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Splitting the Avocado: Short Fiction on Themes of Power, Gender, and the Hope of Change

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Splitting the Avocado:

Short Fiction on Themes of Power, Gender, and the Hope of Change

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English Departmental Honors 2016-2017

Messiah College

Advised by Dr. Matthew Roth

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Acknowledgements

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Lastly, to my parents, Michael and Suzanne, whose patience supports me in everything I do.

Reflection

When I wrote my application for departmental honors, I had no idea what this project was going to be about. I vaguely mentioned something about gender and the fact that I barely read female authors. “I hardly feel this absence,” I wrote, “It seems normal.”

So I started with a spirit of inquiry – wondering, after submerging myself in female authors and theory and free-writing about any topic related to my gender that came to mind – would I start to feel something?

I’m surprised now that my proposal was accepted, but glad, because along the way I discovered what my project was actually about. In another class I’m taking right now, American Women’s Writing, we read theorist Judith Fetterly who suggested that women who read fiction have read so many men that that’s how they see the world, as a man would, and they hardly feel the absence.

Being a woman who writes about life then, whatever that might mean, is what this project is about, because in that way this male seeing of the world is not silenced but rather transformed by the other side of a conversation that has always been one-sided. I read that and thought, wow, I’m doing something political, something revolutionary, something that’s part of a bigger legacy of women completely revolutionizing traditional discourse!

But as I look over the stories I’ve written, I find something very different. I find something intensely personal, even private, in my own relation to gender. I thought I hardly noticed my relationship to femininity, but as I wrote, I uncovered by own deepest fear of my inadequacy of even being part of this gender as well as my most fragile hopes about being loved despite these fears that have so long laid submerged in my Hemingway-Joyce-Melville soaked brain. I found a kind of child-like uncertainty that we can all relate to about whether or not we

are capable to fulfill the roles that may or may not be set before us as well as a simple yearning for love, no matter what.

In addition to my personal revelations, I also discovered that, as a writer, who I read matters. The reading lists I create for myself relate to justice – who do I include? Who do I exclude? How does that relate to the injustices perpetuated in the culture I live in at large? I discovered that being a writer and a reader relates deeply to the questions of our time – a lesson I will carry with me as I leave college and must design my own private learning.

Laura

Two women lie on the floor, facing each other. One is about forty-five, the other nearly ten years younger. They both have brown hair, a certain roundness to the breasts and hips, and similar heights – they could be sisters. Their bodies form a kind of heart shape on the floor, butts out, heads bowed together. They lie like this on the carpeted floor of a master bedroom. The window is open and a summer breeze plays with the edges of the blue bedspread and the fringes of hair around the women's faces. It is four o'clock in the afternoon, and one of the women, the older one, is dead.

The woman who is not dead is Jamie. She is silently crying while she stares at the dead woman's face: chapped lips, crows' feet wrinkles, and smile lines pressed against the beige carpet. Jamie sees a crusty brown halo, emanating from the dead woman's hip in a wide circle. Laura, the dead woman, has been lying there, in that bedroom, for less than a day. The dead woman fell from a six foot ladder while she was replacing a light, shattering her pelvis and re-cracking a hip that had just been replaced in a costly surgery. When Laura came to she was weak and dazed from her blood loss, and she soon fell asleep. As she slept, a gash on her crushed hip, opened by a carelessly placed box cutter, bled out. She had no husband anymore; both her children were at summer camp for three weeks – no one had been there to stuff gauze into the wound or keep Laura's swollen brain from lulling itself to sleep.

Jamie, who is still crying on the carpet, doesn't know any of that. She came to visit Laura, though she hardly knew her, because she thought Laura could help her. Now, lying there, Jamie can't help but raise her hand to the wrinkled cheek and stroke it, press her own forehead into the cold one as she sobs, and feel for herself the claustrophobic sensation of dying alone.

