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FRAGILE: HANDLE WITH CARE
A CONVERSATION ON TRAUMA, FLASHBACKS, AND SEEING A THERAPIST WHEN
YOU NEED ONE

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
Gloria Jean Aragon
May 2024

Accepted by:
Professor Keith Morris, Committee Chair
Professor Nic Brown
Professor Su Cho

ABSTRACT

The primary content of this creative thesis is a complete manuscript titled *Fragile*. This is a work of realistic fiction with a central theme of childhood trauma. Additionally, this thesis contains a critical essay entitled, “Moving On: A Discussion on Flashbacks and Childhood Trauma in Fiction”.

DEDICATION

For my mom, who was brave enough to leave. I love you, always.

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MOVING ON: A DISCUSSION ON FLASHBACKS AND CHILDHOOD TRAUMA IN FICTION

"Alas! there are some wounds that cannot be wholly cured," said Gandalf.

"I fear it may be so with mine," said Frodo. "There is no real going back. Though I may come to the Shire, it will not seem the same; for I shall not be the same. I am wounded with knife, sting, and tooth, and a long burden. Where shall I find rest?"

— **J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of The King***

In literature, trauma is often represented through monologues, character behavior, and flashbacks. Each tool brings a new understanding to an afflicted character. Trauma as a narrative theme is impactful, not only to character building, but setting. In *Fragile*, the main character, Liz, revisits her childhood home after the death of her father. Liz confronts her trauma through packing her past (and throwing away what she can't stand to look at), while simultaneously connecting her present-day issues to the trauma in her childhood. A similar usage of flashbacks can be seen in *The Optimist's Daughter* whereas the main character also learns about the past through her parent's possessions after they die. *Fragile* is a creative piece in which the past and present are woven together, representing the relevance of her childhood to her future happiness.

Flashbacks are a specific mode to showing the traumatic experiences of the past to inform the present. Margaret Atwood uses this technique to discuss how the Gilead society came to be in *The Handmaids Tale*. F. Scott Fitzgerald writes scenes from Daisy and Gatsby's past in *The Great Gatsby* to show readers what they were missing from Nick's skewed perspective, the unreliable narrator that he's always been. While the function of flashbacks in fiction differs widely by genre and focus, they often coincide with the introduction or revelation of trauma, and *Fragile* is a testament to the ways in which a child is molded by their experiences, and how that trauma feels a lot like being haunted.

Flashbacks, or the interruption of chronological sequence by interjection of events of earlier occurrence, can be crucial to presenting trauma in fictional narratives. While it is overwhelming to consider each possible method of depicting trauma, flashbacks are a fantastic place to begin because of their versatility within a linear or non-linear timeline, a reliable or non-reliable narrator, or a fragmented sense of truth. All the above can be seen in novels like *The Great Gatsby* that rely on the retelling of past events to build present and future events. In *The Great Gatsby*, specifically, readers are propelled through the plot by Nick's narration coupled with flashbacks of events that he was not present for. As he discovers the truth about the romance between Daisy and Gatsby, readers are informed of events prior to present day in the novel. Which in turn alters their perception of the main characters, as seen in *Fragile* as well.

In *The Optimist's Daughter* by Eudora Welty, the main character Laurel Hand travels to New Orleans from her home in Chicago to help her aging father before he undergoes eye surgery. As the narrative progresses, and her father dies, she finds artifacts of her parents' lives—letters and trinkets—that allow her to understand her own past and lost love. After Fay, Laurel's much younger stepmother, who cheated on her father and married him for his wealth, leaves, Laurel has time to herself in the house where she was raised. She digs through her family's belongings and summons childhood memories. And in the process, Laurel lets go of the past to make room for the future.

When using flashbacks as a means of showing childhood trauma, authors are hard pressed not to overshare crucial information too soon. There are numerous concerns including bouncing in time and setting, which could cause potential confusion. Heavy themes such as loss of innocence and fragmented memory complicate the fictional world, while pushing the boundaries of main and supporting characters' relationships. In *Fragile*, Liz remembers pieces of

her childhood, represented by items scattered throughout her father's abandoned house. The flashbacks are a means of informing the reader and presenting Liz with her repressed trauma. And while she didn't want to confront her childhood trauma, the memories were always with her. This is what culminates in her finally asking her mother for answers, answers she never fully gets.

Early in the narrative, Liz mentions the neglect of her father at the hands of his own immediate family, establishing the cyclical trauma that haunts her into adulthood. This form of emotional neglect is passed down to Liz and her brother, Danny, leaving them to confront the effects of their childhood without parental assistance. And to convey her trauma, without abandoning Liz's present issues with her fiancé, Dean, frequent flashbacks were essential. These scenes vary from the first time her mother, brother, and her, left their family home (and came back), to the night her mother "fell" down the stairs.

In our "child-centered culture," we express a deep interest in childhood and in the complex relations between the child self and adult self" (Schönfelder 9). So, our adult behaviors can, in theory, be explained by childhood events and traumas. While writing *Fragile*, I wondered what could make an otherwise successful young woman emotionally distant from her fiancé to begin with. That established the key moments that had to occur in the house, and why she had to be there to rediscover them. An example of this is in Chapter Three, where Liz remembers her parents fighting in their bedroom and her dad says "You don't love me" to her mom. Despite her assuring him that she does, Liz's dad says it's "bullshit", as if accusing her mother of not only lying, but being incapable of loving him. This is mirrored in the next scene where the counselor asks Liz, "Do you love him?", regarding Dean. In this way, Liz's present is inextricably linked to

moments in the past, and if she does not go through them, and store them properly, she runs the risks of completing another traumatic cycle with her own loved ones.

But what about Liz's family? Surely they could help her overcome her past and celebrate a brighter, healthier future. Except, it is established early on that her mother will not revisit the house, not even to sit outside for moral support. Their shared phone calls are friendly enough, but only on a surface level. In Chapter Six, Liz tries to get answers regarding the "fall" from her mother, but she remains distant, never giving her daughter the closure that she craves. Through this, it is implied that Liz's mother is avoiding her own trauma, never quite confronting it in the way that Liz is forced to due to the evasiveness of her family. In "Inheriting Trauma: Family Bonds and Memory Ties in Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*", Schonfelder uses the term family trauma to "denote individual traumatic experiences that happen within the context of the family" and simultaneously, "to express how the whole family may be affected by an individual's trauma and how, in particular, interpersonal trauma within a family tends to shatter the group's sense of safety and stability as well as damage the bonds of the familial community" (11). She also notes that child-parent as well as sibling relationships tend to be the source of particularly powerful traumas. Liz and her mother's relationship suffered not only from their shared past traumas, but also because of her mother's denial, choosing instead to tell Liz that it's not healthy to hold onto resentment and that it'll "eat you alive."

Assuming then, that the other child in the home could be a means of support, relating to Liz's memories because he shared them, her brother Danny, should have been the first in line to help her clear out their childhood home. But he's not. From the first scene when Liz asks her mom if she's heard from him to the last scene where he never shows up, Danny makes his stance clear in Chapter Two when he says, "That's the best I can do. You decided to pack everything

yourself. I can't just leave my life to shovel shit out of dad's house with you." Liz is left to shoulder the burden of their childhood alone, literally, and figuratively, while also being blamed for "deciding" to deal with the past. Her compulsory flashes of the trauma she endured then, is almost framed as a punishment, something she deserved to live and relive due to her willingness to clean house.

Using flashbacks to explore the events of Liz's childhood instead of setting the story in the past altogether, is meant to express the value in them. One of the chief questions when understanding and processing trauma, is "Why?" along with variations like "Why me?" and "Why do I have to deal with this?" *Fragile* is an attempt at answering those questions. Without processing the past, Liz could not improve her present and no matter how emphatic she was, no one was convinced that she was "fine." The relationship between shared moments (passed and present) forces the readers to confront the trauma with Liz.

To call writing the passing of time or grieving tricky is an understatement. The loss of innocence is never something meant to be rushed, but pacing is a constant concern. Flashbacks and symbolism are the best way to move the narrative along, without giving up on nuance. After all, the most prominent metaphor in *The Optimist's Daughter* is vision. Both of Laurel's parents suffered from losing their eyesight. Her mother, Becky, progressively goes blind as she is dying, and her father dies while recovering from surgery for a detached retina. In this case, Welty equates the ability to see with the ability to understand, something that Laurel gains by the end of the novel.

Similarly, Liz finds meaning in mildewed toys and a cluttered dining room table. Moreso, she spends the entirety of the novel insisting that she is okay, and no more burdened by cleaning up her father's mess than any child would be. But throughout the narrative, it becomes apparent

that she is not just cleaning up his physical mess, but his emotional one too. The heartbreak and hurt he caused is sharpened by poignant memories that she eventually relates to herself, and her own behavior. This can be seen in Chapter Nine after she finishes packing the house, with Dean, and stands outside on the driveway:

I glanced to the side, watching Dad with a lawnmower, toiling away so my mom wouldn't attempt it herself. He was baking underneath the sun, and any doctor worth their shit would have diagnosed him with sun poisoning. He nearly died every summer from stubbornness, and I guess, that was what did him in.

