



ADULT FICTION
WRITING CONTEST
2018 ANTHOLOGY



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In the Shadow of the Mountain

By: Leisel Hufford

The only sound in the cabin was the ticking of a clock, its glowing face reading 3:01 a.m. Moses Kepler rolled over on his cot, blinking sleep away. His bed was warm, and was the only warm thing in the cabin, but he couldn't linger. There was work to do.

He disentangled himself from the flannel sheets and sharp-smelling Mexican blankets and sat on the edge of the bed, adjusting for a moment to the chill air that nipped his legs. Around him, the world felt still. He stood and felt his way to the cabin's tiny bathroom, finding the matchbox on the edge of the sink and using it to light the candle on the shelf by the mirror. It reflected a face that he could barely place as his own, but one he was studious about grooming. Moses brushed his teeth and shaved with a dull razor, splashing his face with water that could make icicles of his whiskers if given enough time.

Blowing out the candle, he returned to the bed and felt for the boots he'd left at its foot. They made his steps loud and heavy as he shuffled across the wood. He found his coat on its peg by the door and let himself out into the night.

Starlight illuminated the path from the cabin door to Ethel. She and the cabin were the only things in the clearing, surrounded by hundred-foot firs that Moses thought must have seen the days when Christ walked the earth. The darkness consolidated them into a soaring wall of pitch-black. Moses had no desire to go beyond that wall.

He climbed into Ethel, turning the key and feeling her grumble to life around him. He turned on the headlights; they revealed his tiny cabin and he noted with mild dismay that the roof would soon need repairs. For now, though, his only job was to take Ethel up the mountain. He brought her around and headed down the drive, which was barely wide enough for Ethel's treads.

It took a while for Ethel to heat. Moses' fingers were already numb from his morning routine, but they thawed in the warm blast from Ethel's vents, when she got around to it. He turned on the wipers to combat the light snowfall and pulled onto the main road.

As Ethel began her trip up the mountain, Moses kept his eyes on the shadows at the edge of her headlights. One couldn't be too careful up here, where the air was thin and the mind was bored.

It took him thirty minutes by Ethel's radio clock to reach his first destination. A cement platform appeared in the headlights, supporting a dark-windowed way station. Moses didn't think anyone could live there. It was uninsulated and made of hewn boards. Some days, the wind slunk through it as if it weren't there, and snow managed to pile as thickly on the inside as on the outside.

Moses parked Ethel alongside the cement and, after checking the headlights once more, let himself out. He pulled up the hood of his coat and tucked his hands in his pockets. The cold of the mountain would not hesitate to crawl inside of him if given the chance, to make a home in his lungs and never come out. It was a parasite that must be given due respect, and due distance.

He stepped onto the platform and went to the door of the way station; inside were three square wooden crates, splintery and large enough to contain really anything, if Moses let his imagination get away from him. One by one, he hefted the boxes (they were lighter than one might expect, but still summoned a soreness in his lower back) and carried them to Ethel's truckbed. As he worked, he kept an ear tuned for noises in the woods—the stirring of trees or snuffling of a wild animal—not out of fear for his safety but so that he could ignore the sounds of the crates. Most of the time, the clatter of their shifting contents suggested canned goods, tools, or other supplies for mountain living. But sometimes, Moses thought he heard breathing. Sometimes the boxes mumbled or groaned. He could have sworn one of the crates had tried to jerk free of his grip during an especially blustery night. Handling the boxes was the worst part of his job, but they were mercifully quiet tonight.

When it was finished, he returned to Ethel's warmed cab and put her in gear, resuming the climb, his eyes always at the edges of the beams. This was the longest part of his journey, and it took him many minutes to exhale the tension from his shoulders, to forget about the boxes and whatever they carried.

Having returned to a semblance of relaxation, Moses reached forward to turn on the radio. He tuned it to the only station Ethel could find on the mountain, though not without some interference of static. If the static was ever too loud, whispering to Moses in familiar voices with words he couldn't make out, he would turn the radio off. Tonight, the static was lying low, hazy behind the audio. That was good.

“The search for Samantha Chandler continues,” the radio announced. “Concerned civilians can volunteer to join search teams combing the woods around Emory Ski Lodge. If you would like to help, please use the following number to speak to Meredith Plumber, who leads the missing persons task force ...”

Ethel’s beams illuminated nothing but snow-strewn road. Moses strained to see beyond the evergreens, as if he might spot the missing Samantha. Not this far up the mountain, he knew. No one could make it this far.

The voice on the radio continued, voice soft beneath Ethel’s chugging. “Samantha is not the first person to go missing in the mountains beyond the ski slopes. Last year, 36-year-old Jenny Daniels and her son, 15-year-old Gunner, vanished for over seventy-eight hours before Gunner was found wandering near Coalhead with no memory of the last several days. Jenny was never found. Several years prior to that was the case of 16-year-old Charity Kepler, whose father claimed she was snatched off the slope by a shadowy figure. Neither the girl nor any figure was ever found.”

Moses turned off the radio. The darkness beyond the headlights seemed deeper now, inkier. Or were the headlights becoming dimmer?

He reached a stretch of road composed primarily of switchbacks that turned on themselves like thieves. Navigating them was a chore, as Ethel wasn’t agile enough to make the turns on her own. Moses had to reverse and execute a three-point turn at every switchback, making sure not to back off the road and down the steep mountainside. He couldn’t suppress a feeling that the trees were watching him, waiting for a fateful slip.

Finally he pulled out of the switchbacks and onto a ridge that ran to the top of the mountain. The road was straight, barred by trees on either side, but they didn't grow quite tall enough to block Moses' view of the world beyond. Sometimes he would catch glimpses of towns, nearly dark at such hours, but with just enough lights on to show him that they were still there, far below.

When he pulled his eyes away from the glimmering little towns in the valley and looked once more at the road ahead, a face stared back at him from the edge of the headlight. His heart fell on the brake and Ethel squeaked to a stop. Moses sat forward in his seat, staring out at the falling snow, but the face was gone. For several minutes, he only watched, willing it to return. Could it have been Samantha, the missing girl? Or Charity? More likely, it was his imagination. The mountains were full of visions, the trees whispering secrets between them, and a smart man like Moses Kepler should know better than to listen. He ignored the sweat on his forehead and urged Ethel back to her climb.

At length, she summited the mountain. The trees were thinner here, revealing a building similar to the way station but much larger, with lights in the windows. They cast yellow squares across the snow, and Moses parked Ethel in the light so he could see to unload the crates.

First, though, he checked the edge of the clearing for faces. It seemed that, aside from the wooden building, he was alone, and he didn't know if he should be relieved or disappointed. Moses cut the engine and hopped to the snowy ground, crunching toward the back of the vehicle.

Now he began transporting the boxes from the back of Ethel to the front door of the building. He did not enter, but he was aware of a figure watching him from behind one of the curtains, a gray silhouette in the soft light.

Try as he might to listen to the trees, or the wind, or the snow, he could not keep his attention off the boxes. The first was quiet. The second heaved ragged breaths, or maybe that was Moses. The third, when he put it down by the others, emitted a gentle sob.

Moses told himself he was hearing things. With the boxes unloaded, he moved to the side of the building, where he found a plastic can of diesel fuel sitting in the snow. Beside it was a sizeable brown paper bag, the top folded over and stapled. The bag he put into the truckbed, and he used the can to refuel Ethel. When he was finished, he returned the can to its place, but he didn't want to head back down the mountain. Not yet.

When he came around the front of the wooden structure, he saw that the figure still watched him from behind the curtain. It would watch until he had taken Ethel and left, he knew. Another soft cry came from the third crate by the door. Moses glanced at it, and then again at the figure.

It was a long drive back down the mountain. If he wanted to reach his cabin before dawn, he needed to go now. He had his payment; the brown paper bag held enough food to last him a week, until the next job, plus the pills that would allow him to sleep each day away. Snow swirled around him and he imagined that the silhouetted figure shifted impatiently.