Jamie Alexis Shelton is thirty-six, a server at Carraba's, and a drinker who loves whiskey but can only afford PBR. Because they were her grandfather's, Jamie's yellow-tinted sunglasses, the ones with the frames the size of chocolate chip cookies, stay with her wherever she goes. Her grandfather used to hold her on his lap, wearing those glasses and smoking packs of Reds, while he read her books about fishing in the weeks following her mother's death. Jamie has been left by every man who ever slept with her. She is a single mother, but not a good one, and has one son, Peter, twelve years old.

"What is Peter's favorite food?" Vicky, a mostly silent woman from the Philippines asks Jamie. It's the morning of Peter's twelfth birthday party and the morning before Jamie will lie crying on the carpet, facing a dead woman on a summer afternoon. Jamie knows she should make up an answer because any other mother would know; she should say something like hot dogs and macaroni and cheese or pizza or ants on a log, but Jamie keeps her eyes on the toes of her chunky no-slip serving shoes and tells the truth.

"I don't know."

"But when you pack him lunch, what does he like?"

"I don't know. I don't pack him lunch." Every woman in the kitchen is silent – and then they erupt. .

"I never let my kids eat that cafeteria shit," Maria hollers from the back room.

"I used to get up at 5 in the morning just to make sure Julia always had milk, apples, and a note packed with her sandwich," says Marissa.

"My mother used to make all five of us kids' breakfast and lunch before she went to bed every night. She had a basket for each kid in the fridge. We'd get egg sandwiches wrapped in parchment paper for breakfast, cold cuts on rye for lunch, sometimes just peanut butter on

Wonderbread during a bad week. My mother was a saint,” Dani says as she walks out the side door for a cigarette.

“So that’s why all of you are such babies, you had mothers who held your hand while you buttered your sandwiches,” Frank says. Jamie knows it is a bad sign when only that asshole of a cook is on her side.

“We didn’t have to butter our sandwiches at all, neither did our kids. That’s why mothers exist. They take care of you. If you weren’t so ugly maybe your mama would have done it for you, too,” Maria released a shrieking laugh, raising the hairs on the back of Jamie’s neck.

Jamie had never wanted to be a mother – had never liked kids. She enjoys sitting on her porch in to the cool of the night, smoking cigarette after cigarette in silence, watching the birds sit on the telephone wires, rustling occasionally or rising suddenly into the air with a squawk. She didn’t mind being left by man after man who felt her cruel and uncaring after she listened to their troubles in perfect detachment. She had been fired from her last job because she laughed when she saw her boss’s penis – cleaning the bathrooms at the end of the night, she had entered the men’s room without enough warning. Small and shriveled, it looked like it was falling from his hand into the urinal with the weight of some great dejection bringing it down. Jamie snorted, he took it personally, and so she had to find a new serving job in some equally crummy chain restaurant.

Jamie had always been this way. Some things were just funny to her: a substitute teacher who stuttered, a shy neighbor who had asked her to dinner while boasting an entire salad stuck in the cracks of his teeth, a little girl in the restaurant who had spilled lemonade on the front of her white pants.

“Oh come on, does Jamie really seem to you like the kind of person who would make a kid’s lunch?” a dishwasher named Martin, one of the only people Jamie liked at Carraba’s, says. “I saw her laugh at a seven-year-old once because the kid had a limp. She’s too cool for packing lunches.” Martin winks at Jamie, thinking he has come to her defense. The other people in the kitchen start agreeing and laughing, telling their own stories of Jamie’s caustic laughter. Jamie feels her face grow warm.

She truly cares for Peter, but it is hard to show it. She has loved him from the moment she knew he was alive – despite the pain, despite the inconvenience, despite pretending she wanted an abortion all along and just got “talked into” having him by the fat, Evangelical nurse. She used to sit out on the porch and just hold her stomach to feel him move when she was pregnant, reading fishing books out loud to him to keep her mind off cigarettes. She knew his name would be Peter, after his grandfather, when she first saw his heartbeat on the ultrasound. Peter had grown to be a quiet little boy since then, with thick, old man glasses and closely cropped brown hair. He read books about dinosaurs upside down on the couch and, unlike his father or Jamie’s other exes, never bothered her when she smoked alone on the back porch, cigarette after cigarette. He knew instinctively when she needed space. He laughed at her jokes and her impressions “Carraba’s cows”, as she called them. He would snuggle with her on the couch when they watched Jurassic Park or Keeping up with the Kardashians, a warm little boy with soft skin who drooled on her in his sleep.

