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I am a child

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I am a child, four or so, playing outside by the tree with branches like witch's hands—thin and knuckled and curled upwards. You had been gardening on the other side of the swing set by the garage where the lantanas are thick and full. I look over and see you sitting on the bench between them, crying. Your hair is long with ends that curl, and browner than it will be in a few years. The sight of you crying doesn't scare me yet, so I run over. I try to hold you, but you recoil. You laugh, but it is empty. You want me to go away and stop looking at you. I don't understand. I feel helpless. You won't tell me what's wrong, but demand that I go inside and that I *do not* tell my father. I do as you ask, feeling hollowed and useless, when he corners me in the hallway.

"Where is your mother?" He asks. He knows, he always knows, and for years I will think he is a mind reader- smarter, quicker, and impossible to escape. I tell him where you are, and that you are crying. A part of me thinks he will help. A part of me fears omitting any facts, even the ones he didn't ask for, because he'll know.

He goes out to you, and I go to my room, where I stand by the window and watch you interact from across the yard. You are centered almost perfectly in my view. My hands cling to the window sill as I strain to watch.

I can tell quickly that I have made it worse. Your body is tight, and he looms over you. You are taller than he is standing, but you don't stand. There is yelling, choked and thick with tears. He bellows.

I leave the window and sit on my bed. I bring Bear close to me and rub his right ear between the knuckle of my thumb and forefinger as I stare up at the ceiling. My daydreams eclipse the sound of your voices and the weight my guilt.

I am eleven and sitting in the counselor's office at school. The room is designed to make me feel at ease, and my awareness of that makes me resent her. Her name is Elizabeth, like my middle name, and the friend you named me for. It would have been my first name if not for Darrell's insistence. Elizabeth has the hair I wish I had—thick and curly and full of life.

I have already seen her a few times, during PE, partially to get out of PE. I am always tired and feel acute loneliness on teams, and partially because that is the "acceptable" time to see her.

She wants to bring you and Darrell in and talk to you about what I've told her about our home life. I tell her no, emphatically.

"I will get in trouble," I explain. "It will make it worse."

I feel intense regret for crying in front of her before. It is moving her to act, and now I have to convince her not to. Why did I come here? I guess I hate PE.

I am home. It is Saturday, and you've been gone all morning. You come

in, together, through the kitchen. I was sitting at the table writing. I look into your faces and I know she's told you everything. His expression full of contempt, yours washed with guilt, and bitter fear.

What an idiot, I think to myself as the pair of you approach me.

She has no idea what she's done.

I am a young teenager, and I am talking to you. It is one of the brief moments we share together. Your hair isn't brown anymore. It is blonder, and shorter. You are thicker. We are outside, where Darrell can't hear us. You make an offhanded comment about Darrell, and I defend him to you. He is the devil I know, and you are a stranger who recoils when I try to hug her. You know nothing about me and ask me no questions. I don't understand the concept of a job—only that it takes you away from this house and keeps you there sometimes until I go to sleep. I don't understand money. I don't understand that we are poor. I don't know that I despise him yet because he is my only company.

You get quiet, and for days don't speak to me unless necessary. I resent being punished. I don't speak to you either.

I am nineteen and it is early in the morning before you go to work. You talk about your mother as a deified woman you deeply miss. Funny, charming, smart, hardworking. You say she made you so happy. But your mother worked, and you as the youngest stayed home with your father in between his stints in asylums and hospitals for his bipolar-schizophrenia and tuberculosis. We have some of the snakeskin wallets he made there in a box, with his annotated bible in bright red ink, and some of his writing. I don't understand why you love her so much. Did you know her at all? How did you do that? I wish you could tell me, so I could try it with you. Maybe it would make me feel like less of a burden.

I am sixteen, and Margaret has just dropped off the book I left at her house by accident. It's a textbook, but I'm not thinking about that. I am thinking about her face, how beautiful her lips are, how desperately I want to be enveloped by her and fall deeply into our shared writing. Her parents drove her though, so we only manage a quick hug. Platonic. Brief. Non-threatening. I feel tight and twisted at my core. They drive away and the warmth gradually leaves my life at 30-or-so miles an hour.