He took one step toward the crate, and then another. The figure in the window made no move. Moses knelt by the third box, putting his ear close to the wood. It was quiet, now. Surely he'd imagined the sobs.

"Help," the box whispered. Moses' sweat chilled on his skin. Still the figure in the window had not moved.

"Who are you?" he whispered to the box. It seemed too small to contain a person, and yet it had undoubtedly spoken.

The voice within was quiet, choked with tears. “My name is Samantha.”

Moses looked at Ethel. He hadn’t closed the tailgate after unloading the boxes. He could load this box, close the gate, reach the cab, and hurry Ethel back down the mountain before the figure behind the curtain could catch him. Surely he could. The paper bag sitting in the cab reminded him that he didn’t have to. It would be easier to leave the box here and retrace his path down the mountain to retire to his cabin, like he always did. That would be the safe choice.

Just as the safe choice had led him to this mountain, to this bizarre job, to the boxes and the visions at the edge of the beams. Just as he had decided to sleep his days away, because the safe choice was to accept that no shadowy figure had stolen his daughter from the slope that day. She had merely disappeared, and it would not be safe to comb the woods on a grieved delusion that something sinister lurked within, stealing girls.

Maybe Moses was tired of being safe.

He grabbed the box and rushed back to Ethel. The cold pricked at his eyes and froze in his nostrils. He tossed the crate in the bed, ignoring the twinge in his back and slamming the tailgate shut. The sound rang like a gunshot through the trees.

Moses hauled himself into Ethel’s cab and turned the key, bringing her alive. He allowed himself one glance at the building, at the window. The figure was gone. He had no time. He hurried Ethel back to the road, to her slow slog down the mountain. As he retraced the ridge, he stole glances in the mirrors, but could spot no pursuers. He had never seen another Ethel on the mountain and assumed this meant he would not be followed. Not immediately, anyway.

He reached the switchbacks, and now came a test of patience. With shaking hands, he executed each turn, as carefully and methodically as he would have on any other night. Once, he caught sight of a face—Charity’s face—hovering just beyond the beams, and overcorrected,

nearly pitching Ethel over the edge. After that, he refused to look at the edge of the beams, unfocusing his eyes and relying on muscle memory to help him through the switchbacks.

Finally there was only open road, all the way to the way station, his cabin, and beyond. He didn't know how far he would go, how far he could without being caught. Caught by what, he wondered, but didn't allow himself to answer.

He soon reached the way station. The empty windows stared mockingly at him, as if inhabited by whatever pursued him. He kept his eyes on the road ahead, ignoring the way Charity's face appeared not just at the edge of the beams, but in the dark spots between the trees and even the shadows of Ethel's cab. He pressed insistently on the gas pedal, and Ethel's headlights flickered in response.

His faithful truck was dying, he thought. Of natural causes, or whatever evil hung over the mountain? In the truckbed, Samantha's crate rubbed against the metal floor at every bump but was otherwise quiet.

By the time he reached the turnoff to his cabin, Ethel's lights had faded to the effect of fireflies, flickering halfheartedly. Dawn was close now, Moses thought—if he could navigate by starlight until then, surely he could reach the bottom of the mountain. He plowed past the turnoff and his cabin. He was tired of the man who had spent the last four years hiding inside it.

Not ten minutes later, Ethel's lights gave a final flicker and went out, plunging Moses into darkness. He went only as far as his last view of the road would let him, before stopping to let his eyes adjust. The snowy road glowed slightly, contrasted by the massive black trees, just enough for Moses to continue forward. But the falling snow obscured things, further slowing him, and he could only hope that he could outcrawl whatever followed them. The chainsaw rhythm of Ethel's engine was the only noise in the world as he crept down the mountain.

And then that too cut away. Moses was stranded, Ethel a great metal corpse on the road, rolling a few more yards before her momentum ran out. Moses' hands, clawlike, were stuck to the wheel. The silence rang in his ears, louder than the engine had been. He could not remember exact distance, but he knew it was still a long way to the ski towns below. He would not make it on foot.

He considered the wooden crate in the bed. When he stared out the windows, he could see no sign of a shadowy figure, nor of Charity's face, watching him. For the moment, he and Ethel and the box were alone.

Moses breathed deeply before letting himself out into the cold. He rounded Ethel and climbed into the truckbed, metal freezing beneath his hands. On his knees, he shuffled to the box, feeling the wood, its rough knots and corners. "Are you okay, Samantha?" he asked it.

The box did not reply. That worried him. He felt for the emergency flashlight he kept in one of his coat pockets. The beam illuminated rusty metal and quiet box. Placing the light nearby, he set to prying up the lid. It came away easily.

Blood rushing in his ears, Moses grasped the flashlight and held it up to see. His breath turned to shivering clouds in the air.

He caught the quickest glimpse of tangled limbs—the color of young aspens, sap oozing where they'd been severed—before his bravery fled and he turned the light off. Samantha, he thought. Then he thought of Charity.

Slumping back against the cold metal of Ethel's bed, Moses felt his strength leave him. He was almost sure, now, that the figure from the top of the mountain was nearby, would arrive at any moment. He did not know what the punishment for taking the crate was, or if it would be worse for opening it.

He reached over and found the brown paper bag. Inside, nestled among soup cans and crinkling bags of beef jerky, was an envelope, and he pulled from it a small pill. It sat in his shaking hand like a skipping stone. It was his only defense against thoughts of Charity, of the shadow that had dragged her into the woods before his eyes, her skis digging frantic ruts in the snow. It would put him to sleep until 3:00 a.m. the next morning, at which point he would take another, and so forth, until he was due to make the trip up the mountain all over again the next week.

A low growl rose from the trees, vibrating through Ethel's carcass. Moses was mostly sorry that she had died, after so many loyal trips along the mountain road. And he was sorry for Samantha, for what remained of her in the crate. As for himself, he no longer cared. Maybe whatever followed him would send him to see his darling Charity again. The thought made him smile, just barely. As the snow sifted down around him, he placed the pill on his tongue and swallowed it dry, then waited for the darkness to finally overtake him.

A Rational List

By: Sandra Hendricks

The strangest thing happened when she entered the cabin. Suddenly she couldn't breathe. She tried walking to the bed to take off her backpack, but her feet refused to move forward. She did a quick pivot and stepped back outside into the fresh air. *I don't know what is going on here, but I am not spending the night in that cabin. This is the weirdest experience I have ever had, backpacking or not.* The cabin had been dark and dusty with spider-webs hanging from the ceiling, but Kelly was convinced, those things, those natural things were not the root of this feeling.

She quietly closed the cabin door. As she started to walk away, the roller shades snapped up in unison in the two front windows. The sound was distinct and undeniable, however improbable. Kelly stopped, afraid to turn around, to look back at the now uncovered windows. She could clearly see them in her mind's eye, dark and gaping on each side of the cabin door. She took a step forward, away from the cabin. The tapping froze her in place once more. It sounded like a fingers tapping on the glass panes. "Crap!" She whispered. She wanted to turn around, but she was truly afraid, like she had never been afraid in her life. Kelly took another step forward, then another. She walked briskly without running. Her heart was thumping inside her chest like the scared baby rabbit she had once found as a child. A sound like a closing door caused her to quicken her pace. She wasn't running, but she wasn't wasting any time either.

The six mile hike from the trailhead had been glorious. Coloradans knew a perfect calm often came before the storm and today had been just such a day. The temperature hovered around 68 degrees for most of the afternoon. Many of the aspen stood barren, their naked

branches reaching for the sky, but a few golden leaves refused to surrender. They clung to the branches and rattled in the gentle breeze.

Now the predicted storm battled its way across the horizon. The calm weather retreated without a fight. The forest quietened as birds and wildlife wisely took cover before the oncoming snow.