I cleared my throat, practicing in my head. Some poor, well-meaning person would ask, *"Your dad died? I'm so sorry, can I ask how?"* and my answer would be *"He was too stubborn to ask for help."*

Finally, she questions why she never asked her fiancé, Dean, to help her with the heaviest parts of the job (the furniture). Although she had wanted her mother or her brother, she didn't want Dean by her side as she traveled through the ugliest parts of her past, too afraid that it would scare him off: "I wondered how long he would bare my sadness, shouldering the burden so I could breathe underneath his generosity."

But Dean's frustration is finally made clear in Chapter Six, when Liz insists that she doesn't need therapy, or to revisit her childhood, much like her brother had been doing for the duration of the narrative. This prompts Dean to question her:

"Then what? What is making you so miserable?"

"Nothing. I'm not."

"You are? Why? Because your brother won't help?"

"No. You don't get it."

“I can’t understand unless you tell me, which you refuse to do. All the times that I’ve offered to go with you, to drive you, to help you shovel out the crap your parents left and you won’t let me.”

Liz is forced to face that her behavior is an echo of her father’s, the man that refused to get rid of or process anything, including the emotional loss of his wife and children (evident by his unwillingness to throw their old toys or trash away).

Because of this, flashbacks are a crucial element of the trauma in *Fragile*. To create a flawed character, I wanted to flesh out Liz’s past, letting her trauma and its effects become apparent within the work itself. The exploration of a non-linear narrative posed new questions, meant to cause the reader to doubt what they had already come to know or be certain of. In essence, these flashbacks are the driving force of the plot. And they reveal Liz’s motivations to change *or* remain stagnant. Flashbacks are integral to establishing the correlation of adult patterns to childhood trauma within *Fragile*.

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FRAGILE: HANDLE WITH CARE

CHAPTER ONE: KITCHEN

My dad died inside 1201 Orion Drive. Which doesn't mean much, *really*. A lot of people's dads die at home of old age.

But not a lot of daughters are assigned the grueling task of clearing out their final resting place because the rest of the family decided to take a decade-long vacation from human decency.

No, I won that lottery.

And although I would prefer the 3.2 Powerball million, I was stuck driving across the state to wallow in the memories of my childhood and shove them into cardboard boxes.

"I don't have time for this," I said, not caring how blunt I came across to my mom, the only other person in my family to answer my calls anymore. "I have a wedding to plan, and now, thanks to Dad, I had to reschedule my dress fitting."

"Did they understand?"

"Who?"

"The bridal shop."

I pushed my sunglasses up, ignoring how my hair would swallow them whole if left to its own devices. "Yeah, they weren't happy about it but who's going to argue with a woman after her dad dies?"

Silence.

I sighed. "I just wish you were here." The three-hour drive was longer than I remembered, which made sense since the last time I dared visit my dad I was fifteen and wholly invested in a failing middle school relationship.

My cellphone was my best friend that summer—my lifeline.

Not that it mattered because Dad was always gone, frolicking in town with his friends, busy pretending that I didn't exist. And I didn't resent him for it until later, when I realized it wasn't normal—it was cruel.

“I wish I was too, baby.”

But she didn't. If she wanted to come with me, even just to wait in my dated Acura, she could've.

I cleared my throat. “How's Danny?”

“Oh, you know, the same as always.” Her voice was distant, and she was distracted, I could tell.

“Did he say if he could help me carry out the heavy stuff? He hasn't answered my texts.”

The phone crackled. “He hasn't mentioned it.”

Of course not.

“It would be great because I really don't want to hire help and I know he-”

“Baby,” she cut in, “he's not going to come.”

My grip tightened on the steering wheel, and I choked down the complaints forming in my throat. “Okay,” I said, finally, letting go of the idea altogether. I should've known better. “I've got to go. I'm a minute away from the house.” After thirteen years, I expected more to change in town, but the mom-and-pop shops had survived the pandemic, surprisingly, and continued serving the constant stream of tourists.

I watched them pass my car, jaywalking shamelessly with ice cream cones gripped in their hands. The children even *looked* sticky, and I began to understand why so many of my friends had decided to wait to have their own bundles of sticky joy.

First comes love,

Second comes marriage,

Then comes, well.

I pushed the thought aside and continued down the narrow, two-laned street.

“Alright my love, be safe. And don’t forget your mask. Lord knows what state that place is in.”

“Yeah,” I said, glancing at the pack of a hundred and twenty disposable masks waiting for me on my passenger’s seat, “I got it.”

“Good, talk to you later.”

“Talk to you later.”

My mom hung up before I had the chance to find my phone and end the call myself. I assumed that it slid underneath my seat when I was brake checked by a blue BMW on the highway. And I was in no hurry to retrieve it.

After hours of driving, playlist surfing, and snacking, I pulled into the cracked driveway. I parked up front, as close as I could get to the back door where the lime green paint had long since been chipping off.

The back door, ironically, was on the front of the house, along with the front door which was barely used unless we had guests. I sat in my car, staring at the broken shutters and mildewed brick, and pretended I was back home, sitting on the porch, far away from the monstrosity I grew up in.

Then, I sighed, turned the keys, and let go of what my Saturday could have been.

The door swung open as if it had been waiting for me to return for the entire decade I had been gone. I left it open behind me, too paranoid to shut myself inside—*alone*.

Dad died in here, I thought, knowing that it would be best to refrain from thinking about him, and his timely demise. But two steps in, and I saw a basket of his laundry, piled high on top of the washing machine, collecting dust. He had been gone for three weeks, and it was like pulling teeth to get any information out of my family, like *how* he had died.

“Why do you care?” they asked, as if I was heartless, as if he wasn’t my dad.

He was sleeping, apparently, and just never woke up. Where in the house, I wasn’t sure.

I walked through the mud room and into the kitchen. Pots and pans were scattered across the counters, molding where they sat in the sink. I adjusted my mask, making sure that it was resting firmly against my face, then walked toward the pantry where I found thousands of condiment packets, takeout menus, and boxes of instant potatoes.

Before I could gather the courage to open the fridge, I went back to my car and grabbed my bag of cleaning supplies. I had everything a girl could need short of a hazmat suit. Or a team of highly skilled professionals.

But I was on my own, because a cleaning crew was expensive, and weddings were a small fortune. I grumbled back to the door, toward the mess, leaning to the left and struggling to carry the hideous orange duffel bag inside the house.

As soon as I stepped onto the yellow-stained vinyl floors, I dropped the cleaning supplies and escaped back out to the car to collect the boxes, freshly purchased from Walmart.

They looked strange, resting against the muck on Dad’s counter, uncreased and unaware of the task they were assigned. Most of the clutter, I assumed, would be trash, hence the contractor-sized trash bags nestled in my bag.

I put on a pair of gloves and dragged a box with me to the pantry, using it as a sacrifice. The condiments were garbage as most of them expired four years before I graduated high school, but some of the canned goods were salvageable. And although I was tempted to toss everything in the house, the food could go to someone, maybe even help them, and I wasn't in such a hurry that I couldn't box up some Hamburger Helper and drop it off at a shelter.

So, I grabbed the cans in pairs and filled a box halfway, knowing that my back was going to kill me in the morning, and slid it to the back door.

Danny, Liz, get into the car. My mom's disembodied voice startled me out of my own, repressed thoughts. I let go of the box and glanced around the kitchen, looking for something worth keeping.

I shook off the uneasy feeling crawling up my spine and left the box by the sink, promising to return to it once the pantry had been cleared. And as I crossed the room, eager to escape the creaky, musty old house, the memory returned, and my mom was standing in the living room, pointing toward the door through me.

But I don't wanna leave, I said, no older than six, hiding behind my brother.

He wasn't that much older than me, barely a year, but his extra three inches in height kept me safe, unscathed by my mom's glare.

She rushed toward us, grabbing my arm and dragging me out to face her.

We need to go, I don't have time to argue with you, Liz.

But Dad-

He'll be fine.

He'll be sad.

I'm sad, my mom said, her voice hoarse, exhausted from fighting all night. *Do you want me to be sad?*

I turned to Danny for help, but he just stared at us, his blue eyes glimmering with tears. I wondered why he was crying, then felt my own tears rolling over my cheeks.

I shook my head and expected my mom to let go of me. Instead, she scooped down and picked me up, carrying me into the kitchen and out the back door, letting my brother trail behind us.

His young face was contorted, pinched together as he fought off the sobs forming in his throat. Danny sniffled, but Mom didn't look back, assuming he'd follow her to the ends of the Earth, even if it meant the end to our world.

CHAPTER TWO: PLAYROOM

The fat, nineties television set had been replaced with a new, skinny flatscreen but the VHS collection lining the walls remained. My dad wasn't the type of person to go on a cleaning spree, ridding himself of the past, no matter how much it cluttered his house, unlike my mom.

The soles of my sneakers stuck to the floor, still covered in a thin coat of pixie stick sugar and soda. Tubs of our old toys waited for me in the corner, where I dreaded dragging my industrial sized garbage bag the most.

Someone has to do it, I huffed to myself through the disposable mask I got out of my car, along with my phone. The corner of my case pressed against my hip as I leaned over, grabbing the first yellow-orange-and-green plastic thing I could find.

It was a cheap, disposable toy from McDonald's, advertising the release of a movie I had never seen. Beneath it was rat poop, matching the piles I had found in the kitchen before I swept and bleached the whole safety hazard to hell and back.

We had always had rats, apparently, even though I didn't remember them. My mom swore otherwise, though; the way she described the house, you would think it was infested with rodents and creatures lurking in the dark.

