suggested David, dryly. “It’s obvious they want to make out with each other.”

“Later,” scoffed Sarah. “I gave birth to him. I get first dibs.”

Sophie nodded. “I want to have kids someday. And if I have a girl, I want to name her Sienna.”

“That’s a beautiful name!” said Sarah.

Sophie looked over at her. “I feel like you said the word ‘beautiful’ in air quotes, though.”

“No, Sophie, honey, I really like that name!”

Sophie couldn’t help but notice that, once again, Sarah was drinking practically an entire bottle of wine on her own. Did Sarah really like the name, or was it the wine talking?

“What about a boy?” asked David.

Silence as everyone thought of boys names.

“How about Julian?” suggested Luc. “Like Sophie’s last name, but without the ‘i’ at the end.”

“Oh, yeah,” sighed David. “I like it. Like John Lennon’s son. The untalented one.”

“Nah,” scoffed Sarah. “Sounds like that way vegetables are cut.”

Malta was closely following the movements of the girl who looked like a deer. A deer she’d once seen outside as she was hunting a mole. The girl was mating with the human who brought her back to her mistress. What were the humans drinking? It smelled revolting. But the boy’s exquisite-smelling shirt was hard to resist. As soon as the deer girl moved away from the boy, Malta planned to jump onto his lap and lick that shirt. When were they going to feed her again? Was that a bird chirping outside? There was that little kitten again, skulking around the margins of the room. Malta didn’t like the looks of her. She acted like she owned the place. Malta had been with these humans first, hadn’t she? Was that a squirrel she just saw in the tree outside the window? What had happened to the boy? Hadn’t he been much smaller yesterday? And what was going on with the one who was stroking her now? She smelled different than she did yesterday. She smelled like she was starting to die. When was she going to stop drinking that disgusting liquid and open another can for her? The humans were moving their mouths again, making their strange guttural noises. She liked it better when they sang. She liked it when the little girl with the yellow hair sang to her. The girl had sung to her just yesterday, and then secretly snuck three pieces of ham to her under the table during dinner. What had happened to the little girl? Why wasn’t *she* here?