Kelly retraced her steps down the leaf covered path that had led her to the cabin. Dark, thick clouds fought for position in the sky. The wind picked up and the temperature was dropping.

She stopped long enough to pull her coat from her pack, and then continued down the trail. As she hiked, she looked for a place to pitch her tent for the night.

Her plan to stay in the cabin was out of the question. Just thinking about it made her shiver.

“What the heck?” Kelly jumped to the side of the trail as something brushed against her, touching her hand as it passed. The trail was empty. Hesitantly she looked, first at her hand, then back toward the cabin. The cabin stood in the lowering clouds, shrouded in mist. She pulled her coat tighter.

Kelly looked again at her hand. The wind swirled and leaves fell through the aspen branches.

“Just a leaf,” she mumbled. “Just a stupid leaf brushed my hand.” She jammed both hands inside her pockets and continued her brisk pace back toward the trailhead. Hiking back to the car was out of the question. Early darkness was already settling around her. The forecasted snow was imminent now. Her snowshoes were strapped to her pack for tomorrow’s hike. Her goal for today had been the cabin. Tomorrow she had planned to continue the trail called the Cabin Loop, which made, as its name indicated, a loop, through a small slice of Colorado’s Rocky Mountains back to the parking lot she had left earlier that day.

Kelly's small backpacking tent was in her pack in case of an emergency or if the cabin was occupied, which was unlikely in late September. Now here she was, acting like a scared eight year old, hiking back the way she had come because of a 'ghost'. "You don't believe in all this mumbo jumbo, do you?" Kelly managed to laugh at the words from a movie that popped in her head. She admitted to herself, at the moment, she wasn't sure what she believed in.

"Get a grip," she chided herself. As she walked, her mind raced through the events of the last few minutes. Her original plans included a relaxing evening, preparing a small meal, reading an outlandishly juvenile romance novel and letting the tension from living and working in Denver to drift away with the mountain breezes. Nothing brought peace and perspective to her life like a visit to the mountains.

Looking about for a new place to spend the night, Kelly spotted a copse of large spruce trees.

The overlapping branches would provide protection from the oncoming storm. With relief she ducked under the spruce boughs and slung her backpack to the ground. Within a few minutes, her small orange tent was up and practically glowing under the trees. She unrolled, first her sleeping mat, then her down-filled sleeping bag inside the tent and crawled through the small opening, dragging her pack behind her. A cold breeze blew into the tent puffing out the nylon sides. Thunder rolled across the mountain top and echoed through the valleys. *I love being in the mountains during thunder snow. Watching and listening to the power of the seasons clashing makes me feel alive.* She zipped the tent flap closed as the sleet and snow mix began in earnest.

With her headlamp clamped on, Kelly rummaged through her pack. She hoped the Trekker Chair she had sprung for proved worth the extra 10 ounces in her pack. As she relaxed

into the chair, she sighed. The extra support for her back was heavenly. *Excellent purchase.*

She would add the chair to her backpacking list.

Kelly decided to skip the dehydrated meal she had planned. Instead, she opted for one of the several protein bars she had packed. *Chocolate, peanut butter or coconut?* She chose peanut butter.

The sound from removing the wrapper seemed loud inside the tent. The sound reminded her that she was here alone. The nearest human, as far as she knew since she had seen no one on the trail, was at least five miles away.

Backpacking alone was not new to her. Kelly filled her summer weekends with hiking in the Colorado Rockies. Frequently friends joined her, but just as often, she hiked alone or with her neighbor's dog as her only companion. She did not freak out over weather or wildlife or anything else that she could remember.

She sipped from her water bottle and one more time, mentally reviewed the events that prompted her flight back down the trail. She had entered the cabin, or hut, as the forest service called it, just before evening, just the way she had planned. The sun was warm through high thin clouds until late in the afternoon as the cold front approached. The light breeze bolstered her spirits.

Overall, she would say her mood had been light- hearted and downright happy. Until she had opened the cabin door and stepped inside.

Outside the tent, Kelly heard the wind as it grew in force. Occasionally she heard the rustle of snow falling from the spruce branches to her tent, but inside, she sat comfortably. With more rummaging in her pack, she located the one serving plastic container of wine. She also found her single serving bar of ninety percent supreme dark chocolate. Leaning back in her

comfy trail chair, she nibbled on the chocolate and sipped on the wine to make both last as long as possible.

The wind continued, howling now in the full force of the storm. She would create a list. God, how she loved lists. Lists cleared her head. Lists were manageable. Lists were rational. Kelly took her journal from a side pocket of her backpack. The first item she wrote was, ‘A heavy feeling, unable to breathe’. She recalled her entrance through the cabin door. Her chest had immediately felt constricted. No matter how hard she had tried, she could not pull in enough oxygen to alleviate the feeling of suffocation.

Next, she tried to remember the details of the single room. She remembered the bunk beds standing in one corner, a wood burning stove standing like a little round Buddha in the center of the cabin, a small, rustic table with one bench and two straight- backed chairs. Against the front wall was an old sofa, looking like its best years were far behind it.

Then she remembered her attempt walk to the beds to drop her backpack. She had tried to take a step, but her boot had stuck solidly to the floor. The second item she wrote in the list was ‘Forward movement stopped’.

Kelly wrote the final two items, ‘Roller shades popped up’ and ‘Tapping on the windows’. The leaf in the trail was only a leaf. She did not add it to the list.

Next, Kelly started exploring rational explanations for each item she had written in the list.

“A heavy feeling, unable to breathe,” Kelly read aloud. She leaned back in her chair remembering. The last mile of the hike had been steep. *My pack was light, but even a light*

pack has drag that can make a steep hike exhausting. The dust and musty environment made the feeling even worse.

Hmm, that felt pretty good. A nice, sound reason. Putting the list together had been a great idea. Another sip of wine, another tiny taste of savory chocolate. This trip was starting to feel good again.

'Forward movement stopped'. Ok, ok, she thought. This was obviously just my imagination. I was tired, couldn't breathe and just plain freaked out. Yes, I felt like I was prevented from moving into the cabin, but I'll bet I caught my boot on a nail that had popped up from the old floor boards. I will go back tomorrow to find that nail and put an end to this craziness. She laughed out loud and wrote: Overactive imagination after over exertion, and maybe a nail.

Another sip of the wine. She imagined the wine fighting the protein bar for superiority in her body. The wine was winning. Kelly could feel the wine going straight to her head. The protein bar dinner was a lightweight in a heavyweight match.

Kelly nibbled another minuscule bite of her precious chocolate bar, loosened the straps of her chair to a better reclining position. She thought about the next item which could not be attributed to exertion or imagination.

But a simple explanation presented itself and Kelly convinced herself it was accurate. Roller shades snapped up in two windows. *Even though I slipped out the door as quickly and quietly as I could, that cabin is old and likely hasn't had repairs in years. I shut the door with enough force to jar the old cabin wall, which caused the blinds to snap open. Lucky for me the window panes didn't fall out as well.*

Kelly smiled to herself. *I could be relaxing in the cabin with a nice fire going and a hot meal behind me. But instead, I am in my tent while a storm rages outside these thin nylon walls.* She took a moment to listen to the storm which showed no signs of retreating. She placed the last sliver of chocolate on her tongue where it could slowly melt. The chocolate faded as she drank the last of the wine. Slipping out of her trail chair, she snuggled deep into her cozy sleeping bag.

Putting down her pen and pad, Kelly turned off her headlamp, placing it on the tent floor beside her. The wine relaxed her just enough that she drifted quickly toward sleep. Just before sleep fully overcame her, she smile and mumbled, "Tapping on the windows. The strings from the blinds swinging back and forth. Of course! The blinds had just popped up so it's only natural the cords would be swinging. What a basket case." She would add that to her journal tomorrow she thought as she settled into a heavy, contented sleep.