I was prone to believe the latter.

Dad had a thing for inviting his friends home from the bar, where he spent most of his nights until my mom complained. Then, the party followed him to us.

I sucked in a breath and brushed the rat poop off the toys, putting all my trust into the rubber gloves I bought at CVS on the drive over.

Buried underneath three Barbies with matted hair and a silly string gun we inherited from our cousins, was a shining, silver helmet. I lifted it from its early grave and rubbed the NASA emblem carved into the side with an X-Acto knife.

My dad's handiwork, of course.

Danny wanted an official toy NASA helmet for Christmas after his class learned about the solar system. His Christmas list was short that year, featuring the helmet at the top.

We couldn't afford NASA merchandise.

But they found him the silver, second-hand helmet and carved the logo into the plastic.

I thought about tossing it into the bag with the other toys, damning it to its final resting place. Not even Goodwill would want a rat poop covered space helmet from over a decade ago, but treating it like garbage, like it meant nothing, felt like a betrayal.

While I stared at it, and followed the cracks in the plastic, my pocket vibrated.

I didn't want to pick up. What could possibly be so important?

A lump formed in my throat, but I dropped the helmet, not liking the effect it had on me, and tossed my gloves off. I slid my phone out of my pocket and glanced at the screen, staring at the Caller ID in surprise.

Danny.

I answered on the fourth ring. "Hello?" My heart hammered in my chest. Maybe he was coming after all.

"Hey," his voice crackled, and I could hear someone watching cartoons in the background. "Mom said you're at the house again."

"Yeah," I said, rubbing my sweaty forehead with the back of my hand. "Unfortunately."

"How's it going?"

I stared at the helmet waiting for me on the linoleum floor. “It’d be better if you were here.”

“I can’t leave. Delia has her first recital tomorrow.”

I shut my eyes and ignored how they burned. I told myself it was the chemicals, the bleach, but my heart ached. “This is going to take me weeks,” I said, holding back emotions that would only overwhelm him.

Danny sighed: “I’ll talk to Sarah. We could help pay for movers.”

“Danny-”

“That’s the best I can do. You decided to pack everything yourself. I can’t just leave my life to shovel shit out of dad’s house with you.”

My grip tightened on the phone, and I thought of all the moments he ran out of our apartment five towns away, swearing at our mom for not leaving sooner.

He was a ghost then, an echo of the man we left behind.

“Okay,” I said, my voice rough, *from the bleach*, “Um, movers would be expensive, and I know that’s not ideal for anyone right now. I got this.”

“You sure?”

I nodded. “Yeah, just save the money for the wedding. Gas isn’t cheap.”

“Alright,” Danny said, walking somewhere with running water, probably where Sarah was washing the dishes. His wife was kind, but secure. At least she seemed so at their wedding, and the few times I had seen her after. She was happy to join the family, but didn’t want to be dragged down by our disfunction. I couldn’t blame her. Sometimes, I was envious. I wondered what she was going to say when she heard about her husband’s sister, stupidly scrubbing their childhood home, as if it could change anything that happened.

The afternoon sun streamed through the broken blinds, landing on the helmet, letting it sparkle for the first time in years.

Danny took it everywhere. He even wore it to the movies. And when it became clear that interplanetary travel was a team effort, he held interviews for his “Houston.” He perched himself in the oak tree by the edge of the fence, and questioned me from above, making sure I had what it took to bring him home.

He was going to go to space, and I was going to be his mission control.

“Are you okay?” he asked, pulling me out of the memory.

I cleared my throat. “Do you want your space helmet?”

“What?”

“The one you got for Christmas. I thought maybe I could clean it up really good, and Delia could use it.”

He paused then said, “No. You can donate it.”

“Is there anything you do want? I can look for whatever it is while I’m here.”

“I’m okay.”

I nodded to myself. “Alright. Sounds good.”

“You never answered my question.”

“What question?”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I answered before considering the truth. “I’m fine. It’s just a lot, being here, you know?”

“Didn’t Dean come with you?”

“He had work,” I said, not bothering to explain the whole truth.

But somehow, maybe, Danny already knew. “Right.”

Silence lingered between us; then he continued: “How long do you think it’ll take?”

I laughed, letting a tear or two slip down my cheeks. “A while.”

A door shut on the other line, and Danny’s voice returned, clearer than before. “I might be able to find some time to help you with the heavy stuff. But I can’t make any promises.”

“Really?” My heart hammered in my chest.

“I’ll ask Sarah.”

“Okay,” I agreed, willing to accept any help I could get. Danny had gone to the moon, and I thought he’d never return.

“I have to go.”

“Me too.” I swiped my cheeks dry. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Yeah,” he said, “I’ll see you soon.”

The phone call ended, and I stood in the playroom, alone, waiting for my astronaut brother to come back and tell me what he found out there, in the space I would never travel to myself.

CHAPTER THREE: BEDROOM ONE

I hurried up the stairs, listening to the echo of my shoes on the cracked wood. After another long drive, I was eager to leave. My glass baby doll, Rosie, was shattered; shards of its face were scattered over the stained carpet. I shouldn't have cared.

I didn't care. Why would I? I hadn't been in "my" bedroom since I was a pre-teen, holding on to the belief that my dad was worthy of a relationship. The toys were collateral damage, doomed to end up at the bottom of a dumpster, broken and discarded.

I pushed the glass around with the toe of my shoe, mourning the shallow loss.

My bed was stripped bare, leaving the already stained mattress to yellow. I blinked, and there I was, small and sitting with Rosie. A picture book was spread over my lap, and I ignored the shouting from the other room.

You don't love me, my dad said, loud enough for the accusation to travel past my mom, and into my ears.

I do, I swear. Her voice was frail, tired. She was always so tired when he was home. Over time, I had begun to wish that he wouldn't return, at least for one night of peace.

Then why did you leave?

I needed time to think.

Something shattered, something that sounded expensive. *Bullshit*.

A door slammed, and I continued sounding out the words in Danny's book, pretending to know what *lon-g-ing* meant.

“Do you love him?” the counselor asked, off-handedly, smiling. She was in her mid-forties and convinced that I had to be the one holding up the marital bliss awaiting me soon.

I adjusted the edge of my tank-top, suddenly self-conscious. It had been a week since I left the house, promising myself that I wasn’t giving up but just taking a short break. I was planning to return that afternoon, but Dean reminded me of our premarital counseling session. One of ten hour-long sessions meant to convince me that I was ready to hitch myself to another person.

“Yes,” I said, responding on impulse. I wouldn’t say it was practiced, no. But when he said it first, and I froze, the look on his face pulled the words out of my throat. And now my love was being questioned by a woman with a two-hundred-hour counseling certificate. It was stupid, all derived from a simple complaint.

I just wanted him to pick up his filthy socks and unlock the bedroom door when he napped. It wasn’t a one-time issue, either. He had done the same thing at least thirty-two times since he moved in, give or take.

“Let me in.” I had knocked, like a reasonable human being.

“Why?” he asked, like a smart ass.

“At least so that I can put away your dirty socks.”

We fought the whole drive to the counseling center and Dean insisted that we “discuss it” with the smiley, suggestive woman that had been assigned to us by the church.

“So maybe overcoming laundry issues isn’t as daunting as you feel that it is,” she said, enlightening me.

“I mean, I don’t mind it,” Dean said, “I just don’t think it’s that serious.” He had been sitting next to me, nodding along, but not bothering to grab my hand. The hand weighed down by the two-carat diamond resting on my finger.

My shoulders were tense, and I worried that I would have a migraine before I even got on the road. “It’s serious because I keep asking you to do it, and you keep *forgetting*.”

“I *am* forgetting.”

I scoffed. “Then you need a CAT Scan.”

The counselor cleared her throat, ending the fight before it could worsen, and she’d have to use her counseling certificate to deescalate. “That’s all the time we have for today.” Goody. I grabbed my purse and slung the strap over my aching neck. Before I could make it off the couch, the counselor gestured to me. “Liz, can I talk to you for a moment?”

“Sure,” I said, falling back onto the sofa and watching Dean head out the door to start the car.

The counselor’s eyes softened. “How are you holding up?”

I shrugged. “Well, you know, the florist is giving me some attitude about the peonies but other than that, I’m fine.”

She nodded. “I see.”

“Why?” I asked. “Do I not seem okay?”

Her dark brown hair was pinned back in waves, creating a severe look contrasting her round face. “You seem tense, and that’s understandable after losing a parent.”

“It’s not like that,” I said, fighting the urge to scoff. “I didn’t have a relationship with my dad.”

Her lips tightened. “That’s hard.”

“Not really.” I laughed, realizing how callous I sounded. The dirt over my dad’s grave hadn’t even settled, and I was chuckling about how little he meant to me.

I was an awful daughter.

She sighed. “Let me know if you ever want to talk. About anything, not just floral arrangements.”

“Okay,” I said, agreeing so I could join my fiancé in our beat-up Subaru. She let me leave after confirming our next appointment and advising me to “take it easy” on Dean. Because, after all, “marriage is a big change for him too.”

On the way out of the stale, mid-century building, I glanced at my hand, the ring, and the way it sparkled underneath the many skylights leading the way. I wondered what it would take to make it shatter too, like my Rosie’s painted face, like the mirror in my parent’s room.