Peter didn’t care that she didn’t know his favorite food, but he did care when she forgot to pick him up from school or refused to let his friends come over. He did care when she made a nasty comment to another mother about her son’s haircut. Jamie could see the worry in his quiet

eyes – and she could see that ugly smoothness inside herself reflected in his soft pupils, radiating back at her.

Everyone else in the restaurant eventually moves on with their work and forgets about Jamie, but Maria still blabbers while Jamie tunes her out, focused on getting her work station in order and cleaning food scraps from the counters, blissfully apathetic, but Jamie can't help but hear when Maria finally turns to her and says, "You need Laura."

Laura: the patron saint of Carraba's. Jamie had met her once at a Christmas party and was infatuated with her, as everyone seemed to be. Laura was a cynical, foul mouthed manager who had worked at the restaurant since it started seven years ago. She was plagued by endless health problems – a thyroid disorder that made her gain weight unpredictably, recurring shingles that gave her painful and flaking skin, a genetic disease that made her bones break easily – but never complained; she lived forty-five minutes away, but was never late; she had two jobs, but never missed a day of work. Laura had peed outside the back door once; Laura had pretended to give a hand job to the hose they used to rinse down the delivery truck; Laura had called Frank a little bitch once in front of everyone. One time a man grabbed a young girl's ass who was working as a hostess over the summer, and Laura slapped the man, threatened him with a lawsuit, and comforted the crying girl before anyone else even had a chance to flinch.

If Laura still worked at the restaurant, Jamie might have gone to Laura herself and found some roundabout way to ask for advice or guidance. But Laura wasn't at Carraba's anymore. Laura's bones, always brittle because of her condition, had gotten worse. Six months ago, she had been at work and tripped on a fold in the carpet; she broke her knee cap. She stood up and fell onto a side table because of the sudden pain; she broke a rib. Her hip splintered on her

driveway when she fell over trying to get out of the car. Now she was at home, wrapped in bandages, suffering, trying new medications and surgery.

“What do you mean,” Jamie replies to Maria’s suggestion.

Everyone knew how Laura had helped Maria, saved her from a depressive state worse than death. Even those not there to see the transformation, like Jamie, had heard the story ten thousand times – Maria had arrived to Carraba’s a voluntary mute, choked by her own sadness. Maria had come to wash dishes, never wanting to whisper her own name or smile at a customer, but Laura had broken down Maria’s dead fish silence with her bawdy jokes and steady reassurance, re-building Maria into the vulgar but confident, capable woman she was today.

“She was like a mother to me,” Maria repeats. Everyone has heard this litany a thousand times. “I think you need that.” Jamie blows the fringe of her hair out of her eyes as she picked up plates, balancing them on her inner elbows and wrists.

“I mean it. Laura could really help you.”

“Grab this door for me, would you?” Jamie asks, walking to her tables bearing gifts of mashed potatoes and chicken.

On her way home, Jamie picks up a case of PBR because Peter’s party is that night. Five middle school boys are going to be crowded onto their family room floor, bursting the seams of Jamie’s small duplex with their shouts and dirty hands. But Peter was determined that this year is going to be the first year he gets a real birthday party. Since it is also the year he had to get braces and his father stopped calling him on the phone, Jamie couldn’t say no – there was that tenderness that wouldn’t let her.

The reality of hosting all those other boys though, who were not Peters, makes her depressed and nervous, so she pauses in the garage when she gets home, chugging a tasteless beer before entering the kitchen.

Peter's friends arrive and drop their sacks and silky sleeping bags on the family room floor in chaotic heaps before scurrying up the stairs like long legged spiders. Jamie starts kicking her way through their things, lining them neatly on the carpet, spreading the bags in straight rows – trying to make it all fit. Peter lags behind his friends and gives her a quick hug. She wants to hold him there, but the shouts of the other boys pull him away.

“Thank you,” he whispers, and then he too runs up the stairs.