Suddenly Kelly was wide awake. Her eyes shot open. Darkness stifled her inside the tent but she felt the pressure of something on her sleeping bag, lying next to her. The weight, the pressure, were undeniable. She lay frozen, scared to breathe.

Gradually, Kelly pulled her hand from beneath the covers. She moved as naturally as possible. She hoped her movements mimicked stirring in her sleep. Her fingers touched the strap of her headlamp then curled around it. With a sudden movement, she bolted from the sleeping bag, turned on the headlamp making her way into the corner of tent.

The opposite side of the nylon tent side flared out as if struck, but the tent was empty except for her things. "Ok, ok, I am still under the influence of the cabin freak out. It's all good." She involuntarily shuttered. Outside of the warm down bag, she felt the intense cold.

Dawn seemed far away. Crawling back inside the still warm sleeping bag, Kelly turned off the headlamp, and then she snapped it back on again. She quickly opened the side pouch of her backpack, pulled out her mini camera, sliding it quietly inside the bag next to her. The camera was cold, but she kept it near her, just in case, she thought. “Just in case, what?” She asked herself silently. With the headlamp off, but still on her head, she settled once again.

The warmth of the sleeping bag and the darkness inside the tent lured Kelly back into a restless sleep. Again she felt the pressure on her sleeping bag like something was lying next to her. Her eyes popped open. *Am I fully awake, right? This isn't part of a nightmare that won't end.*

Something was actually beside her on the bed. She turned on the camera under the sleeping bag. She waited until it had time to cycle on, then Kelly held her breath for her next move.

In a single fluid movement, Kelly pulled the camera from the bag with one hand, turned on her headlamp with the other, and scooted again to the corner of the tent, snapping picture after picture with the camera. Again the tent wall flared outward. Frightened and feeling desperate, Kelly unzipped the tent flap and yelled into the dark morning, “Get out! Get out of my tent! You are scaring the crap out of me.” The tent flaps flew open with a “swish”. When they settled back in place, the cold morning air filtered in. Kelly zipped the tent shut once more and crawled back inside the sleeping bag. She trembled from fear and from the cold that filtered in from outside.

This time she didn't try to sleep. A clump of snow fell from a tree branch above. With a ‘swoosh’, it bounce off the side of the tent making her jump and shiver inside her bed.

Gradually, the wind grew fainter and fainter as the storm moved across the mountains.

When the sidewalls of the tent illuminated with the first rays from the sun, Kelly rolled up her sleeping bag. Calmness and clarity came with the daylight. The camera bounced from where she had dropped it during the night. She paused. She had forgotten about the pictures. They weren't important anyway. There had been nothing to see. Still she picked up the camera and reviewed the digital photographs.

One by one, Kelly scrolled through the three pictures she had snapped inside the tent. They appeared in the tiny LCD screen with brilliant clarity, except for one small spot in each frame. Each picture showed a fuzzy, bright smudge. The smudge was in a different location in each photo. In the first photo, the image appeared directly on the sleeping bag, in the next image, it was closer to the door. In the final photo, Kelly could see the strange, bright smudge exactly where the tent side had flared outward.

She turned off the camera. *Just the light from her headlamp moving through the tent as I took the pictures.* She refused to allow any other train of thought to continue. She packed the camera back in its carrying case and back inside her pack.

She pulled a small tarp from her pack and backed out of the tent. She put the tarp on the snow covered ground and looked around. The sun was shining and before her was a beautiful view of the snowy backside of Pike's Peak. She never tired of that view. Several inches of snow, as predicted, lay on the trail. She looked at the spruce trees above her tent. Their branches drooped with the heavy snow, but beneath them only a couple of inches of snow lay on the ground inside the circle where she her tent stood. They had served her purpose well.

Pulling her backpack from the small opening, she set it on the tarp. In the bright, beautiful morning, Kelly felt especially silly for her “midnight madness”. She looked inside the tent to make certain it was empty. Her journal and pen lay on the floor. *Must have been under the pack.* The journal was open to her writing from the night before. She decided to finish documenting her reasonable explanations for each event that had scared the bejeebees out of her.

Settling just inside the tent door, Kelly opened the journal to write. With one look at her journal, writing was forgotten. She threw it from her, taking down her tent and stashing it in her backpack in record speed.

When her pack was on her back, the final tarp tucked away, Kelly awkwardly bent to retrieve the journal. The journal was wet from landing in the snow, but the word was still legible. A single word she knew she had not written. Scrawled in childish letters following the final item in her list, tapping on the window, she read the single word, ME.

Kelly started the trek back to her car. She concentrated on the swish of her snowshoes on the fresh snow as she made her way back down the trail. Her mind relaxed. She felt the tension leaving her body. The sun was warm, the thin mountain air was sharp with late autumn scents of decaying leaves and a rich earthy musk. Her mood soared with the hawks in the sky.

Before she reached the trailhead where her car was parked, Kelly reached the only rational conclusion of her strange backpacking trip. She did not eat enough which allowed the wine to go straight to her head. Maybe, just maybe, she should forego the wine in her next outing.

Mentally, she finished her list. The light in the pictures; simply reflections. She further rationalized the barely legible scrawl was accidental pen markings as she bounced around the tent during the night. None of this would be shared with even her closest friends. She would be the butt of their teasing and practical jokes for the rest of her days. As far as she was concerned, the night never happened.

Two years later Kelly hummed softly to herself as she stood in her kitchen making an anniversary dinner for Adam. They had been almost inseparable since the first day, one year ago. Kelly had never been so happy. Sharing a love of exploring new breweries that were popping up all over Colorado, snow skiing, bicycling, hiking and, of course, backpacking, her personal favorite, they had busy, full lives.

She looked at Adam, packing while watching the local news. He was really waiting for the latest weather report. Tomorrow they would begin a week long backpacking trip. Though they had packed for all four seasons, knowing what to expect was helpful. She stirred the spaghetti sauce and took a sip of wine.

The news anchor's voice cut through her musings. "A young child's body has been uncovered during the renovation of a forest service hut called Loop Hut on the Cabin Loop Trail in Teller County. Details are still coming in, but the remains could have been under the hut for several years." Kelly stood frozen as the wine glass slipped from her hand.

Hungry
By: Davyne Desye

“Mama?” The strawberry blond youngster played with the curls at her ear with one hand, the other tugging at the hem of her mother’s skirt.

“Just a minute, Honey.” Hating to deny the child attention for even a moment, Mother sped her inspection, moving her significant body around the rough wooden box, all the while bent to examine the petite corpse within. She squinted as she lifted the sallow hand from the box, minutely assessing the cuticles. Then, “I’ll take it,” she said.

The mortician did not answer as Mother turned away from him and squatted before the girl. Mother barely registered the expected sounds of the man replacing the lid to the coffin and restoring the nails to the edges – she turned all her attention to the cherub.

“Yes, Darling, what did mommy’s angel want?” she asked as she petted at the unruly curls and wiped a smudge from the round face with the hem of her skirt. She smiled and tried with tone of her voice, each gesture, to convey to the small child how precious and beloved she was.

“Hungry,” answered the child.

Hungry!

Mother's stomach lurched – though not with hunger – and a chill crept down her spine despite the warmth of the day. She abruptly stood to face the man.

“Can you bring it ‘round?” she asked, digging through the purse dangling over her arm and then handing over the agreed price.

“Ma’am,” he answered as he tipped his head in a bow and accepted the sum. He neither smiled over the prospect of the sale nor indicated any disgust with the purchase. This was, of course, not the first such sale he had made to Mother but despite their decade-long relationship, she could spare no time for pleasantries.

“Up, Darling,” said Mother as she lifted the child to the small seat at the back of the buggy, then secured her before mounting to the driver's seat. “Let's get you something to eat, Darling. Right away!” She tried to still her trembling limbs as she settled herself.

“Hungry,” the tot answered, throwing the word over her shoulder toward Mother with a dancing nimbus of blond-red curls.