CHAPTER FOUR: DINING ROOM

Dean offered to drive me, but I needed time to think, and rethink the way that I was clearing out the house. He sighed at my insistence but eventually handed over the keys like I knew he would. He didn't want to wade through my childhood crap any more than I did.

But the drive was lonelier than I expected. I listened to four different podcasts, all of which faded into the background as I thought about my morning.

Do you love him? The counselor asked.

Do you even love me? My dad spat as I left the house for the last time with him alive in it to watch me go.

The answers were the same and I loathed the tears stinging my eyes. Just as I was choking down a sip of my Pepsi, the phone rang.

I hit answer before my car registered the Caller ID. "Hello?"

"Liz?"

"Yes, who is this?"

"Linda," the woman's voice crackled. "Johnny's girlfriend, well I guess ex-girlfriend."

My stomach flipped. "Oh."

"We met at the funeral I think." We did. After I had tried to avoid her at all costs she hunted me down by my grandparent's graves.

"I remember," I said, swallowing the Pepsi in the back of my throat. "Do you need something?"

“Actually, your aunt told me that you’re packing up your dad’s things.” We had different definitions of “packing”. Half of my dad’s belongings were now at the bottom of the dumpster behind his favorite bar.

“I am.” There was no use telling her the truth.

“Well, I’m hoping you haven’t cleared his closet yet. You see, I gave him this button-up with rainbow fish on it and it would just mean a lot to me to have it.”

“I haven’t gotten to the bedroom.” I had been avoiding it.

“Fantastic, I mean, not the circumstances but-”

I interrupted. “You can come pick it up, if you want it.”

“Would that be too much of an imposition?”

“Actually no. I’ll be there all day.” Much to my dismay. The commute was just far enough that it didn’t make sense to clean for a few hours, then escape back to my life. It didn’t matter how much there was to do for the wedding, or how many calls were waiting to be made. The house demanded my attention, as if punishing me for abandoning it in the first place.

“Can I stop in around two?”

I glanced at the clock, then nodded to myself. “Yeah, that’s fine.”

“See you then.”

The line disconnected, and I was left alone again. My foot had steadily pressed against the pedal, increasing my speed to ninety miles an hour. Reckless driving was what my tenth grade Driver’s Ed teacher would have called it.

Mom was too busy with work to take me out for lessons, so I was saddled with the fifty-year-old grouch that had been teaching for decades. He hated me, almost as much as I dreaded

our time together. I eased my foot off the pedal and slowed to match traffic. I pulled off the highway and ignored the faded signs on my way into town.

The house sat where I left it, which was moderately disappointing. Houses didn't just sprout legs and walk off, but I wished this one would.

I checked my voicemails as I sat in the car, avoiding another bout of memories waiting for me inside the mildewed walls. The florist was in a particularly sour mood, and the photographer wanted to know if we were going to upgrade to the silver package. I sighed and shut off the screen, promising that I'd put out the fires after clearing out another damned room from my childhood.

I pulled my hair into a ponytail, hoping to keep the pungent smell of the house off me. It hadn't been left vacant for long before it started to reek of decay, and death. My stomach churned at the thought. The car waited for me in the driveway, and I envied it.

The house door creaked open, and the soles of my tennis shoes stuck to the linoleum floor. I should have brought a jug of gasoline. Burn everything down to the studs. And if it wasn't for the neighbors, separated from the house only by a privacy fence, maybe I would have.

My phone vibrated and I pulled it out of my pocket to see a picture of Dean standing in front of the Grand Canyon. My thumb hovered over the answer button, but instead I silenced the call and tucked it away.

He would have to wait until I was back in the safety of my car, driving to our apartment with the windows down, and the house far behind me. It was easier that way. He wouldn't have to hear me hack up a lung as I fought the dust bunnies and swept up fragments of my childhood.

I crossed the kitchen and propped open the scratched door to the dining room. The oval table stretched across the room, filling it almost from wall to wall. It was too large for the room; it always had been. But my mom bought it from a yard sale and spent hours putting it together. When she finished, she joked that we would all have to “eat less at Thanksgiving” to fit around it.

But we never used it for food. Stacks of dated newspapers and old, yellowed Tupperware were strewn around the faded surface. I turned and saw piles of China lined up the wall, almost reaching the height of the table. My mom had collected them, insistent that we would have guests over for dinner one day.

I stared at the plates, wondering how many rats had crawled over her dreams. And there was dad, standing in front of me, gesturing to a once cleared table, set with dinnerware and a bouquet of flowers.

What is all this? he huffed, still in his work clothes.

Mom tucked a piece of sweat-drenched hair behind her ear. Our air conditioning had been out all summer, and while we were all hiding by the windows or fans, mom was keeping busy around the house. As if the heat reminded her of the hellfire we were taught about in Sunday school. “Idle hands,” she’d said if we tried to stop her, and the fear of those devil hands spawned a mad woman.

When I woke up in the morning, she was elbow deep in dishes, and when I went to bed, she was scrubbing the stained floors. *I want to have a place for people to visit*, she said, running her hands over the polished wood.

Who? Who is going to visit us here?

Mom’s shoulders dropped. *Some people from the church.*

Dad laughed. *No one from the church is going to step foot in this house.*

He was right. We had few visitors, less and less over the years. They'd all stop short of the kitchen, refusing to fully enter the house. As if our disfunction was an infectious disease. Eventually, mom stopped cleaning. Because Idle hands meant nothing if you factored in that my mom was already living in hell.

If I had the time, I'd pack the China away in an expensive cardboard box, double tape it shut, and scribble fragile over the top. Maybe I'd insist on what side sits where in the car and deliver it to my mother with a bright red bow.

But I didn't have the time, and the paisley China plates shattered as they hit the bottom of the garbage bag, like the porcelain face of my doll. Our dreams, our wants, were nothing but garbage, buried under layers of dust and carted off to a landfill.

I called myself melodramatic and brushed off the stinging in my eyes.

If she wanted the plates, she should have come with me, I thought, accusatory, but knowing it wasn't that simple. Mom grew up by the ocean, breathing in the salty air, laying out to absorb the heat like it renewed her lifeforce. After we left, the final time, she wouldn't leave her bed to eat, or stand out in the sun.

Dad almost killed her.

I ran my hand over the last plate, not feeling the cracked ridges or lumps through the kitchen gloves I brought to protect myself from the various diseases lurking in the house. A bright white anger crawled up my neck, contradicting the cold indifference that had settled inside my chest, insisting for years that I had healed. I had moved on.

I was ready to live my own life, unencumbered by my mother's taste in dinner plates and my father's stubborn ideologies. But I set the plate down, careful not to add another chip. Then

someone knocked on the backdoor, someone who knew not to bother with the front. I sighed, realizing that Linda had arrived early to reclaim her fish shirt.

A moment later, I heard footsteps in the kitchen. I considered calling out, letting her know where I was, but a pit formed in my stomach. The footsteps were heavy, heavier than that of a fifty-year-old woman. I frowned and then a man appeared in the doorway behind me.

“Lizzie?” he asked, his eyes wide, creasing at the corners.

I stepped back, cornered in the little room with no space to turn. “You are?”

“Jack,” he said, licking his cracked lips. “I’m a friend of your dad’s. It’s no wonder you don’t remember me though. I haven’t seen you since you were a little bitty thing.”

“Oh.”

He smiled, showing off a grey tooth. “What are you doin’ down here? Last I heard you got a fancy job and boyfriend out of town.”

“Yeah,” I nodded, pressing the back of my thighs against the table, wishing I had brought my sweater inside the house with me. “My fiancé and I came down to clear out some things.”

“That’s mighty nice of y’all. I guess I just thought there would be an auction or something.”

“Nope.” I forced a laugh. “It’s all us.”

Jack stared at me, unabashed. His dark eyes wandered down my body and I cleared my throat, startling him out of whatever he was thinking.

“Sorry,” he said, even though he wasn’t. “You look just like your mama.”

“Thank you,” I said, afraid to not take it as a compliment.

“It’s a real shame you know, your parents. I told your dad to get his shit together. A woman like your mom, a gem like her doesn’t come around often.”

My shoulders tensed and the headache I had chased off with caffeine returned full force.

“Yeah, she’s great.”

“How’s she doin’? Ever remarry?”

I shook my head. “She’s good, but no, no husband.”

He tilted his chin up. “And you, you have a fiancé, huh? When’s the wedding?”

“A few months.”

“Where’s he at? I like to meet him.”

“Upstairs,” I said before I had time to think. “He’s getting boxes from the attic.”

Jack opened his mouth, but someone interrupted him.

“What are you doing here?” Linda asked from the kitchen. “Johnny told you to get out.”

Jack frowned. “He’s dead, Lin. Give it a rest.”

“*Out.*” Linda appeared behind him and waved her arms until he backed away from the door. Her eyes narrowed when she saw me cowered in the back of the room, clutching my mom’s plate as if it could protect me.

“I was just catching up with Lizzie,” he claimed.

“She doesn’t want to talk to you,” Linda snapped. “The poor girl can’t even leave the room. Why are you here?”

“To pay my respects.”

“That’s what the funeral was for,” she huffed. “I suggest you leave now before I accuse you of trespassing on a dead man’s property.”

“Alright, alright.” Jack rolled his eyes. “Bye, then.” The screen door slammed shut behind him. Linda joined me in the dining room and asked if I was okay, and how long that “scum” had been hanging around.

“Not long,” I said, feeling the tension lift. “Maybe five minutes.”