I sit under one of our thick trees and begin to write in a new journal, on the first pristine page. I collect journals, but at this point, keep them blank. I don't know why I buy them anymore. This one is deep red, with a small golden emblem on the front: a heart, with an arrow piercing it. It isn't romantic. It is a violent icon. Its pages are unlined, and thin.

Our house, our existence has become a powder keg, I write, with the fire lingering close enough to feel the heat of the flame, close enough to warm the fuse. It is the matter of the time remaining that causes me to quake, for I fear there is little to no chance of escaping the explosion.

I dot the period and see you coming out the front door. You are crying. My entire body tightens in terror at the look and sound of it.

I ask you what's wrong. There is no empathy left in my voice. My reserves were drained years ago and my soul is empty and fearful.

"It's your sister," you say with a desperation unique to your relationship with Havi. The youngest, like you, and famously the more fragile and precious of your children.

"She won't come out of her room. She's locked the door. She's afraid of your father."

I wonder if this surprises you. Did you never realize that before now? Even when we thought we loved him, we were afraid, her especially with her sensitivity. He made her feel weak by belittling her, telling her she said *I love you* too frequently to really mean it and shamed her 'cowardice' for locking herself away in another room whenever he started to yell (I taught her that when she was little so she wouldn't have to see it or listen to what I've heard you say to each other, or he to me). He threatened not to go to Havi's junior high graduation barely a month ago, because he didn't like the place she wanted to eat dinner afterwards. When he beat us there and saved seats in the front row as a "surprise," I boycotted the seats on principle and stood outside with Ambrose. Whatever small sense of accomplishment she may have felt was ruined irreversibly by all of us.

At dinner, he slowly drank two white russians and never took his hate-filled black liquid eyes off of you. When he suddenly left and didn't come home well into the night, you and I casually wondered if he was dead. We supposed we'd get a call eventually. When we heard the garage door open, our disappointment was palpable-as if he continued to live to spite us personally.

Havi sat in her room alone, listening to music-graduated.

Did you really not know? Do you know anything?

I tell you we should call someone he will listen to. I suggest his eldest sister.

She is of no help, and he is listening on the other line. He interrupts us and the hair on the back of my neck stands up. I look at you, and you are panicked. You are left to deal with him while I try to reason with Linda. *He needs help*, I tell her, *psychological help. It's getting worse.*

She told me how important it was that you get a divorce. That you aren't right for each other. She says this must be hard for me as your child, and I almost laugh at her. I ask if she will be of any help. She claims not to know what to do,

so I hang up on her. Adults are never of any use to me. They never know what to do.

When I come in you are fighting, the expanse of the room between you serving as a buffer. His eyes are wild and his screaming is incoherent. His sentences don't make sense. You look like you've never seen him like this. I know from experience this is dangerous territory. I try to ground him but my usual techniques don't work, and honestly, I no longer feel the daughterly duty to save him from himself. I am not fueled by care for him, but a need to protect you, Havi, and myself.

He centers on me and now we are fighting. He is inches from my face and standing on the small step that raises the hallway from our sunken living room. In this configuration he is taller than me. This is a familiar battleground and I am not afraid, only empty. I fight back and I feel as though a part of me has been dead a long time. Nothing he says affects me. I have heard it all before, in the hours between the end of my school day and when you come home from work, for years and years.

He brings up Margaret and I am struck. He calls her a whore for seducing me. A cord deep within my most primal being is struck. I slap him so hard across the face it snaps to the right with his profile to me. I hear you audibly gasp behind me.

For a moment I feel invigorated. Vindicated. It reminds me of when I was thirteen and he moved to hit me. I grabbed his right bicep with my left hand—my weaker hand—and involuntarily squeezed. I made him scream in pain. I felt powerful.

Then he ripped free of my hand and threw me into the wall. My vision blurred and my head throbbed. The room spun, but I could still see you sitting on the other side of the room on my sister's bed, holding her next to you while she cried. You were impassive for most of the fight. I heard her beg to leave, and you said no, she had to stay. I'll never understand why you made her watch, or why his threatening your thirteen year-old daughter and looming over her was passable. Only when he threw me did you stand up. You didn't come near me. We all went to bed that night like nothing happened.