“Yes,” answered Mother. *No!* Her shoulders lifted with sudden tightness and her hands gripped each other before releasing into separate fists. She flicked the reins and brought the horse to its best speed.

Once the horse drew alongside the barn at the far side of the farmhouse, Mother leaped from the buggy.

“Come, Baby,” she gasped as she unbuckled the child and flung the straps aside.

“Hungry,” the child said plaintively as Mother lifted the tot from her seat.

“I know, I know, I know.” It was a breathless mantra from Mother as she churned thick legs toward the kitchen at the back of the house, toddler gripped to her chest. She would have powdered the soft hair and cheeks with kisses if she had not felt it would slow her.

It could not be happening again. Not again. Not so soon.

Mother suppressed the wail that built within her heart at the same time that her mind catalogued the knowledge that the child had eaten just one hour before.

Mother burst through the kitchen door, head swiveling to take in the countertops and any food that might be readily available.

“Bread!” Mother said, her voice laced with panic and overloud in her own ears. She rushed toward the partial loaf, slipping the child to the countertop. The angelic toddler tilted her head back. Her chin lifted and her mouth came open.

Mother broke off chunks of the rich, dark loaf and pushed them into the child’s mouth. After three fragrant chunks had been devoured, the small hands reached for the remaining bread and, satisfied that the child would continue feeding herself, Mother raced to the shelf and snatched at the nearest jar of jam. The flavor did not concern her.

“And jam!” Mother cried, as she placed the now-open jar on the counter by the child. Then a race toward the darkened pantry and a yank at a hanging bunch of yellow onions, a grope for a handful of carrots, and a race back toward the counter and the seemingly insatiable child. “Here! Vegetables!”

The child lifted an onion to a mouth still half stuffed with bread and crunched down with her small teeth as she might on an apple. The kitchen filled with the pungent aroma. Mother’s eyes watered, although not from reaction to the onion fumes.

Mother carefully spooned jam into the spaces at the side of the child’s mouth that were not filled by onion or bread. She paid no particular attention to the neatness of the operation and cared little that the cherub’s face, hands, arms and clothing were covered in bits and smears of the various foodstuffs.

It could not be happening again so soon.

But it was. She knew the signs. She almost wept at the thought that her precious daughter may not live to meet the new sister she had just purchased. She swallowed against the threatening sob and reached for more bread, helping the toddler to bring whatever she wished to her mouth.

When the mortician rang at the front of the farmhouse, the small child was washed and neatly clothed. She peeked at the man from around the edge of the mother's skirts.

"Ma'am." The man touched his front hat brim and bobbed his chin.

The mother glanced around the mortician at the waiting cart with its cargo and then up to meet his eyes. A small grimace of pain creased her features before she nodded and spoke.

"To the barn, again, please." The sadness and resignation contained in her one word – *again* – squeezed at the man's heart. The mother lifted the toddler to her hips and cradled her against her abdomen and chest as she prepared to follow him down the front steps. The little girl was such a beautiful child, so obviously adored, so lovingly cared for. He despaired as he considered that, if the past was any indication, this child would so soon be lying in a coffin of her own. His despair was for both the mother and the child.

He moved toward horse and cart, allowing the mother to begin the walk to the barn. He watched as she dropped kisses to the top of the child's head as she walked. After a moment he mounted and signaled the horse to follow. The horse nickered and moved its head from side to side in the same regretful motion through which the mortician's head shook as he watched the pair.

Once at the barn, he dismounted and removed several large ice blocks from the end of the rectangular igloo constructed there. He pulled the small coffin from its cool enclosure and lifted the box to one shoulder. He did not pause as he entered the darkness of the barn, knowing that his eyes would adjust as he walked. He placed the coffin upon the ice blocks on the bench at the far end beside which the mother stood.

Despite his curiosity, he did not study the contraption that hovered over the bench to see if he could detect any changes to the equipment. Instead, he returned to his cart to bring the additional ice blocks inside. Once the coffin was surrounded with ice, he touched the brim of his hat, nodded at the mother and turned to leave the barn. He hoped the sigh that escaped him as he moved into the sunlight was not audible to the woman.

By the end of the week, Mother's work on the new corpse was well underway. She should see results in only another day or so. But for now, she focused on her current daughter.

"Hungry..." whimpered the child around the half-chewed salted ham in her mouth.

"I know, Sweetling," Mother answered, lifting an overripe pear to the child's lips. She cradled the prostrate girl more closely in her arm. Her own lips were salted with the tear she licked from the side of her mouth.

The child was failing. Mother could feel it in the lassitude which slowed the young girl's movements, despite the meats, fruits, vegetables, bread and sweet creams that were lavished upon her and eagerly devoured. Well, perhaps not eagerly. No longer eagerly. In the face of the unquenchable hunger, the tot was no longer able to continue powering the small jaws at their necessarily frantic pace.

"Mama loves you," she crooned as the girl's movements slowed and further slowed.

Not fair. Not fair the transition from well to dying, signaled only by a sudden, escalating hunger.

“Mama loves you!” she wailed when the child’s movements finally stopped. The words cracked and wavered around the choking constriction that tightened Mother’s throat. Mother raised her head and squeezed blinding tears from her eyes. She lowered her head for another glimpse of her beautiful girl, her Honey, her Angel, before the tears rendered her blind once more.

How many? How many children had she returned to the mortician? How many since the child of her body had died and with herbs and poisons and prayers been conjured back to her only to end as this child had ended?

What was she doing wrong? She would give her heart, her soul, her body, her blood for her children...

And then she knew. She knew what she had been doing wrong.

The mortician watched as the smudge upon the roadway resolved into the horse and buggy of the mother. He did not need to see it to know that the buggy carried an undersized coffin across the small seat at the back. He wiped his brow and erased his grimace, bringing his face into keeping with the cool public image of his profession. His heart, however, wept for the mother.

“Good afternoon,” the mother said cheerfully as she bounced from the driver’s seat and lowered herself to the ground. Her good humor so shocked the mortician that his façade nearly slipped.

“Ma’am,” he answered. He was pleased that the word did not escape with an interrogatory inflection.

“The last for you, I think,” the mother said. She smiled as he had not seen her smile since, oh, since many, many years ago. Not since the first child, her own child, died.

“Ma’am?” This time the question was clear.

“I’ve worked out how to keep them, you see. I think I have.” The doubtfulness of her words was not reflected in her joyful tone.

“Ah,” he answered. The skepticism of his thoughts was clearly audible in his single syllable. He moved to the back of the buggy to retrieve the coffin he knew would be there. Before he could lift it, the mother placed her hand upon it and with the caress, her face clouded to a more expected expression.

“Be sure to let me know when you are ready for me.” Eyes, suddenly full, spilled quick tears to her bosom. “I will want to say goodbye.”

“The funeral will be arranged, Ma’am,” he answered.

Another loving stroke to the rough wood, and the mother wiped her tears and pressed a tentative smile toward him. She mounted the buggy. He lifted the coffin from the seat and she flicked the horse into motion. She seemed eager to be on her way.

By the mortician’s own self-assessment, he was not, by nature, a curious man. Stated properly, while he was a curious man, he was not often given to making unseemly attempts to satisfy his curiosity. Not often. But the strange glimpses he had seen of the mother in the village over the years since her last visit had pressed him beyond his normal staid self. She so often had appeared with bandages of one sort or another, or limping through an indiscernible

injury. After years – with no return visit to purchase another child corpse, she had been correct in that – he determined to visit her farmstead. He would couch his visit as a report that all the small graves were being tended as she had requested.

To say that he was shocked at the sight of the mother and child would be an understatement so profound as to approach utter falsehood. His normally controlled visage dropped with his chin and his mouth remained open through her merrily shouted greeting.

As she approached, one arm thrown around the lovely – healthy – young lady at her side, he cataloged what he saw.

Or rather, what he did not see.