She nodded. “Well, if you see him again, call the sheriff. That man is bad news.”

My throat was dry, and I yearned for my Pepsi melting in the car. “What’d he do?”

Linda pursed her lips, then sighed. “Many things. None of them good. I told your dad to cut him loose for years before he did. And now that rat is scavenging for valuables.”

“Well, I think he found me before he could find anything worth grabbing.”

Linda’s gaze lingered on my pale face, then turned to the table. “Are you throwing all this away?” I nodded in response. “It’s about time. I’ve never seen this room without crap covering it.”

“Yeah.” I cleared my throat. “I guess Dad was never much of a home maker.”

Linda sighed. “I suppose not.”

The house creaked as I waited for something to say, but Linda beat me to it. “Are you alright in here by yourself? It’s an awfully big house.”

“Yeah,” I said, “but it’s not so bad. I’m working on it one room at a time.”

Her lips pinched together. “I see.”

I scratched my face, then froze, realizing that whatever gunk was on my glove had spread to my face.

“Can I help you find the shirt?” I asked, eager to leave the dining room and live to trash the rest of the junk another day.

Linda looked at me, and then at the black garbage bag behind me before nodding. “I’m not sure if he moved it, but it should be upstairs.”

I gestured to the door and forced a smile onto my face. “Lead the way.”

CHAPTER FIVE: MASTER BEDROOM

Dean pulled back the duvet, forgetting to grab the top-sheet, as always. So I moved it for him, smiling.

“Did you have a good trip?” he asked, sliding into bed with a sigh.

I unhooked my watch and set it on the bedside table before joining him, wishing that I had been laying down two hours before I managed to scrub off the day. “I can’t complain,” I said, staring at the ceiling. Then I continued, “Dad’s girlfriend stopped by.”

Dean turned. “How was that?”

“Good.” I shrugged. “She wanted a shirt of his. I guess as a keepsake.”

“That’s sweet,” he said.

I nodded, thinking of the plate laying in the trunk of my car, wrapped in a plastic bag. “You saw her I think, at the funeral.”

Dean raised an eyebrow. “When?”

“You were in the bathroom but probably saw her walk off.” The wicker ceiling fan spun above me, sending cool air over my exposed arms. Goosebumps formed.

“I don’t remember, sorry.”

I shrugged. “It’s alright, there was a lot of people.” A lot of people shooting judgmental glares at us from all directions. And my family that had nothing to say except “Poor Johnny” when Mom packed our bags and left him to rot alone.

Dean pulled the blankets over his shoulders. “Yeah, seemed like he had a ton of friends.”

I clicked my tongue. “Dad didn’t have friends. He had vultures.” I thought of Jack, and how easily he had let himself into the house. How long had he been doing that? I remembered

long nights with my mom crawling into my bed, laying with me while my dad laughed in the den with the men that followed him home from the bar.

She slept with me those nights, pulling me close, and telling me to go back to sleep each time she got up to check on Danny in the other room while the TV static lit up the walls.

I swallowed the memory. “They’ve been circling him for a long time.”

Dean stared at me; his face scrunched up from laying on his side. One arm was close to mine, almost touching.

“What?” I asked, sinking into my pillow.

“That’s the most I’ve heard you say about your dad in months.”

I used to talk about it a lot, the absence of my dad. It was a great opening fun fact at parties. “Hello, my name is Liz and I have daddy issues.” But at some point, it stopped being a punchline. Maybe when they lowered his body into the ground.

He had warned me, several times over the last few years I knew him. “One day I’ll be dead,” he threatened, “and you’ll be sorry.” At the time, I brushed it off. Because the death of your parents seems so foreign at fifteen, next to impossible. But then he was gone. And he was wrong. I didn’t miss him.

My back ached from the drive, and I wondered if investing in a lumbar support pillow would be a smart investment. “I cleaned two rooms out.”

“Yeah?” Dean said, his eyes already closed. “Which ones?”

“The dining room and Danny’s old room,” I said reflexively. I had given my mom the same report on the drive home. I even mentioned Linda, and the call ended shortly after.

“The furniture too?”

I stiffened. “No, but Danny said that he might come to help me with that.”

Dean scoffed. He had never met Danny, but he acted like he had.

“Maybe you could come help?” I suggested, knowing that I only had a few minutes before he drifted off.

“Maybe,” he said, itching his nose. “I’ll have to see if I have any PTO left.”

“Yeah.” I stared at the TV in front of our bed, the Roku insignia bouncing around the corners of the screen. “Whatever works.”

Dean made a noise that sounded like “mmph” then went silent.

Dad’s bed was stripped, just like the rest of them. It was the first thing I noticed when I stepped inside the room with Linda. She seemed to know her way around the house, so I let her lead me through, hoping that her presence would ease the restlessness inside of me. But it didn’t.

I had crawled into bed with my parents on very few occasions in my life, mainly because my dad typically fell asleep in the den watching TV or drinking a beer. Which made it all the stranger that he was found lying in bed, where my mom spent her nights waiting for him to join her.

After we left, she could count on waking up and going to bed alone. It was a sad certainty that had plagued her through the years, but better than waiting. Knowing is always better than waiting.

My dad had Linda, and my mom had ghosts, haunting her even when she slept.

“Find it?” I asked when the fish shirt was pulled from its hiding place. It was a multi-color atrocity, meant to shock but not awe anyone in a five-mile radius of it.

“You know I bought this for your dad after our second date.” Linda ran her fingers up the buttons. “He hated it.”

I laughed. "Sorry."

"Don't be," she smiled, showing her yellowed teeth. "I know how your dad was and I loved him anyway."

The room was in disarray, which was no surprise after witnessing the state of the rest of the house. He had been living in squalor for years. Piles of receipts and half-soaked ashes were scattered over the dresser. A robe hung off the bathroom door, stained with toothpaste and what I prayed was chocolate.

It was a far cry from the tidy room my mom kept on her own, to pretend they could keep a shared healthy living space together.

"Where were you-" I cleared my throat. "The night he...y'know."

She sighed. "At home, feeding my cats. I'm afraid there's not much more to the story. He had this real bad cough. For months he was just hacking up a lung. But he wouldn't see a doctor. Claimed he was in perfect health. Eventually, I just stopped bothering him about it." She draped the shirt over her arms and looked me in the eyes. "I should've pushed harder. He might be here now if I did."

But I wouldn't be.

I nodded, feeling the need to comfort her. "It's not your fault. He hated doctors, said they were frauds."

She chuckled. "Yes, I remember."

"Is there anything else you want?"

"No." She sighed. "Just this." She waved the shirt in front of her, almost blinding me with Joseph's technicolor button-down.

The back door slammed behind me, and I slid the deadbolt into place. I had been avoiding Dad's bedroom, my parents' bedroom. It was foreign, stale, and not at all the same space I remembered sneaking into at night to hide from the monsters tapping on my window. But I didn't know what lurked inside my own home, the resentment that filled my dad like breaths of air.

As a teenager, I wondered if he had always been that way, *angry*, but then there were the memories of family trips to Sea World, the aquarium, and middle of the day lunch dates with just the two of us. I wanted so badly to be with him, that I ignored the comments behind my mom's back, the shared glances between attractive coworkers, and the days he missed entirely. As I got older, the days were longer, and more solemn. When we left for the second time, he promised to be better.

I crossed the kitchen, avoiding the empty dining room, and headed to the stairs, shadowed and then creaking underneath my feet. Danny used to pretend that we had a troll hiding inside the framework of the house. The troll never caused issues, of course, unless you forgot to leave a penny in the crack by the staircase. I glanced at as I passed, barely surprised that it was still there, waiting for more innocent pennies.

My parent's room was at the top of the stairs and down a narrow hall, next to mine. Sunflower and daisy stickers stuck to my door, clinging to the concept of happiness, to the idea of a happy child living within its walls. I sighed and continued with a garbage bag in hand, pushing open the cracked door and stepping inside.

My phone rang in the middle of the night, managing to stir me out of my heavy sleep. I answered on the last ring, rubbing my stinging eyes. "Hello?"

"Lizzie?" A voice asked on the other line, it was gruff, almost like-

“Who is this?” I sat up, wrapping the sheets around my chest. I pulled the phone away from my ear, checking the Caller ID but it was an unknown number. Dad hadn’t tried contacting me in years, why now? Had he heard about the wedding?

“Your Uncle, Robert.”

“Oh,” I said, my shoulder slumping while I tried to place a face to the name. I gave up when Dean shifted beside me, mouthing a question that I couldn’t decipher. I waved him off. “Is everything okay?”

“Your dad is dead.” A cough rattled through the phone. “I just thought you’d might like to know.”

A soft beam of light streamed through our apartment window, and I followed it to the ground. Dust danced in front of me, and I wished I had never picked up.

“Hello?”

I shut my eyes. “Is that all?”

He huffed, clearly not a fan of my response. “The funeral is on the tenth. Tell Danny? I can’t find his number.”

I wanted to say that Danny would care even less than I did, but that would require more of my time. “Yeah, I’ll mention it.”

“Great.” Uncle Robert hung up before I could be any more callous and I remained still, staring at the wall.

“Who was that?” Dean asked, still half-asleep. He had a presentation at work that morning, and the death of my father wasn’t his burden to bear.

“Wrong number,” I said. My throat was dry, and a headache started to form behind my left eyeball, warning me of an impending emotional breakdown.