I remember that night and suddenly I am looking at him again. His face slowly turns to look at me, and I know it will be worse than a collision with my bedroom wall. It is in his eyes that he doesn't intend for me to survive.

He lunges forward, but you are quicker. You pull me out of his grip and you threaten him. "If you touch anyone, I will call the police," you say with vibrato. It is the nicest thing you've ever done for me and I feel like you are my mother for a brief and beautiful moment.

I remember the phone is still in my hand. I see Havi out of the corner of my

eye—her own protests having fallen on deaf ears as if she wasn't even in the room.

He laughs at your threat and tells us plainly: “If you do, you won't live to see tomorrow.”

I dial immediately, and he is running to the kitchen where the phone's base is. It is ringing, and I am urging it to connect. If it connects, they will come quickly. Someone just needs to pick it up, just for a second.

I watch him rip the telephone base off the counter. The cord yanked out of the wall with a frayed end. It connected only a second before. I feel smug about it.

I hear him in the kitchen drawer, and remember it is where we keep our knives. I look around, and find myself alone. I see Havi dash out the back gate, following you. I run after. I want to go back for the cat.

You've run next door and I hear you begging to be let inside. I've never heard you beg like that. It makes you sound human and it scares me. I see my sister crying and try to comfort her, but she recoils from me and folds in on herself. We are strangers to each other and nothing I say can help her. She only wants you. I feel betrayed, bitter and alone.

When the police arrive, he is already gone. It took them nearly a half hour to get there. I joke with you that we could have been chopped up and under your flower beds by then. You laugh. Havi is silent.

They talk to us and determine somehow that I am the “primary victim.” I already felt that way, so I agreed, and signed the paperwork that verified it. It felt good in a hollow way to vilify him on an official legal document. It felt good to be validated by the police in front of you.

But you weren't looking. You and Havi were curled up like doves next to each other, comforting each other.

I handed the police officer his pen back, and he asked if I was alright.
“I'm fine.”

When we go back to the house, we find it trashed. The cat is alive, which surprises me and I am relieved. It looks like he has crushed every phone in the house with his bare hands. They are in pieces and impossible to use. His blood is splattered on the walls and I wonder if he is dead. You say it is more likely that he cut his hand on something, and the blood was sprayed while he threw things. I exhale as if I am relieved, but I am not. The picture of you and your mother, one you loved and he detested, is shattered and covered with his blood. My picture is in the fireplace buried in ash, and my computer which held all of my writing up until this point in my life is in pieces on the floor. My writing with Margaret is gone. I am acutely wounded. He killed the only part of me that still felt anything in a cruel, purposeful act of vengeance.

Havi's room, save the phone, was the only room untouched in his rampage. He did not hear her speak against him, so he rewarded her silence.

It is later that same evening and I go to the kitchen to get a glass of water. I see your brother-in-law David asleep on the couch, sitting up, with a frying pan in his hands. You and I laugh. You think we are in on the same joke, but we aren't. You are laughing at the image. I am laughing at the futility of his attempt at protection. I don't trust any of you. I know I will always be fending for myself. You will always be out the back gate before I even know you've left. At least he's trying. I find it endearing, even if I feel no comfort or security. I wonder why it makes you feel safer to have a man here. Have you ever known a safe man who could protect you? Have you ever known a safe man?

I am still sixteen, but Darrell is gone and the house is ours. I am pretending he is dead, though I don't say that to people. I tell them I hope he is far away, happy, but far away. In reality I know what makes him happy and hope he never has another opportunity to be happy again. We rearrange the whole house as our rebellious act of freedom. We were never allowed to move or change anything. Everything had an exact configuration, including all of our rooms. I remember the hell it caused when you bought me new sheets, something you thought he'd have no opinion on because you had no idea how anything worked.

Now you and I rearrange my room, and you buy me an entirely new set of sheets, curtains, and pillow cases. He is gone forever and we'll live happily ever after now.

I am seventeen, and I am bleeding. I've called you at work to ask where the bandages are, the large gauze ones. You ask me what happened. You sound angry, inconvenienced. I feel intense shame, and lean on the cold kitchen counter. I want to hang up. I regret calling you at all and wonder why I did it.