The mother's one ear was missing. The other ear was missing the lobe. Both hands appeared deformed, each missing the two smallest fingers. Her torso was misshapen with suggestions of missing flesh from here or there. The arm that was not resting on the shoulders of the girl was gripping a brace which extended to the ground as a crutch – a crutch that allowed the woman to walk despite the fact that her leg was missing from the knee down. A bandage around the bottom of the stump showed a small amount of fresh blood, certainly not enough to suggest a recent amputation but fresh nonetheless.

“My daughter, Larissa,” she said, dropping her arm from the child and extending her hand to shake his.

“Ma'am,” he said, taking her hand and shuddering at the smoothly healed wounds around which his hand closed. “Miss,” he said, nodding to Larissa. Gathering his wits he stammered the excuse for his visit.

“The graves are all well tended, Ma'am,” he said.

“I knew they would be,” she answered with a smile. She gestured toward the farmhouse and offered him refreshment. Her obvious happiness and his own curiosity would not allow him to refuse her hospitality.

When, after a rather strained exchange of pleasantries on life in and around the village, he rose to go, the mother accompanied him to the door.

“How? What?” he asked, horrified with himself even as the words escaped his lips. The mother smiled gloriously, eyes crinkling in good humor and satisfaction.

“A mother would give anything for her children,” she answered. She shook his hand and then winked. Full of self-directed wit she said, “It’s a good thing I’m a rather large woman!”

THE END.

Checkmate

By: Molly Bailey

When his son had moved in, Eugene tried to help out just with a box or two but his son shooed him off with a wave of his hand. “We've got it, old man, don't worry.” Eugene's pride hurt as much as his back did after sneaking boxes when no one was looking. Not being expected to help was more painful than the aching muscles and joints.

Eugene had felt a pressure building in him since that day. Such stresses used to not bother him at all. Sure, back in the 703 he had worked a lot while his wife, God rest her soul, looked after their boy when he was young, but he never thought three grandchildren could feel like six under foot.

The day he brought their son home his anxiety shocked him. A veteran: medals placed in proper cases, his regularly washed but never worn uniform in the closet upstairs. Well, they sure fell short to this infant now residing in the nursery he had gleefully painted in a hopeful shade of pink with Dorothy 40 years ago (then repainting blue two years later.) This wriggling, often wet human being of only 8 pounds had him shaking in his boots. Dorothy's grace and instincts calmed him as much as they did the boy. The baby grew into a toddler, falling down the stairs as his first introduction to the emergency room. Eugene had felt crushingly guilty as it was the first time watching him on his own. At his fifteenth birthday there in the same house, where the girl he liked didn't come... which somehow became Eugene and Dorothy's fault in that way teenage brains work. Eugene could look back on all of those memories with warmth and a smile, but knew at the time they had been terrifying and difficult as life could get.

Perhaps part of his growing angst was being forced to enter his old age in an environment opposite to his own stage. The toys on the floor, milk spilt, ear-splitting screams in the middle of the night. Had Dorothy survived her stroke, even if she needed care 24/7, Eugene imagined his golden years with his wife as much calmer than this. He still daydreamed that she was there and, embarrassing as it was, he found himself talking to her as if she was there from time-to-time.

The fear of dementia, Alzheimer's, or other pesky ailments was high in Eugene's mind. Many friends had departed over the last 76 years, but the hardest friends he lost were still alive. Not in the same way as the loss of friends in mid-life had gone. He recalled the drifting of friendships during his 30s and 40s; not foreseeing how painful an empty mailbox, a silent phone, neighbors who no longer waved back could be. Those memories hurt, yes, but in these older years, people still existed but their minds stayed either vacant or seemingly in an alternate reality. It was woeful times before Dorothy's stroke and now Eugene was not his usual social self anymore.

Eugene still went to the park every day. Over forty years ago they had gotten a dog. Eugene would walk their corgi, Trixie, to the park every morning without fail. It was during this time he noticed the park had chess tables. In the warmer months, Eugene indulged when he could. Once retirement hit he was there daily, even after the dog had long passed, playing chess until noon. Usually Dorothy would come calling, knowing he would stay stuck there if she didn't, but occasionally dear Dorothy would bring a picnic and lay out in the sun in sweet silence, sometimes with a book, sometimes with a meditative smile.

Eugene had made friends, but one was most important. Eugene thought they were a complementary pair: Eugene, small and frail, always in a button-up, bow-tie, and suspenders and Bill, with ripped overalls, muddy boots, and a stained T-shirt. They certainly were oddballs sitting next to each other. Eugene would often notice how Bill didn't notice, laughing to himself about his best friend's obliviousness. Bill made up for all the other lost friends and Eugene appreciated him more than anyone in the world after his wife's passing.

On this morning he woke from a sublime dream. He and Dorothy were having breakfast, abiding to their doctor's regime of low sodium, low fat, which they would laugh at to make the meals easier to swallow. The sun came through the thin yellow curtain, gracing his lovely wife's right cheek, high-lighting her perfection, like God himself was visiting her through sunbeams to admire her beauty right along with him. She caught him staring and smiled bashfully. The vividness was so strong, when he awoke, he went right downstairs to see her.

He took a break on the stairs, trying to work his cranky knee into submission, and called out, "Dorothy, I don't know how you stay so agile these days." A clink and clatter of pots was the response as he took the last few steps with the help of the railing. He smelled the eggs and toast, the coffee brewing, inhaling deeply as the corners of his eyes rose with his smile. The humming from her in the kitchen carried him down the hall like a piper and him a child. The sun shone warm on the wooden floors, guiding him to the tiled kitchen. In his auto-pilot movements engrained after over a half century of marriage and home-like, he took himself to his seat at the table where his coffee and newspaper were always placed.

The room went dark abruptly, the sun disappearing not from a cloud but from the fact that it was 3 A.M. There was only the ticking clock, illuminated by moonlight. Eugene shook. Looking around he saw the dirty dishes piled high, the peanut butter smeared across a cupboard, cereal bits still scattered across the table from yesterday's morning. "Dorothy would have been down-right disturbed with the mess," was his first thought that broke through the shock. Then it all sunk in. What would she think of him and this state; this old age taking over in every possible way? Did he miss her so much some wiring in his mind was reworking its networks to try to bring her back? Or was he facing his biggest fear? He shuddered, gathering his wits enough to make it back upstairs and into his cold bed.

Six hours later Eugene was in better spirits, looking forward to seeing Bill on his walk to the park. He wanted to tell Bill all the horrible things his lazy daughter in law was guilty of this week, like letting the baby watch TV — the baby! He didn't feel senile when he talked things over with Bill. Back at the house, it was exhausted looks and miffed sighs thrown his way any time he tried to do anything other than entertain the rug-rats. Eugene felt burdened as well as a burden which left him with a dire need to not be home. Bill understood all of this, or at least let Eugene believe he did. He wasn't going to share his dream or delusion or whatever it was, though, as much as he'd like to. The embarrassment was too much to share.

Bill's goddaughter was at the park. Eugene was proud he could remember her, for new people slipped out of his memory almost as soon as introductions ended nowadays. He greeted her with a large smile and extended his hand as a greeting. She looked down him with a sad expression, put an envelope into his palm instead of shaking his hand and left, making further rounds to other familiar chess players. Eugene hesitated, waiting for her to leave the park before opening the envelope. He sat at their usual table, pulled his fountain pen from his pocket, sliding

it under the paper flap once his arthritis allowed it. He was shaking again, like he was at the table the night before, hoping it was anything but... A heavy sigh pushed the tears from his eyes. Funeral services would be held at St. Mary's Cathedral on 9th and Broadway, Saturday at 2.

He sat at that table for some time in silence. He played himself a few games, finding himself talking to Bill just like he still talked to Dorothy from time to time, not caring if he looked crazy, not caring one bit. Once his stomach reminded him that he was still with the living, he pulled himself up slowly and ambled his way back home. He smiled at the youngest, making a mess of his hair with a rough head rub. He saw the middle child, picking his nose and wiping it on the couch and sighed, but smiled. The oldest was in the kitchen with his mother, singing along with the radio to impress her, but she was in a different world, as usual, doing the dishes without checking if she'd rinsed the soap all the way off.