Dean murmured something that sounded like “there’s snakes on the plane.” Then turned over, unbothered. As soon as I was sure he drifted off again, I abandoned my phone and fiancé, slipping out of bed and stumbling through the dark to the kitchen. The stove light guided me. My robe dragged on the floor. I wrapped my robe tight around my body.

In a few hours, I’d call Mom. And we would tell Danny the news, together.

But even with a plan, my heart was heavy with a weight I hadn’t felt in years. I gathered the bread and cheese, out of the refrigerator and pantry, refusing to cry.

CHAPTER SIX: THE STAIRCASE

I tossed thirteen bags down the stairs, listening to glass shattering on the way down. But the room was finally cleared, unburdened by the crap my parents left behind. I wanted to feel relieved.

I stood by the railing, leaning on the wall so I could steady my racing heart. I hadn't bothered eating breakfast, too nauseated by the idea of stepping inside the room dad died in, in the bed he refused to sleep in while he was alive.

I shut my eyes, just for a moment, not expecting my head to spin in the darkness. I grabbed the railing, latching on as my vision returned, and realized that I had lurched forward, toward the stairs. My toes hung off the edge of the first step, begging me to tumble down where the shards of my parents' things waited to break my fall.

Stop it. Just stop it.

Don't walk away from me.

I crept to my door, setting aside my book, and watched my parents rush down the hall. It was dark, almost sunset, and shadows climbed up the walls.

I can't stand in there and fight with you all night. Mom's voice was scratchy, exhausted by the hours of yelling.

Come back. Dad snatched my mom's arm, freezing her in place just before her foot hit the stairs.

Let me go.

Moira.

I said, let go of me. Mom jerked back, fighting his hold on her. She flailed out of my sight, blocked by Dad looming beside her, stubbornly watching her yank against him. Before I could find her face again, she screamed and her body rolled down the staircase, crashing into the wooden boards, cracking bones each time she landed.

Then there was a pause, an eerie silence. I swallowed my panic until it bubbled up inside me and swelled into shriek. It was shrill, the consequence of being taught not to scream bloody murder unless there was an emergency.

Dad turned, and I backed away from the door.

Traffic blurred past me as I pulled onto the exit ramp, unable to drive with my eyes burning and welling up with tears for the last fifty miles.

He pushed her, I thought, damning the carefully worded explanation that I had been fed for years after that first hospital visit.

Dad's hands were on my shoulders, telling me that she had fallen. It was an accident. He couldn't have pushed her; he wasn't even that angry. Mom was bruised, black and blue all over her body and Dad was framing her as a klutz. I didn't argue with him. The sterile room and flickering lights were too similar and a far cry from the gas station I pulled into.

The phone rang as I swiped away my tears, unable to find the end of them. On the last ring, Mom answered.

"Hey, baby. How's it going?"

"I need you to be honest with me, okay?" My voice quivered, no matter how hard I tried to control myself. "Just once, I need to know the truth. Can you do that?"

“Honey, what is this about?” I had scared her, I could tell. My mom was the type of parent to assume that her children were in grave danger if they so much as sneezed funny. And there I was, crying in my car in front of a gas station where girls like me readily went missing in the eighties. Maybe they were crying about their dead dads too.

“The house,” I spat. “I was at the house, and remember when you fell down the stairs? You broke your arm. I need to know if you really tripped.”

“Why?”

“I just have to know. I can’t take it anymore. Did he push you?”

She sighed. “That was a very long time ago.”

“Mom.”

“Why are you even thinking about this?”

“He pushed you,” I said, echoing my thoughts. “He did. You fell after he pushed you.”

“Lizzie, I don’t remember.”

“What?”

“I don’t, okay? I just don’t remember what happened. I barely remember anything before I woke up with the paramedics surrounding me. Why? Why are you so upset? Did something happen?”

I shut my eyes, allowing my head to spin. “I hate that house, Mom.”

She was quiet, listening to the sound of my erratic breathing. “I know you’ve always been angry about what happened when we were there, but it’s not healthy to hold on to that kind of resentment.” Silence. “It’ll eat you alive.”

“Or push you down the stairs?”

“Liz.”

I sniffled, then nodded my head, knowing that she had no way of seeing me pull myself together. “I’m alright, I promise.”

She paused again, debating whether I could be trusted to monitor my own emotional health. “How’s Dean?”

“Good,” I said, knowing she meant “Where is Dean? And can he monitor your vital signs all night?”

“Where are you?”

“Almost home.”

“Promise?”

“Yeah,” I said, staring at the map on my phone. “Promise.”

I shut my apartment door, sliding the chain lock into place. The shower was running, and I had a few short minutes left to myself. I fought the urge to collapse on our sofa, waiting for me across the room. It was beige, like everything else inside the two-bedroom city home. My minimalist style was almost overpowered by the few photos we had hung of Dean and me on our engagement trip, but the lack of clutter and carefully selected furniture evened it out.

I set my keys on the entryway table and sighed. It had started raining a few minutes after Mom hung up. My sweater was drenched and sticking to my skin, clinging to me as I pulled it off.

“Liz?” Dean asked from the bedroom.

“Yeah,” I said, slipping out of my wet shoes and trying not to fall on the hardwood floors.

“Sorry, I just got in.”

Dean came to greet me, letting the steam from the bathroom trail behind him. “Why are you sorry?”

I shrugged, tired from the emotional downpour I had faced alone. “I didn’t mean to take so long.”

Dean frowned. “You’re only a few minutes late. I’ll call the counseling office, I’m sure they’ll understand.”

I sighed. “I don’t want to go today. Do you think we can reschedule?”

“Why? Are you sick?”

“No, I just don’t want to be talked down to. I’m not in the mood.”

Dean narrowed his eyes. “They don’t talk down to you. They’re just trying to help.”

I dropped onto the sofa. “We pay them so they can tell us stuff we already know.”

He crossed his arms. “You said you were okay with premarital counseling.”

“Yeah, when it was going to be about marriage stuff.”

“It *has* been about marriage.”

Easy for him to say. “No, it hasn’t.”

Dean rubbed his forehead. “Why do you really not want to go?”

“Because I’m fine. Okay? Perfectly fine. I don’t need someone to try and dig up my past.” I crossed my arms, stubborn, unbudging. The last thing I wanted to do was sit on a couch and continue crying about my childhood.

“You’re definitely not fine,” Dean said as if it was a fact.

“I am,” I lied.

He scoffed. “No, you’re not. You just disappear, all day. And when you are here, you aren’t even happy.”

“That’s not true.” I wasn’t the bad guy. He was *trying* to make me seem like the bad guy.

“It is,” he said, further accusing me.

“Why wouldn’t I be happy?” I asked, mocking the idea. I had everything I wanted. A well-paying, functional job, a furnished apartment, and a loving, sometimes asinine, fiancé.

Dean sighed. “It’s that house.”

“It’s not the house.” I swallowed a bitter laugh.

“Then what?” He stepped forward, putting another burden on my shoulders. The burden to explain myself. “What is making you so miserable?”

But there were no answers, none that I had readily available to satisfy him. “Nothing. I’m not.”

“You are,” he said, not giving up. “Why? Because your brother won’t help?”

I shook my head. “No. You don’t get it.” Danny *was* going to help. It would just take some time.

Dean sighed, exhausted by my denial. “I can’t understand unless you tell me, which you refuse to do. All the times that I’ve offered to go with you, to drive you, to help you shovel out the crap your parents left and you won’t let me.”

“You haven’t offered that much,” I said, my jaw starting to ache.

“Yes, I have. I asked you if you needed me to come after the funeral, when your uncles dumped the whole thing on you. You said no. I wanted to be there when you went through your dad’s shit because it’s not fair that you have to do it all alone, but you insisted.”

“Because it’s not your responsibility.”

“Why is it yours?” he asked, a pair of wrinkles forming between his eyes, all because of me.

My shoulders fell. “I don’t know.”

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE LIVINGROOM

Dean stared at me from the doorway, watching me sit on the couch with the nothing but the sound of our diffuser puffing lavender oil into the air making noise in the room. It had been a few minutes, maybe a lifetime, but he wasn't done staring me down.

I shifted, fearing that my legs would fall asleep before he decided to speak to me again.

“How much is left?”

“What?” I asked.

“Of the house.”

I shrugged. “The attic and the living room.” The bathrooms were basically empty, littered with empty bottles of 3-in-1 shampoo but otherwise bare. They had given me the least trouble in the weeks I had been commuting back and forth.

He nodded. “I'm coming with you tomorrow.”

“You don't have to-”

“I want to.” Dean sat beside me, reaching for my hand. “You're going to need help with the furniture anyway.”

“Danny said-”

Dean shook his head, cutting me off. “Danny isn't going to show up.”

“He might,” I said, feeling the need to defend my brother in his absence.

“You can't wait on him to get the hell out of that house. He'd have you wasting away in there for months.”

My eyes followed the cracks in our floor, wondering when my brother had decided he couldn't come back to Earth, even just to keep me company. “Alright.”

“Good.”

A moment passed before I cleared my throat and asked, “So, we don’t have to go to counseling?”

A smile appeared on Dean’s face. “We’ll reschedule.”

Dean hurried around the room, scooping up crusted paper plates and tossing them into the garbage bag trailing behind him. We had a long day ahead of us, but he hadn’t complained once.