I admit that I cut myself, with the intention to kill myself but stopped. I didn't tell you that it wasn't a desire to live, but a feeling of intense guilt and responsibility that kept me from going through. I knew I couldn't leave you and Havi alone. Who would keep Darrell at bay? Who would embolden you when he drove by again, or parked out front to yell at us over the fence? If he came by in the middle of the night while you were gone, who would stop him from getting inside?

You send your sister to come over and sit with me. She is a stranger, and I know I make her uncomfortable. I know this situation makes her uncomfortable. I am a prickly burden to every one of you and my emotional

instability reminds her of Darrell. None of us are emotionally equipped to handle each other. I feel unhinged just sitting across from her.

When you come home you ask to see it. I don't know why I expected you to hug me, but you don't. You are rigid. I pull the bandage aside and you hold my arm. It hurts when you do. I assess my own wound. It isn't as big or brutal as it could be. I feel embarrassed to see it in the light. I am so pitiful. How could I let this happen?

"You did it wrong," you tell me, and I look up at you. What little there is left of me is crushed. You aren't looking at me, but at my arm.

"It's the other way."

You let my arm go and I just let it fall. I don't know what to say. I am nothing. I am no longer sure I survived the attempt. Maybe I am dead and this is Hell.

I am still seventeen and I come to you in the middle of the night. I am shaking and terrified. I don't want to talk to you but I have no one else. I tell you about my deterioration. I am unable to sleep, and when I do, the nightmares are crippling. While I am awake I am full of terror. My eyes wander to the shadows and they seem full of people-demons-monsters who mean me harm. I am crying and telling you about the windows-our house is so full of windows-and how I am so afraid *someone* will get in. There is a door in my room to the outside. You and Havi sleep on the same side of the house, but I am down the long hall by myself. I tell you I am afraid I'm sick like Darrell. I'm so scared of losing my mind.

You ask me what you should do about it. Should you put me in a mental institution? Is that what I want?

"No" I say, but it's desperate and you don't see it. I don't know what you should do. I was hoping you knew. I feel like an idiot. You never know what to do.

You give me two strong Xanax pills and tell me to go to sleep. They are from your stash that you renew for your fear of flying. You renew it much more often than we fly. I know you must really want to shut me up if you are giving them to me. I am desperate to feel better so I take them. The pills kick in quickly and I lose myself in the medicinal emptiness. My crippling fear melts into a dreamless sleep and I hope I never wake up. I want to be in this void forever.

This becomes our routine for a while and I miss days and days of school to drugged-out hebetude alone in the house. Eventually I get my own prescription. We see the same doctor, so it's easy. I ask for 2 mg, a strong pill. He gives them to me without argument. I can't rely on you to fill my prescription again, so I hoard them. When I do take them, my legs feel weak and

I lose control of my body. The absence of pain makes me giddy. I am a ragdoll with no past or future.

I am in my early twenties and I am sitting on the couch watching television. You are walking by cautiously. I know you want to ask me something, but I don't help you. I let you flounder until you find the words.

"So, on your arm, are you branding a design?"

You are looking at the welted scars on my upper arm that I am not bothering to hide. I look at you like you are an idiot, because you are-not because you really believe that, but because I know you don't and you think you are offering me a way out of the truth. You are saying it because you want me to agree, for your sake.

"No" I tell you plainly. *Family Guy* plays in the background. I miss the lead-up to the punchline.

You seem at a loss.

"So, why then?"

You are terrible at feeling bad for me. It looks like concern for my wellbeing is a bitter flavor on your tongue and you wish you could wash it down with something else.

"It makes me feel better."

"Oh."

It's all you can say, and at least it's honest. I know you were a cutter, and that my sister is a cutter. Pain is the only thing any of us understand. You have no grounds to argue with me, so you don't. You walk into the kitchen, and we never talk about it again.

Time, like our interactions, becomes severed.

I am in my room, when I hear you come home in the middle of the day. Havi and I come running. I don't know why I am always excited to see you. The feeling is never mutual.

You tell us that you were laid off from your job, someone mistakenly told you today so you had time to say goodbye and left.