“You're gonna kill the family with that business,” Eugene grumbled, lightly but loudly.

She blinked her eyes a few times, then scowled at him, “Excuse me?”

“You're going to kill the family by not washing all that damn soap off, I said,” This, this was one of the thing he was afraid of in himself; this irritability that was as new to him as being old was.

“Well, who's saying that's all that bad an idea?” she snapped.

Eugene saw the tears before he heard what she'd said.

“Damn it, Dorothy, there's no reason to be so upset. I know the miscarriage was hard on you — on us - but we still have our boy, Dorothy! You're still a mother! I'm still a father, a husband! You're still my wife! Where do you keep going? Why won't you come back?” Eugene gasped at his own words... once they sunk in. Where was he? His kitchen, yes. But who was she? She was not Dorothy.

She stuttered out some syllables, but Eugene couldn't understand.

“Who are you?!” he bellowed angrily.

Her stare was less blank than usual, her mouth agape, her hands trembling, dripping dish water on the floor. The oldest boy had left the room the moment the tension of the conversation hit him.

Eugene swallowed hard, ground his dentures and looked around the kitchen, remembering slowly what year it was, that it was his daughter-in-law was standing there. He remembered what he'd said, he just couldn't figure out why.

“Excuse me,” was all he could muster, despite the guilt calling up an apology straight from his gut, but he was so ashamed he took himself immediately up to his room to his closet, grabbing his rifle. The last time he had touched it, it was to put it away after buying it. He had purchased it after returning from the war. He had felt utterly naked without having one in his possession. He never needed to open the case, he didn't consider it for protection, he simply needed that mental assurance that his most trusted tool was nearby.

Eugene walked passed all the kids, sitting in front of the TV without even turning their heads to see who was making the floor boards creak. He took his only hesitation there, deciding not to give them any kisses or goodbyes, less he lose his nerve. He didn't want to be old. He didn't want to be mean. He especially did not want to lose his mind. So he locked himself the hollow garage, knowing it'd be easiest to clean, and nestled the barrel under his chin, using a screwdriver to reach the trigger that tried so hard to be out of reach.

Friends Aside

By: Ann Amicucci

1990

“I can’t believe we’re in Derrick’s house!” Layla shrieked, then lowered her voice to a whisper. “I mean, he’s so cute, right? And we’re going to see where he sleeps!”

“We are not going in his room,” Erika hissed. “I can’t believe we’re even in here. We should not be doing this.”

The two fifteen-year-olds stood in the middle of what must have been Derrick’s parents’ office, a room they’d entered by walking in through the unlocked sliding glass door from the back patio. Erika wrung her hands and kept glancing over her shoulders, thinking she heard someone coming. Layla posed in front of a decorative mirror, jutting her chest out and putting her hands on her hips, then using her palm to try to flatten her stomach. Erika watched as she fluttered her purple-shadowed eyes at her reflection and fluffed her curly hair. Erika’s hand grazed her own pixie cut.

“What are you doing?” Erika spat. “We have to go.”

“They’re going to be gone for a while,” Layla shot back. “We should check the place out.”

Layla winked and then took off for another part of the house. Erika sighed but followed, her shoulders hunched.

She found Layla in the kitchen, opening cupboards one at a time. She ran over to Layla and grabbed her arm, then pushed a cupboard door closed.

“Don’t touch anything,” Erika said. “We have to leave. You’re not going upstairs.”

“But we love him!” Layla said, her voice teasing Erika to recall all the times they’d talked about Derrick and drew his name with little hearts around it in their notebooks.

“You love him,” Erika said. “I don’t want to get arrested. Don’t get your fingerprints on anything.”

Layla snorted. “This isn’t a crime show.” She headed into the living room and Erika followed.

Layla flopped down on an oversized couch and grabbed the television remote.

“Don’t turn it on!”

“I’m not.” Layla rolled her eyes. She pointed the remote at the tv and mimicked changing channels. She ran her hand along the fabric of a couch cushion. “It’s just so nice,” she said. “I wish I had this stuff.”

Erika didn’t answer. Derrick’s house looked a lot like her own house up the road, but she knew Layla didn’t have the things she did.

Suddenly both girls froze at a noise coming from the front of the house.

“Shit, is that them?” Layla whispered.

Erika’s face crumpled. Her legs felt frozen in place.

Layla jumped up and grabbed her arm.

“We gotta go,” she hissed, pulling Erika back to the office and then back through the sliding glass door. She pulled the door shut softly behind them and they ran for the woods.

The girls hurtled down the path they had come through, side stepping the thorny patches they knew by heart until they were deep in the woods. Panting, they looked back toward Derrick’s house, now dim in the distance. The windows glowed warm, just like the windows of the houses next to it.

“What’s that?” Erika said, pointing down at the television remote still clutched in Layla’s hand.

“Oh my God,” Layla said. “I can’t believe I…” she trailed off as Erika eyed her, not sure if it had been a mistake, but it didn’t matter. Relief at not getting caught had hit them, and both girls started to laugh. Even Erika, who had been terrified moments earlier, let out a slew of giggles.

“What are you going to do with it?” Erika asked her.

“Keep it forever?” Layla said. Before Erika could protest, she said, “I’m kidding. I don’t want this.”

“It’s not like we can give it back,” Erika said.

“We’ll bury it,” Layla said, still laughing. She looked around and then chose a patch of dirt. “They’ll think they lost it. No one will know.”

2000

Erika blinked at the muddy backyard with its one old oak tree and the woods behind it, surprised her memories of running around with Layla when they were teenagers were so vivid. She sighed, and her hand went automatically to the round of her belly.

She had the kids on the back patio making chalk drawings on the concrete. The little boy was three and kept running into the yard, and his sister, a year older, would call for him to come back. His little sandals had slipped off, and his bare feet were dirty.

“You guys having fun?” she asked, swaying from foot to foot.

The boy ignored her, and the girl answered a dutiful “Yes” with a lisp.

“I’ll be right back,” Erika said, moving toward the door. “I’m going potty. Yell if you need me!”

She ducked in the house and made a beeline for the bathroom. It was a safe neighborhood, but she didn’t want to lose her job if the kids’ mother showed up and found them alone.

Three minutes later she was back out the door and for a second her heart dropped: the girl was alone on the patio, but then she spotted the boy. He had managed to get to the back of the yard and was digging in the mud near the tree, his arms brown and wet up to the elbows.

“Oh my God,” she said under her breath.

“I told him not to go out there,” the girl said without looking up from her chalk creation.

“Billy!” Erika slipped off her own flip-flops and headed out barefoot, slipping a bit in the mud and walking slowly so she didn’t lose her footing. “What are you doing?”

His back was to her, and he was squatting down with his chest against his thighs in the way three-year-olds do so easily.

“You’re all messy!” Erika cried.

“I found a treasure!” the boy said, and he stood up to face her. In his outstretched arm, he held a muddy, outdated tv remote.

Erika swallowed. She told herself to laugh but couldn’t. It was too much of a coincidence.

1990

The night they snuck into Derrick's house, Layla slept over at Erika's. Long after the lights were off, Layla crawled out of her sleeping bag on the floor and climbed into Erika's bed and under the covers.

"What are you doing?" Erika said, half giggling as Layla's cold feet brush her legs.

"He's so cute, isn't he?" Layla said, diving right in. Derrick was like an ongoing conversation between the two of them that never really ended.

"Would you kiss him?" Erika whispered, turning so her face was inches from Erika's.

"Hell yeah," Layla said, and they both giggled. "I always think about kissing him. I had a dream last night that we kissed."

"Yeah?"