Jamie gets another PBR can to keep her company as she frosts the cake. The taste of the beer does not mix well with the teeth-cramping sweetness of the frosting she licks off her fingers. She sets out the plastic plates and paper cups on the table just as the doorbell rings. The boys stomp down the stairs as she opens the cardboard tops of each pizza revealing cheese; meats; curling vegetables. The pooling grease turns her stomach.

Jamie goes out to the garage to avoid their slobbery pizza chewing and to soothe her nausea with a cigarette and a beer. She watches the smoke wind around her fingers, wincing at each shout radiating from the kitchen.

When she opens the door, she finds one of the boys standing on the kitchen table, swatting at a fly that had landed on the light fixture. The other boys are all gathered in the family room, running and sliding on the sleeping bags. The sound of Jamie slamming the door scares the boy on the table, who begins to slip on a plastic plate underneath his right foot. Jamie offers him a steady hand just as he is about to face plant, the sheen of pizza oil making his grubby fingers slick.

“Thanks,” his voice sounds light-hearted as he jumps off the table and runs to join the others.

“Next time don’t be so goddamn stupid,” Jamie wants him to know he’s done something wrong, something stupid, something only an annoying kid would do. Peter glances up at Jamie with a nervous look.

The boys are now congregated around the TV, playing Xbox – some kind of game with monster trucks and loud, percussion-heavy music. Part of the game seems to be insulting whoever you are beating. Jamie grabs a beer and sits on the couch to observe.

“My brother says he’d never date your sister, her mouth’s so full of metal,” one boy observes, smashing another kid’s truck against the side of the track. Jamie thinks this is funny and laughs, harshly. They turn and stare at her, surprise in their eyes. Jamie laughs again. They start laughing, too, uneasily at first but then louder, proud of themselves for having made a mother laugh. Jamie starts to enjoy herself, feeling pleasantly expanded by the beer and even affectionate toward these little boys and their petty cruelties.

Metal mouth’s brother comes in dead last, lapped by his insulter. “How does it feel to have a sister no one else will date?” the insulter says. Jamie feels joyous and light-hearted. “Must suck having a sister who looks like an Avengers villain,” she adds. They all laugh harder, some clutching their sides as they roll, messing up the slippery sides of the sleeping bags. The other boy doesn’t laugh. Peter looks at Jamie and says, “Mom.”

“You would know, wouldn’t you Peter?” Jamie asks.

“Know what?”

“Braces!” the other boys shout.

“And you even got different colors, so it looks like you’re missing teeth,” Jamie chuckles. Peter’s braces did look comical – he had chosen black and white rubber bands to overlay the wires. Every time he smiled or pulled his lips above the metal, the bands checkerboarded his teeth with black gaps, as if every other tooth had been erased. Jamie had laughed with the receptionist about it before Peter shyly walked to her from the orthodontic chair, self-conscious about the machinery thickening his smile.

One of the other boys gasps between giggles, “that’s so true.” Jamie knows vaguely that they aren’t adult laughing, that they are just children caught in a storm of silliness. But she is still enjoying herself, savoring the blustery, open-air feeling she receives from insulting others. She swaggers, picking up cardboard boxes in the kitchen and bringing them to the garage, opening a feel-good beer, chugging it, warm and self-satisfied. Maybe Peter should have friends over more often. She saunters back in.

Peter sits cross-legged, slightly separate from the rest of the group. His head is in his hands, his cheeks smooshed upward, and his eyes are on his shins. The back of his neck is red and sweaty.

Jamie sits next him on the floor, placing a hand on his back. “Are you okay?” She thinks she has whispered, but the boys glance at them and then hurriedly back to the video game. Peter doesn’t answer. She tries rubbing his back, but he shifts away from her. Jamie looks down. Her eyes fall onto his open lap, and she sees a halo of dark navy blue on his thighs about five shades darker than the hue of his jeans.

“You spilled your soda?” there was annoyance in Jamie’s voice. His silence nettles her.

“I told you not to bring any drinks in here,” she says a little louder. “Where’s the rest of it, Peter?” He pushes his face farther into his hands until his fingers cover his ears. “Where’s the rest of it, Peter?”