I am gripped with horror. How will we live?

You don't want to talk about that.

You and Havi go to Target to spend your severance money on throw pillows and new curtains.

When Havi sees my face, she tells me not to bother you about it. I don't understand either of you. I know we won't last six months.

You don't care.

I am in the kitchen trying to talk to you about the finances. Let me help you budget. Let me see how it works. You don't have to do this alone. We're a team. That's what we say, even if we've never meant it and our alliance is purely circumstantial.

You pick up a plate from the sink and slam it back down so it shatters. I don't understand what's happened and you don't care to explain it to me. You get in your car and leave.

I pick up a plate and take it outside. I throw it and it shatters. I am destroying your precious plate from the kitchen you don't let me into where all your things need to be just so. I hate this stupid fancy plate and I hate this life.

I stand there and look at the mess. I quietly get a bag and pick up every piece. The rage is gone with only emptiness left. I pick up the pieces in the sink too, and throw the bag away. Nothing is salvageable.

I come home from Margaret's and find my room entirely rearranged. I look in my drawers and you've rearranged those too. The color scheme looks just like you and I am bitter that you don't know me at all. Some of my clothes are missing—the pieces you don't like. I yell at you.

You tell me that I am ungrateful, that you were doing something nice for me. I wonder if you're stupid or vicious. You know how precious control over my own space is, a right and privilege I only recently obtained—one you helped me celebrate with an arrangement and color scheme we picked out together. Maybe you picked it and I just agreed.

I see now I am still not free. I've traded one jailer for another. This one more insidious than the last with her supposed good-intention. I didn't ask you to make my room "nicer," or my appearance more "fashionable" or "presentable." These aren't gifts. They are affronts.

You say the way I keep my room drives you crazy. What I hear is the familiar jingle of cell block keys, this time grasped between manicured fingers.

I resent ever needing to come back, and no longer trust you to behave when I am not there.

It is evening and I am calling my friends to see where we—my sister and I—might live. We can't go to a woman's shelter. They won't let us keep our cats. I can't abandon them.

You hear what I've done and you call me a traitor for airing "your business, your life" to others. We are a family bound in dark secrets, not blood. Hidden truths flow through our shared veins and they cut me from the inside. You don't understand. I don't know if you don't feel it, or if you've grown so use to it that its absence feels unfamiliar.

I try to explain that I am trying to protect us.
You don't care. You can't hear anything I say over your own wounded
pride.

The three of us are in the kitchen and you are lecturing me. You and Havi
stand on one side, and I am pressed against the corner of the sink. There is a
room between us, but I still feel trapped.

You are demanding that I explain what Darrell did. I am exhausted. You
know. We all know. Do I really have to say it?

I look to Havi. I am looking for help. You were gone, but she was at
home. She must have known. She slept with you every night for protection until
she got her own room. She locked that door. I wasn't allowed to lock mine. She
never brought her friends to the house.
She is fighting on your behalf. You tell me I am making it up. She tells me I am
misremembering. I have been told so much what my own memories are that I
have no counter argument. It is my word against both of yours and it is useless to
fight. I give up.

I know I'll never talk to you about it, or anything of any depth or
importance. I feel adrift in a stormy dark ocean and you have both left me to
drown because acknowledging that I am even in the water makes you
uncomfortable. A piece of me dies.

I am sitting at your desk in the kitchen-a recent rearrangement-talking to
Havi over Facebook.

I am telling her to give San Francisco State a chance. It's hard to be
somewhere new, to be out of the house for the first time. No one else
understands, but I do. I remember how scared we were to be in our own front
yard, because Darrell kept us locked up so tight we were afraid of the outside. He
convinced us there was danger everywhere else but him. Knowing it is a lie isn't
enough, though. The fear is ingrained and to fight against it feels reckless and
wrong.

I am telling her to stay. She wants to come home. I want her to thrive, but
my throat burns. I was told college wasn't for me. I couldn't name more than
five colleges in the country while I was in high school. I never even looked at my
final grades. You let me believe I was an idiot because it kept me at home and
kept money you might have to spend on me in your pocket.