"We were on vacation." Layla propped her head up on her elbow and looked past Erika as she talked. "We took a walk by the ocean, and you were there, and a bunch of other kids from school were there. Everybody was in their swimsuits laying out."

Erika nodded.

"Then we kept walking and walking until we were far away from everybody else. He held my hand. And he told me I was the prettiest girl in school. And then he kissed me."

Erika took in a sharp breath. Hearing Layla say it felt like a betrayal, even though she knew it was just a dream. She knew neither of them would ever actually go out with him.

"I just love him so much," Layla said. "Don't you?"

"Yeah," said Erika, giving Layla a smile.

2000

The next morning, Erika sat in the driveway in her rusty Toyota, the car her parents had given when she left for college. The car was on, but she couldn't move just yet. She watched the clock: twenty minutes until her doctor's appointment, so she needed to leave in five more minutes at the absolute latest.

Her stomach churned, and it felt like more than morning sickness. She told herself everything would be fine—the baby was kicking like normal, and she was pretty sure her extra queasiness was only about Troy. He had lost his job but was somehow angry at her for not bringing in enough money from babysitting to support them. He would sleep until mid-morning and leave the house without a shower, but it seemed like he was fresh and showered when he came back. Sometimes he showered and dressed up—khakis, polo—and stayed gone until after she had gone to bed, then he crawled into bed and tucked his body behind hers.

They had gotten into a fight that morning when she reminded him about the doctor's. He had clattered his breakfast dishes into the sink while yelling that he had to find a job and he couldn't do that if he was always gallivanting off to doctors' appointments. Erika yelled back that he hadn't found a job in two months and had only been to one doctor's appointment since she got pregnant. He had stormed out and left her unsure of whether he'd be back to go to the doctor's with her, but now it was clear he wouldn't be.

She thought of her family, how they had no idea she was with Troy or that she was pregnant. Her mother would be mad—and embarrassed—to see her daughter poor with a boyfriend who yelled the way Troy did. She wanted to go back inside, climb under the covers, and call her mother, but she backed out of the driveway instead.

1990

They were in the second floor bathroom, and Erika was standing outside the last stall, listening to Layla heave.

“Are you okay?” Erika whispered even though no one was around.

“I'm fine,” Layla said, clearing her throat.

But a moment later, she still hadn't started talking again, and she started retching.

“Are you throwing up?”

“Whatever. I'm fine.”

“Are you bulimic?”

“What is wrong with you, Erika. I’m not fucking bulimic.”

“That’s probably what you would say if you were.”

Erika slid down the wall and sat on top of her backpack.

“I probably have the flu.”

“That sucks.”

“Yes, it sucks. God.”

“Well I was just saying,” Erika started, but then she stopped. Layla had been testy all week. She didn’t want to get on her bad side.

“What? What, Erika? If you have something to say, just say it.”

“Nothing.”

“No, come on. I know what you’re thinking, that I’m some kind of fuck-up.”

“Oh my god, what?” Erika said from the other side of the door. “What are you talking about?”

“I know your mom thinks it. I can see the looks she gives me. You know last week she asked me if I had taken a shower?”

“What? When did she say that?”

“Well she didn’t say it exactly, but I could tell she was thinking it.”

The toilet flushed.

“What going on with you lately?” Erika asked, quiet.

“Why do you care?”

“Because I’m your best friend.”

Layla burst out of the stall, wiped her mouth and then wiped her fingers under her eyes.

“I’m fine,” she said.

“Yeah right,” Erika answered.

2000

Erika sat in the backyard on a lawn chair, her legs under the shade of the oak. The skin of her stomach was tight. She breathed in slowly: she could hear nothing. No cars. No noise at all. She had stopped wondering where Troy went when he left. In quiet moments like this, she felt at peace: alone with the baby boy she didn't know yet. A metallic buzzing started off in the distance. It grew closer, and she watched the sky. A helicopter came into view, a red one with a pulsing light beneath it. It had words on the side, but Erika couldn't read them. She wondered if someone was dying.

Erika studied the patchy grass beneath the tree. She figured it couldn't have been long after she graduated high school and went to college that these houses were built—that the woods they used to run through was nearly gutted. She saw a cluster of small purple flowers that had sprouted near the base of the tree and remembered that she and Layla would pick those same flowers in the woods. The petals were almost transparent purple and limp like crepe paper. Erika imagined stroking them but didn't, afraid they'd crumble.

She remembered arguing with Layla in the bathroom that day, then talking about Derrick as they walked home. In the few weeks that followed, it was like no matter what she said or did, Layla got mad at her. It wasn't long after they stopped speaking altogether.

1990

They were lying in his bed as quiet as possible because his mom and dad might be coming home at any minute. Layla's bra was off under Derrick's softest t-shirt, and his hand ran back and forth across her stomach. She loved him, she really believed that, even though she hadn't said it out loud.

It was dusk in early winter, and Derrick liked to open his windows even though it was too cold. When Layla showed up, she'd close them. She could see a fly now, trapped between the window pane and the screen, buzzing in circles. She hated the fly. It had been there yesterday, too—at least she figured it was the same fly, still trapped—but she didn't hate it enough to do anything about it.

Layla felt around the covers for her bra and sat up.

“What are you doing?” Derrick mumbled without opening his eyes. “We have at least another half hour.”

“I have to go,” she said, leaning over to let her lips graze his as she spoke to him.

“You coming over after school tomorrow?” he asked, now staring at her and holding onto her wrist with his long, tan fingers.

“Of course,” she said, showing her teeth as she smiled because she knew that was how she looked prettiest.

She stripped off his t-shirt and pulled on her own, then her jeans and her sneakers. She would walk down to Erica’s house since she didn’t have any other way of getting home. Maybe Erica’s mom could drive her. Then she’d go to the clinic tomorrow. She had the money she’d taken from Derrick’s parents’ dresser. She wasn’t sure if it was enough, but it would have to be. She didn’t want to ask him for help.

2000

Erika sat again in the car in the driveway. She remembered her first days of high school vividly: eating fries and underbaked cookies in the cafeteria, struggling through her advanced classes while Layla ignored all the homework in her own. She remembered feeling that Layla was protecting her around the rush and press of high school, and she thought it might be time to return the favor.

Troy’s behavior had become more and more erratic. He didn’t care about the baby. He didn’t even know they were having a boy because he kept missing the doctor’s appointments. And then Erika had found the letter.

At first, she had hesitated with the papers covered in a woman’s scrawl in her hands, thinking it was none of her business. But she had thought of his late nights and his boozy breath, and she got angry and started reading.

The letter told the story of losing a baby at a young age and not being able to trust anyone since. She read it first like she was reading a novel, but when she saw Layla’s name at the end, she realized why the handwriting had looked familiar and felt acid rise in her throat. Troy didn’t know anything about her

high school friend. He couldn't have known that she would know this woman. She read the letter again.

Erika had packed some clothes that night in a duffle and shoved it in the back of the closet, then went to bed like normal and pretended to be sleeping when Troy got home. When he got up the next morning, she stayed in bed. She waited until he was gone to put the duffle in the car.

Even if it hadn't been Layla, it wouldn't have mattered. She knew she had to leave. She thought of her family down in Florida. They thought she had an office job.

Erika had seen Layla once when she first moved back to town and was looking for a job. She had pulled into the parking lot of Ranger's Steakhouse and was sitting in her car, trying to gather the nerve to walk in the restaurant and ask for an application, when she saw a young woman come to stand behind the hostess station. The curly hair and purple eyeshadow: it was Layla, and she looked almost exactly the same. As Erika watched her talk and laugh with customers, that glint still in her eyes, she got embarrassed. She herself looked so much older than she did in high school, and she knew she looked tired and thin from living on too little money with Troy. She hadn't been able to bring herself to face Layla, so she had driven away.

Now she sat in her car, thinking. She could call her parents and admit how she had ended up. She could drive to them. Or she could drive to Layla.