He stands up then, suddenly. His skinny body quivers. With his small hands he holds the edges of his pants out from his thighs, keeping the fabric off his crotch. In a flash, Jamie realizes what has happened. When Jamie asked the doctor about this, she was told it was something he would outgrow, something that was normal for nervous children, and it was something that was absolutely never acknowledged until he had taken a bath and changed his clothes. Peter looks at her, his eyes solid and glossy.

“Oh my god, did you wet yourself?” one of the other boys asks, with a mean little chuckle.

Peter stands alone in the middle of the room with his pants held out like a skirt. The other boys’ heads start turning, too curious to stay focused on the video game. They whisper under their breath, nudging each other. Drops of sweat grow on Peter’s upper lip, his pink face turned to his mother. Jamie knows she should make something up about a spilled soda or drink or a leaky pipe in the ceiling.

She lets out a snort.

The boys clamor loudly, laughing, exclaiming, and barking crude, pointed questions as Peter silently walks from the room, still holding his pants outstretched. Jamie spots the trembles of his legs as he walks. Seconds later, she hears the sound of water hitting the bottom of the tub. Jamie follows him upstairs and stops outside the bathroom door, listening to the water run. She wants to open the door, but the thought makes her nauseous and shaky, so she goes out for a cigarette. Jamie stays in the garage all night, drinking and smoking. She doesn’t know what the

other boys, or Peter, do until sunrise. She can't move from the garage, can't go back inside and risk having to look anyone in the eye. She can't risk getting sober, either – as if the dimness of it all can protect her from what she has done.

Early the next day, Jamie looks Laura up on the staff website, sends a cautiously polite email first, something about advice and coffee – and then another, more insistent one, riddled with typos from her sloppy hands. The sound of mothers' voices comes and goes, emptying the duplex and sending a hush through the house. Peter goes to his room and shuts the door, forcefully hardening the molecules between them. His room is five steps away, but Jamie cannot make them.

She leaves three voice mails on Laura's phone.

“You need Laura,” Maria's voice echoes in Jamie's head, rolling its thunderous possibilities through her brain. Jamie has missed out so far on Laura's healing capabilities, but Jamie has no doubt now that this is what she needs. She needs the same kind of miracle that resurrected Maria. She needs a woman to guide her, to show her the way, to crack her out of her dead fish cruelty. Maria said Laura could be a mother to Jamie, but maybe Laura could make Jamie a mother.

Jamie sends another email and two voice mails.

Jamie's hangover headache pounds in the silence that starts in Peter's room and moves through the whole house. No matter where she moves, she is uncomfortably aware of his presence, like a crumb fallen and chafing inside of her bra. Peter is disappearing, growing faint. She knows he will leave her like her mother and grandfather and her dozen or so exes left her. The thought makes Jamie crazy enough to drive to a strange woman's house, ring an unfamiliar,

brass filigreed doorbell, crack open an unlocked door, walk through several silent rooms, and lie crying next to a corpse.

Tomorrow, Jamie will return to work and receive a lecture for not showing up for a shift, and she will look the same to everyone at Carraba's and everything will feel the same. But for now, Jamie lies there, facing Laura, staring into the face of her last chance. She hugs herself into Laura's chest, sobbing against the dead woman's softness. Never again will there be someone like Laura, someone so ready to share a beer or lend a hand. Never again will there be someone so perfectly suited to save Jamie, someone who garners both her affection and her respect. Jamie cries because Laura is dead.

But she also cries because her mother is dead, because her grandfather is gone, because she has never found a man who would stay with her and love her longer than a year. She cries because her only hope is that someday, Peter - who is better and braver and stronger than her in every way- will find some slow way to forgive her; will eventually trust her again enough to rest without fear against her while he sleeps, drooling gently; will go to see some therapist in college who will find a way to explain to him that Jamie was not a good mother but maybe she tried her best; will conjure some miracle of love and hope that Jamie couldn't even dream of. Jamie cries because she never knew before that she would rather cut out her cigarette-stained, alcohol-numb tongue than laugh at her son.