But not your precious baby. She wanted to go to San Francisco State, so
you leased a beautiful apartment for her right off of campus. You bought her new
bedding and furniture.

But she couldn't handle it. She's never been made to work through discomfort
and it crippled her. More so, it crippled you.

I am trying to talk Havi down with one hand while calling to you in the other room. You are pacing in the hall, sobbing. You say you need to go get her. I tell you to get ahold of yourself. She is a human being and not a safety blanket. You are her mother, and a supposed adult. I am acutely aware of how pitiful you are in this moment. I am juggling two children having tantrums.

I wake up the next morning and she is home. I know you have ruined her life. You've cut her at the knees in an irreversible way. She could have made it and you were too scared to let her. You are so selfish.

You pay for an empty San Francisco apartment for a year. You couldn't get out of the lease you signed.

When I ask to see a doctor about a lingering fever, you make me feel weak and guilty.

It is the first night in my new apartment. A friend of Margaret's is letting me live with him for free. I don't trust him at all, but I trust you much less. My cats and I are out of harm's way. You had acquired so many cats in the last year that the ones we already had were getting attacked and malnourished. My relief largely comes from removing them from the situation.

I sit on my bed and I start to cry. I am shaking all over. This is a new place and I am terrified. I have no idea why I want to go home to you. It is irrational and it makes me angry that I am not ecstatic.

I feel like an idiot.

I am riding to the hospital in Aunt Vicki's car. You admitted yourself to the psych ward for suicidal ideation. You needed help. Everyone congratulated you for your brave move towards recovery. I remember the conversation in your room when I was eighteen. I remember you grasping my arm at seventeen. My sympathy for you turns to ash in my mouth.

Havi and I don't know how to act. Your sisters make it worse. I feel a brief kinship with Havi as we sit in a break room while you talk to them. I see a familiar exhaustion in her eyes. I feel guilty, but vindicated. *See how hard it is?*

We are still strangers, but linked by a thin thread of duty and responsibility. She isn't a child anymore.

When I go in to talk to you, the conversation derails to my relationship with Margaret. Your sisters tell me, "*but you were so coquettish with the boys growing up!*"

I am baffled by the logic. Do they mean when I was *seven*, on the playground?

You don't correct your sisters. You let me flounder.

When Vicki takes us home, we talk about Darrell. She tells me about my cousin who I have never met, who claimed he "crossed a line" with her but

quickly recanted when pressured for proof. She refused to come to Thanksgiving a few years ago and felt betrayed any of her family would come to our house. You made it sound so trivial when you described it. It wasn't trivial.

I tell her my cousin wasn't alone, and she cries. She thanks me for telling her.

We never talk about it again.

I am home for Christmas and I am begging to sleep on the couch.

"I can't be in that room," I explain to you. Just to be in it for a moment makes my chest tight. You ask me why and I don't know how to answer. I don't know why it makes me panic now more so than any other time. I haven't panicked in weeks since I left. I don't know why I can't deal with it.

"Can I just sleep on the couch?"

You are inconvenienced greatly by this. You like the house to yourself in the morning, and for the rest of us to be locked away out of sight. You can't relax with me out there. You agree, but make every effort to remind me how intrusive to your routine it is every day.

The gifts you buy me are as impersonal and needlessly expensive as they have been for a long time.

I am on the phone with you in my apartment when you mention Darrell. You told him where I lived, and that I moved in with Margaret.

I am incredulous.

"He just wants to know how his daughter is doing," you say to me, with a simpering tone that suggests you pity my cold heart.

I remind you that he is a dangerous, unbalanced man that intended to kill us all in our own house.

You claim he's better.

I wonder if Grandma ever covered for your father like this. Would you have abided by it? He stabbed her with a fork, and drew a gun on her. Did she ever try to pass that off as a "momentary loss of judgment"? Would you have ever believed that?

I tell you not to trust him. It's a ruse.

You tell me I'm cruel.

I am at your house on a Sunday, hoping I can get back on the Westside for work tomorrow. You called me and asked me to be here because you didn't feel safe with him at the house without me. I came, because I am an idiot.