“When will the movers be here?”

“Six,” I said.

I glanced out the window where our car waited at the end of the driveway. It was still early, too early, and I was doomed to spend the rest of day covered in dust mites. The windowsill was coated in a layer of dead bugs that were left to rot so close to their own freedom. My stomach churned and I pretended it was because of the gas station grilled cheese.

Dean insisted that I eat, afraid that I would pass out halfway through moving the furniture downstairs. We had to use our budget for the flowers to cover the cost of the junk haulers, but carrying dressers and bedframes down the stairs would save our photographer. I swore that I could handle it, that I could do the heavy lifting, but he was still skeptical.

The moisture in the air stuck to the walls, and my skin. Dean’s sweat was starting to gather on his brow line, and I wondered how much longer he could go before stopping for one of the many sodas he brought to renew his faith in humanity.

“*Jesus*. Is it always so hot in here?”

Yes, I thought but said, “Not really. Today is the worst day.” The weather had been disgusting all week, hot and stifling. The thunderstorm the night before only brought a new layer

of moist, smothering discomfort. And the house trapped everything inside it, good and bad. So, we could forget about fresh air or a reprieve from the humidity.

“No wonder he got sick,” Dean said, looking up from Dad’s desk just long enough to apologize.

I shrugged. “You’re right. He lived like a pig. Never threw anything away.” My voice hovered above me, as if coming from another source and not my own lips. Dean’s presence in my childhood home was surreal and wrong. He didn’t belong there.

“Yeah, there’s paperwork here from 2002.”

The desk legs were chewed from my uncle’s cockapoo. I could still make out the teeth marks running up the faded wood. A smile crept onto my lips.

“What?” Dean asked, shoving a brochure into his collection of garbage.

“Danny put peanut butter there,” I gestured to the bottom of the leg, where it threatened to snap at any moment. “So Dad would have to buy a new one.”

Mom hated the desk and complained about it for years. Finally, Danny took matters into his own hands and baited the dog to the same spot in the house whenever it visited. But the plan failed, and Mom had to live with an even uglier desk for five more years.

Dean laughed. “I guess that’s one way to get back at him.”

I was going to correct him, say that Danny didn’t do it out of malice or revenge, but the words wouldn’t form. In the end, I said nothing and grabbed my own garbage bag to continue scooping up paper plates and used napkins. Gloves gave me little comfort.

But then, there I was, walking through the living room door saying, *Dad, dinner is ready.* I carried two plates and set them on the glass coffee table. Dad’s favorite news channel was already on, and I was worried that the grilled cheese would be cold by the time he joined me.

I had been back at the house for a month and could count the number of times we talked to each other for more than ten minutes on one hand. No matter what I cooked, or how much I stressed the importance of quality time, he only stuck around long enough to inhale his food. Then, if I was lucky, he'd fall asleep on the couch, and I'd watch him, wondering why I even bothered to spend my summer vacation with someone that had no interest in me.

But grilled cheese, *my* grilled cheese had always been his favorite. Even when I was a kid. So I toasted each slice of bread, buttered them all to perfection, then threw them on the finnickiest stove until three types of cheese oozed out the sides. I thought about Danny. He was at home, trying to up his kill count in Call of Duty. I tried to convince him to come with me, but he refused.

Why would I want to spend my break in that crappy house?

Dad's there.

He scoffed. *Your dad.*

I shook off the conversation and called for Dad again, expecting to hear him walking down the stairs. When he didn't, I left the food and went to investigate. I made it as far as the playroom before I heard the backdoor open and slam shut.

Dad? I asked, confused.

Just me.

I frowned but headed back to the living room, where he had already slumped onto the couch with his grilled cheese on his lap.

I thought you were upstairs.

I had to run some errands.

It's noon. You never wake up before me.

He reeked of tequila, and I wondered if I had really left him on the couch, passed out the night before.

Did you go to the bar? I asked, trying to give him the benefit of the doubt despite my churning stomach.

I told you I had errands. He was gruff, and already irritated by my questioning but I couldn't help myself.

How long were your errands? I pressed further.

Dad rolled his eyes. *I don't have to explain myself to you.*

I frowned. *Was I here by myself all night?* Did he remember to lock the backdoor when he left?

Of course not. He said, refusing to look away from his sandwich.

Dad. A headache formed behind my right eye, throbbing with each of his responses.

I was only gone for a few hours. Don't flip out.

My shoulders dropped. I wasn't flipping out. *I just want to spend time with you.*

The room was quiet. The newscaster mumbled something about a heatwave creeping toward us, and I wondered if Dad cared about me visiting at all. Mom's apartment wasn't big, but it had functioning A/C, and on the nights she wasn't trying to drown her memories, we were a family. I left that, *my home*, for him.

Why? he asked when my thoughts began to spiral out of control. They landed on my feet, waiting to be taken seriously.

Because I'm your daughter.

He turned to me, his brown eyes meeting mine for the first time since he stumbled through the door. *How do I know that?*

What?

Your mom got around. I'm not an idiot. Danny? He's probably mine, but you? I don't know. His claim settled between my ears, burning as I processed the words, clustered together so haphazardly, but meant to wound.

He was a ridiculous, infuriating man.

I balled my fists at my side. *That's bullshit.*

Dad looked up at me, grease dripping down the sides of his hands, before saying, *I know.*

He turned away again, and I stared at the side of his head, angry, furious at him for the first time in my life. He missed my dance recitals, or showed up late, his hair still wet from the shower Mom made him take. He ran off on Christmas day, saying that he shouldn't be expected to celebrate if Jesus was born in April. But I was born in April, and he didn't celebrate then either.

My mouth quivered, holding back more fury than my body could stand in one sitting. *You...my voice trailed off, have no daughter,* I wanted to say. But he'd be relieved, not sad, not remorseful.

I shook my head and walked away, letting him have a daughter, making him live with my existence until the day they put him in the ground. I slammed my bedroom door, took Rosie, and threw her onto the floor. She shattered, into a thousand pieces, and I fell to my knees.

Sobs wracked my body, forcing me forward, cutting my shins on the glass shards. My blood trickled into the carpet, and I fell back, pressing myself on the wall. I cried until I shivered in rage, freezing from the inside out. Until I heard the backdoor slam shut and Dad's car start up in the driveway. The fan belts squealed as he left me.

Mom picked me up the next day. She never asked what happened. And I never visited again, swearing that when I soldered the fragmented, fragile pieces inside of me back together, he'd have nothing to be proud of, nothing to claim as his.

“Hey, babe,” Dean said, his voice distracting me from the heap of old newspapers piled in front of the front door. “You might want to see this.”

CHAPTER EIGHT: ATTIC

“What is it?” I asked, stepping away from my section of garbage and walking toward his. I had a headache behind my eye and the back of my shoe kept slipping off my ankle. Dean had been chunking Dad’s paperwork in the garbage, barely checking the dates to see if they were important.

“They look like letters.”

“To who?”

“To you.”

I laughed. “Yeah, right.”

Dean handed one over the desk, and after a second of staring, I took it. “He wouldn’t write to me. He barely talked to me.”

“Well, it’s addressed to you.”

My grip tightened, almost crushing the yellowed notebook paper in my hands. I could see my name scrawled at the top and the date, three years before he died upstairs.

“It’s old.” I shook my head. “No point in reading it now.” I tossed the letter back onto the desk, where it belonged, and turned away.

“Liz,” Dean said, trying to make me reconsider. But I waved him off.

“I have too much shit going on to stop and cry over a letter asking for a paternity test.”

“What?” Dean asked, startled by the mention of a test. I hadn’t told him my dad’s parting words. There was never a reason to.

I waved him off and turned back to collect my rag. “Nothing.” I expected him to ask for an explanation, but he didn’t. Instead, I heard the rustling of papers, and the garbage bag being tied. I spun around. “Did you toss it?”

“Yeah. You didn’t want it.” He stared at me. “Did you change your mind? I can still fish it out.”

I shook my head. “No, it’s fine.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

He didn’t believe me, but he nodded anyway. “Then we have our first full bag of the day. I’m going to toss it onto the porch and check out the attic.”

I scrunched my nose. “Grab the masks out of the car? I’m pretty sure that the rats nest up there.”

I leaned on the ladder, pretending not to notice the clusters of rat poop on the top two steps. “What’s up there?”

“Junk,” Dean said, “Lots of junk.” I wouldn’t have been surprised to hear that Dad hadn’t ventured into the attic since we moved out. Mom spent as little time up there as possible. I groaned.

“Here, I’m going to pass some stuff down. Do you have your gloves on?” Dean asked.

“Yeah. I’ll make a stack in the playroom.”

Dean huffed and then a cracked blue storage pail was heading toward me. I caught it before it could do any damage and trusted the thin rubber gloves to protect me from the plague. The first bucket wasn’t heavy and slid across the floor without adding to the stifling heat but as the hour progressed, so did my back pain. The constant driving wasn’t easy on my vertebra, my daily step-count, or my ability to sleep.

My dreams had stretched into abstract conversations with the damned, people lost to me in the waves of life. Each time I found myself spun around, crashing into a reef, I emerged with one less friend by my side. Danny was the first casualty, never calling when he said he would, leaving me to pick up the pieces of our childhood. Then it was best friends, boyfriends, all promising they understood the aching inside my ribs.