The death of Laura will hit Carraba's with soul-darkening vibrations. A palpable despair will fill the back room for a week, as if that shithead cook set the stove on fire again and the smoke-cloud refused to leave. In time, though, the bickering peanut gallery will begin to grind its conversational gears again, speculating on the manner of Laura's death (the obituary speaks only of an "untimely passing," and none of the staff are close enough with the distant ex-husband who

comes to collect the two grief-drenched boys). They will re-enact possible scenarios, jostling each other for hyperbolic drama, a few seconds of being Laura.

“What if, what if someone robbed her at gunpoint?” Frank will ask, spit flying out of his excited mouth. And then mime punching and shooting and violent explosions.

“And she just refused to hand him her cash!” He will pull his hat down below his eyes, pretending to aim a gun. He becomes Laura again when he pulls the hat up, brave and courageous against attempted robbery, saying no. And then he’s the hat man, saying “well, you just don’t know what’s good for you” and then Laura again, sprawled out on the floor, hands clutched above her chest.

And then Maria will jump in – “I bet it was alcohol poisoning! I bet Laura was just partying too hard, I bet she didn’t even care.” She will act taking shots off the counter. She might climb unsteadily onto a stool and stand, waving her hands above her head. “I bet she was the life of the party that night,” her raspy voice letting out a loud, hard cackle. “Wait no, I bet I know what it was! I bet she was going eighty miles per hour down the road and the cops tried to get her and she just kept driving man, you know! I know Laura, she would never quit.” The stool becomes a car being ridden into a fiery inferno as Maria tilts an imaginary steering wheel up and down at impossible angles. “Or maybe she was going rock climbing or something, and a big gust of wind came over and just knocked her right off the side.” Maria will end in a coughing heap against the linoleum.

Vicky will cut Maria off in what could have been a never ending tirade of possibilities: “No. I bet it was suicide. I bet she took pills and fell asleep.” Even Vicky will play her part, kneeling down below the counter, pillowing her head in her hands, eyelids closing softly. Her

worn lips, practically gray with age, dead as two lines on a page, will part slightly. “Too bold for this world,” Jamie might be able to hear her say, soft as a breath.

“No, no, no!” Maria will cry. “You don’t know anything Vicky! She was too strong for that. I bet it was...”

Jamie will be conspicuously silent. She wishes that becoming Laura was as simple as reenacting some mysterious death, wishes that it was that easy to be transfigured. Jamie will watch her coworkers imitating Laura and stare down the long corridor of her days. Something is rising inside of her, a storm unlike any other, threatening obliteration.

Meanwhile, Maria’s voice will go on incessantly as the staff acts out their stories. Each one ends the same way: warm cheek pressed against the dirty floor, still body spread out, soundless as the unlocked bedroom door Jamie was too afraid to open when she paused in front of it, car keys in hand, before fleeing to beg sainted, crumbling bones for a way to silence her laughter.

Oranges

Sunday Afternoon, November 9th, 2025.

Even cutting a cucumber was horrific. The mottled skin stretched tight across her right hand; she winced. She slid the knife in with great effort, cutting the long vegetable down bit by bit. Eventually, the cucumber was gone, replaced by a stack of disks. Instead of using her problematic right hand again, she used her left to grab great chunks of the watery circles and place them in the bottom of a wooden bowl. She had pulled the garbage can over earlier, so now with little struggle she threw away the ends and the bruised bits she had carefully avoided.

The avocado was harder; its soft flesh made her take greater pains to stop her spastic right hand from smashing the green fruit into a mushy puddle. She slowly circumcised the pit with her knife, dividing the avocado into equal halves. With a spinning motion that pulled a grunt from her disfigured lips – they said that might happen: sudden, shooting pain – she split the thing in two. With a spoon she pulled the pit out from the flesh, then the flesh out from the skin. With disjointed movements she watched her hand as if it were not her own, as if it were a tired goblin's hand twisting uneven chunks of sausage, as it cut the avocado into misshapen clumps. It was a relief to allow her left hand to fondle these softened pieces, grabbing them into the bowl. Her hands were shaking still from the electricity of the moment of rotating the avocado, so she decided to add the lemon juice, the salt and pepper, the olive oil next.