He is finally moving his possessions out of the house. According to the paperwork you signed, against my explicit instruction, nearly all of the possessions—including some of Havi's and mine—are his. The house is selling

at a dismal price because he blocked every offer at the height of the market. He doesn't care. You let him have your social security, which I am sure isn't at all legal. I don't understand you.

I am outside when he comes. He looks like a human, if you don't look too closely. His eyes are empty and his entire body is poised like a predator. He is shorter than me, but much stronger. Whatever fear I felt before melts when I see him. This is an old game we play and I have a 100% survival rate so far. It's a comforting statistic.

But you come out, repeatedly, to pick fights with him—fights regarding agreements you already made. I am baffled and furious. Why would you do this? You feel safe enough to challenge him, but you don't care about me. When it gets too scary, you'll run away and leave me in the bear pit. I look at you and realize how much of our shared trauma with Darrell required your direct and tireless participation.

I tell you to go inside.

David comes out to help me and I feel a kinship I will never tell him about. I don't know if he would be able to protect me, but he tries. He is scared, but it is scary so it is sensible to be afraid. His presence makes me feel better.

Darrell goes on a rant about his children being stolen from him and poisoned against him and cries into his hands. I watch him do it knowingly.

He peeks through his fingers. He sees that I am not moved.

He stops crying immediately. His face slacks into apathy.

A chill runs down my spine. I had forgotten how unreal it was to watch sociopathy in action like this. The world feels alien and dangerous. I am an island.

I walk away and David is on the other side of the gate, ensuring me that I handled that well. I am still an island, but there is a passing lifeboat temporality docked on my shore. The moment was so brief that I am sure David won't remember it. I know I will never forget it, and will think of him fondly thereafter.

I am at home reading your email that you moved not ten minutes away from the old house, despite Darrell stalking you regularly. I don't understand why you put yourself and Havi in danger. You say you like the sushi place and the neighborhood. I don't trust you with my sister's safety but there's nothing I can do—nothing she wants me to do either. I have to let you both go.

I am sitting at the computer in my apartment. It's been two years since I've spoken to you. I accidentally clicked a button on LinkedIn that added all of my possible matches, including you. You thought it was on purpose. You sent me a

nice message. You congratulated me on my entrance to LMU. I am going places, living my dreams.

I reply with a knotted stomach that it was a mistake. I tell you I don't mean you ill, but I can't talk to you. I say "yet," but I might mean "ever again." I ask you to stop tagging me in Facebook posts—that it hurts me to see them and see how you talk about me. You reply to me passive aggressively. You say you didn't know that's how Facebook tagging worked. I know you're lying.

I am on Facebook and I see your status:

 **Dena Ra** [redacted] 🥺 feeling emotional
24 September at 20:18 · 🌐

Drinking alone. But it's ok



I stare at it for a long time. The comments are full of sympathy and concern for you. For a moment I feel that way too.

I imagine you alone at a table, miserable and unable to understand why any of this has happened.

Life was cruel to you. Your father died a pillar in the community while he terrorized you every night. You, more than your siblings, were forced to deal with him. Your mother was a cold woman even in your own dotting depiction of her. You say she taught you how to be strong, but I think you know that isn't what you are or what she was either. That would be enough suffering for a

lifetime, but it was only the spring of your anguish. You eloped with my father because your parents didn't support the union, and you were young. You were degraded, abused, and terrorized.

I understand our disconnect—my birth made your marriage to him real and somehow more permanent. Even if you desperately wanted to be a mother, you didn't want to be one to his children—something you discovered too late. The idea of a child was what completed you. I—a real child—only ripped you further asunder. Independent, willful, and “too clever for my own good,” I was the handful you didn't need, further complicating a poisonous marriage to a dangerous man. Havi would not carry the same crystallizing baggage.

Maybe if I called you, I could cheer you up.

But then I blink, and the inclination leaves.

While I sympathize with you and your pain, so much of it so similar to my own, you and I do not play the same parts. Whether you will ever understand it or not, in my story, you are an *agent* of my agony. While injustice happened to you, you *brought* it to me. You *guaranteed* it.

I know you are cold and mixed up and selfish and hungry and desperate and mean because of what happened to you—but *so am I*.

I close the computer, and turn on Futurama.

I don't feel bad for you.