But each left, with an apology. Their final words lingered in my head, punishing me for not reaching out, swearing I could be happy and whole. And Dean? I wondered how long he would bare my sadness, shouldering the burden so I could breathe underneath his generosity. When would I wake up to an heartfelt apology, a “I swear you did nothing wrong” promise that would lead to my timely return to holding up the world?

“Got it?” he said, making sure I had a solid hold on the last box.

I nodded before I spoke, dazed by the sweat dripping down my nose and the dead spiders still clinging to the frayed edges of the carboard. “You can let go.”

He released his grip, and I stepped down, careful not to trip with Dad’s prized bricks in my arms. That’d be ironic. If there was an afterlife, one where my spirit would stay where it separated from my body, I’d spend an eternity with him. Finally, some quality time.

The idea almost brought a smile to my lips. It was sick, but amusing.

“What?” Dean asked, brushing layers of cobwebs off his tanned skin.

“I just thought, wouldn’t be funny if I hit my head and had to talk to my dad after all this time?”

He raised an eyebrow, but his mouth twitched, as if he couldn’t decide whether he was allowed to laugh. “Did you drink that bottle of water I got out of the car for you?”

I promised I did, but he still gave me a skeptical look before opening a half-empty pail and tossing the lid to the side. “Are these McDonald’s toys?”

I stepped forward, peeking inside to see a treasure trove of cheap, plastic promotional toys. “I guess so.”

After a moment passed in silence, he laughed. “Okay so, what are the chances that everything in the attic is more of this crap?”

“Pretty good,” I said, gesturing to the walls lined with cracked buckets and mildewed cardboard. “This is my legacy.”

Dean chuckled. “Alright, well, figure out if you want to keep any of your *legacy*. The movers will be here in a few hours, and we haven’t even started moving furniture.”

“Oh, I don’t want it,” I said. “We can just drag it out with the rest of the stuff from the living room.”

Dean frowned at me, too stubborn to give up all at once. And that’s a good thing. He crossed the room and pulled open the last box, just itching to prove me wrong. “Look,” he pulled out a binder decorated with crayon drawings and glitter stickers. “You don’t want this? What about when we have kids? You don’t want to show them what their mom liked at their age?”

“That’s Danny’s,” I said, a wry smile forming. Dean blinked in surprise, and I decided to put him out of his misery. “I’m joking, I swear.”

“I wasn’t judging.”

“Sure.”

“You should keep this,” he said, already flipping through the pages. “You were an artist. I mean look at this.” He flipped the binder around and held it toward me. “Is that a pigeon or an eagle?”

I chuckled. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

“You journaled?”

“I had the poor man’s version of a diary.” Notebook paper and pink glitter pens in surplus.

“Dear *die-ary*, I am seven today. Danny is mean. And smells bad.” He tapped the page, “That’s gold.”

I mimed a bow. “Anything for my fans.”

“Wait, there’s more,” he said, excited, but his grin fell as he deciphered my chicken scratch. He glanced up, shutting the binder for good. “Maybe we leave this here.”

“What was it?”

He shook his head, throwing the sparkly atrocity back into its resting place. “Something about a fight.”

I nodded. “There were a lot of those.”

“My parents fought too,” he said.

“Not like this.” I sighed. “They never stopped.” Half of my childhood was spent tuning out mom’s screaming.

Dean paused then said, “I’d hug you if I wasn’t covered in rat poop.”

“It’s the thought that counts,” I responded, shutting the bin in front of me and waving him to follow. “Come on, we have to get started with the heavy shit or we’ll never get out of here.”

The movers arrived early, too early for either of us to answer the door. We were stuck on the stairs, unable to move the final piece of furniture from Dad’s room. The oak dresser had an mirror, which was much easier to relocate.

Dean was taking the brunt of the weight, and I couldn't feel my fingertips anymore. "LIFT," he said, trying keep his balance. He was exhausted, and frustrated. *Why did no one else offer to help? How were you supposed to do this by yourself?* He was mad on my behalf, and I just shrugged.

My shoulders burned, shot from the constant strain. "I AM."

"Doesn't feel like you are."

"My toes are going to get crushed."

"Not if you lift."

Sweat dripped down the back of my neck. "Just *move*."

"I'm going, I'm going," he snapped, stepping backward until he was on the ground floor, leading me to the last clear space in the room. When we dropped the dresser, he sighed, apologizing as soon as he regained his breath.

"It's okay," I said, rubbing my fingers, trying to revive them. "It's a lot to deal with."

Dean smiled, then his face fell and he swore. "I hope they didn't drive off." He ran into the kitchen, trying to chase down our saviors before they wrote us off as a lost cause. I heard him yell, the slam of the door screen, and then his rushed footsteps back to me. "Hey, I caught them. They're backing the truck in now."

"Cool," I said, "What needs to go in first?"

He scanned the junk beside us. "Probably the lighter stuff, we'll secure it with the heavier pieces after."

I nodded, but my attention lingered on the doorway. Dean watched me, carefully, and I wondered what I had done to make him concerned. "Why don't you take a break?"

"I don't mind."

“But you deserve a break. Besides, we got this,” he said.

“I want to be helpful.”

“Why don’t you pull the trash to the street so we can leave whenever we’re done here?”

I stared at him, too tired to argue. “Yeah, I can do that.”

“Great.” He leaned forward, kissing my forehead and risking catching the plague. “Love you.”

“Love you,” I said, feeling my heart thrum in my chest. But the threat of heatstroke loomed above me and I walked off in search of another bottle of water.

CHAPTER NINE: DRIVEWAY

The letter crumbled in my hands, but I couldn't find the nerve to trash it. Dean waited for me at the bottom of the hill, helping the movers back down the cracked driveway with the last load of furniture. *Garbage.*

We kept nothing, except for a piece of stained notebook paper that I dug out of the trash.

Lizzie,

I am thinking about you. And your grilled cheese. Maybe you can teach me how you do it.

I clenched my jaw and I stared ahead, toward the empty sky. He didn't sign it. It wasn't finished. It couldn't have been. I blinked in anger and disappointment.

Dean waved at me as the movers drove away with my childhood. I tried to find some peace, or relief in the moment. *I'm free.* Yet still felt Dad in my bones. I shoved the letter in my pocket and started down the driveway, walking toward my life, the one I built without him. But there he was, beside me, walking in step.

I told you not to run in flip flops, he said, leaning over me, blocking the midday sun while my mom ran inside for Rite Aid clearance band aids and Lidocaine. *That's how you get hurt.*

I was bleeding, dripping onto the concrete, crying uncontrollably. *I'm s-s-sorry. I didn't mean too.* Danny watched from the window, forbidden from running outside to make fun of my pain.

I know. Hey, I know? It's gonna be alright. Mom is going to fix you all up. You'll have a nasty scar, but we all got those.

I sniffled. *I don't want a sc-ar.*

At the base of the hill, Dean slid into the car, ready for me to join him in the A/C, but I'd never see my dad again. He died inside a house I didn't belong to, and that I could never visit. I swiped away a stray tear, too eager to hide it from the light of day.

I glanced to the side, watching Dad with a lawnmower, toiling away so my mom wouldn't attempt it herself. He was baking underneath the sun, and any doctor worth their shit would have diagnosed him with sun poisoning. He nearly died every summer from stubbornness, and I guess, that was what did him in.

I cleared my throat, practicing in my head. Some poor, well-meaning person would ask, "Your dad died? I'm so sorry, can I ask how?" and my answer would be "He was too stubborn to ask for help."

They would stare at me, like I had lost my marbles. And maybe I had. Who was honest about the dead? I swallowed the lump in my throat. My feet felt like lead, moving along just so I could say that I could. Why didn't *I* ask for help?

The house was empty, finally, but I felt like I was leaving something behind. The driveway was crooked, and uneven, just enough that Dad would park halfway down and to the side, where Mom could pull up past him and walk straight into the house.

Don't do this, he said, following Mom to her car. I was in the back seat with Danny, a wall of pillows between us. *Not in front of the kids*.

Mom weaved around him, going straight to the driver's seat. *Don't use them against me*.

Dad frowned. There were lines on his forehead, showing his age for the first time. *Stay. Okay? We'll work it out*. They were fighting, always fighting. I didn't want to go but couldn't let Mom be sad. I squeezed Rosie in my arms, ignoring the crackling sounds she made.

Not this time. Mom said, starting the engine. As we began moving backward, Dad's hand pressed against the glass of my window, leaving smudges for me to stare out long after we pulled out of the subdivision.

We spent the afternoon in a hotel, listening to Mom make phone calls to her family.

My hair stuck to the back of my neck, and I wondered if I would ever feel clean again. Dean brought towels, the ever-prepared man that he was, and I watched him lay mine out over the passenger's seat.

Just a few more steps. Downhill, nonetheless, but each one brought a bout of nausea. Leaving never got any easier.

I stopped, squeezing my eyes shut, praying through gritted teeth. When I opened them, I was five, hurrying down the driveway in my new, bright pink sketchers.

Did you miss me? Dad asked, climbing out of his beat-up Volvo, loosening his tie.

My arms were wide, stretching out from my sides like wings. *You were gone all day!*

He chuckled. *I had to work, but I'm home now.*

Never leave again? I asked, staring up at him, hair sticking to my small face.

Never, he said.

Promise?

He smiled. *No. I can't promise that.* He reached down to take one of my hands. *But I'll always come back.*