She took her time, luxuriating in the easiness of pouring from small glass bottles. She knew she should have bought the easy cherry tomatoes; what came next was inevitable, really, if she had thought through the exhaustion of so much chopping, dicing, destruction; the

shaky knife that slipped so easily on the tighter tomato skin, it rushed against her own hand like an ice skater scoring an uneven rink.

Honestly, it felt clean and easy compared to the explosion that had taken the skin off her right side, clumsily peeling extra skin. Mangoes were cut like that – the skin too thick to be taken off smoothly – instead, slightly hacked. Knives were made to slip between skin and meat, unlike the brute force of that hot impact. She regretted cursing after the incision. The cry was immediately taken up and muffled by the sound of the walls breathing, the couch cushions sitting, the pipes gurgling, the upstairs clock steadily counting.

She laid a napkin to stop the drops of blood that had already splattered against the cut cucumber and avocado, mixing itself into the settling juices: the illusion of tomato. All her work gone to waste.

She walked to the bathroom, bloody hand held uselessly, and retrieved band aids and first aid cream from the cabinet above the toilet. The napkin was tie dyed explosions of pink and red, changing before her eyes into a blossoming poppy. She crumpled it with difficulty and flushed it down the toilet, getting red on the clean white of the bowl. She'd take care of that later. She smeared the cream onto her hand indiscriminately, recognizing the uselessness of even trying to aim. Mushed enough, it got into the wound enough to burn. She spread the bandage over the cut, a big rectangular one, too big for the chop, but perfect for her little inaccuracies. She rinsed off the blood in the sink, mesmerized temporarily by the seamless flow of the water. She wrapped her hand in a towel and released it, partially dry. She glanced meaninglessly into the mirror, mind dull with the aftershock of the pain, into the mangled dog vomit face and past into the long cool corridors of emptiness, curtains billowing with the spiced autumn air, white chairs facing

each other in conversation, the unlit television pondering the hidden shows and movies beneath its closed eyes, sweet bedrooms groomed with daily care.

It was only a little bit of blood – the cucumber salad was probably fine to eat. She walked back into the kitchen to assess the damage done on the cucumber salad. She still had a bowl of oranges on the counter; the big mirror that used to hang opposite the bar stools was gone now. Everything else looked exactly the same as it had nine years ago. What had changed really?

She peered into the bowl: still edible. A tinge of red here and there, but it had become quickly diluted by the lemon juice and watery cucumber. It was a comfort not to have the mirror staring at her as she used a fork to eat her tomato-less salad, seasoned with invisible blood. Eating it after everything is the kind of thing that would have made her feel embarrassed, at one time. She let the red smear on the cutting board sit while she ate.

The dirty dishes looked strange in the otherwise spotless kitchen. Evening was coming on. The whole ordeal had taken her over two hours. She was still shaking slightly. The graying light hit everything in the kitchen and touched it with a kind of permanence, making her mess look like some kind of museum exhibit. She knew she should wash the dishes; there was nothing worse than coming downstairs in the morning to face the grimy, crusty remains of something she had eaten yesterday. It only made it harder for her shriveled hand to scrub everything clean. Avocado was like that, too, it stuck to things and wouldn't let go. She had forgotten to get her mail yesterday – maybe the walk out to the mailbox would give her enough energy to clean. All of her windows were open, so she knew the temperature was going to be a soothing 60 degrees. But still, there was a fresh quality in the air that the windows couldn't let in. She shut the door on the mess inside and strode into the autumn evening.

It had been sunny that day, and the sun was pitched at the horizon in that blinding autumn sharpness. It struck her harshly. The air was slightly cooler than she had expected, as well. Walking was fairly simple, now, after all the months of therapy. She was lucky, the burns hadn't reached down to her feet, melting them into unusable pebbles. The muscles in her right thigh and calf had been gnawed, she would never run again, sure, but at least she didn't have to buy those horrible shoes that came in sickening whites and grays and were repulsively squishy. At least she didn't have to wear those.

Walking down her driveway was pleasant. She had a big yard; the driveway was about 300 feet long. The front and sides of her yard were held in snugly with a tall hedge; she had installed it after everything changed. The checks helped with things like this – little things to keep her safe. And the hedge had definitely helped, though she still felt apprehensive whenever she drew towards the opening at the end of the drive, the place where the mailbox stood. Its tarnished handle gleamed in the late-fall sun. It was good she had remembered to get the mail; there was a check in there she had forgotten to reclaim. It wouldn't be right to let it sit there all night. She pulled out a thick wad of mail from her red tin mailbox. All the usual fliers – one that suggested that this was the apocalypse Jesus had predicted, another claiming that acting now could get her a full stocked food bunker underneath her house for the low price of \$150,000, a couple newspapers. She barely glanced at the headlines – they were all about ocean acidity levels, the mass extinction of flowering plants, strained borders between states fighting for chemical dumping rights. Not until the very bottom envelope did she find her check. Her stomach still lurched, after all these years, at the sight of the name, *UNITED STATES PLASTICS*,

stamped in blue ink. It instantly brought her back to the bright flame, the months in the hospital, the explosion barely lived through.

It had been some disgruntled employee, she still didn't know who. Cuts at the plant had forced them into longer and longer hours, and apparently he couldn't feed his family. At least, that's what one co-worker said. Another claimed his wife was cheating on him and it just made him go crazy. A third said he didn't even have a family, and that's what drove him to it – all the loneliness. Whatever the cause, he happened to bring in a grubby package with a ticking timer the day she was there for a presentation. At least the money was good. She sighed, passing her good hand over her eyes as if she could wipe out the memory of all that heat.

It was careless of her, to stand so long like that at the end of the driveway. It was her fault, really, she should have turned as soon as she had grabbed everything with her good hand and walked back into the safety. But she didn't.

The whirr of the bike pedals approached so fast that she didn't notice the sound until they were upon her: a whole little gang of them. Baseball caps ajar, bare feet dangling over the bike seats, screeching like little monkeys. One of the older boys even touts a cigarette dangling from his chapped lips. For a second, she forgot herself. There was something pleasant about seeing them buzz around her: their liveliness, the smooth curves of their thighs tight in their middle school jeans. She smiled to herself. It was beautiful, the summer evening, the boys passing her like ripe apples falling from some crisp tree, the fresh air connecting them all.

“What the fuck is wrong with your face, bitch?” cigarette called to her. They all laughed and kept moving, disappearing down into the cul-de-sac. She turned back up the driveway. On her walk back into the house, her mangled hand twitched with some spasms on pain. Back inside, the messy kitchen stared at her blankly as she closed the window over the sink.

Friday, July 4th, 2015

Jamie held her close against him as they rose in the helicopter. The pilot looked back at them and smiled; they were an attractive couple. Jamie's perfectly coiled blonde hair swirled in her face. His smooth skin rested against her shoulders, bare as they were in a silk tank top. He absent-mindedly kissed her forehead.

They rose slowly, unsteadily, rocking in the air as the blades of the helicopter sank their teeth into the air. Something seemed to catch and then they rose more quickly, angled into the wind. Out of the window, she could see the city slowly fall away beneath them. The bay and ocean grew small, until there were no more texture left in any of the landscape – only lines. The line of the beach, the small lines of white waves, the clean, straight docks. The bright lines of windows on the buildings.

Jamie had bought her this trip. They had spent the night before in his bed, laughing, making love. It was one of their best nights. They had more stamina, and something more like affection, on that night than they had ever had before. Part of it was the prospect of this, this promised date, the rising together in the treacherous air with the faintest hint of danger.

For an hour they rode over the Boston Harbor, circumventing the city and then heading out over the sea for a little detour. It was easy to imagine the wind taking them further out until they were lost, maybe bearing them down, close enough to the water that they could be battered by an ambitious wave. It made her skin shiver. She looked up at Jamie and smiled, thanked him for taking her. "This is thrilling," she shouted over the beat of the blades. He agreed.

She felt a vague but intense wave of relief once her feet hit the tarmac of the landing pad again. It gave her even more energy once they were back between his sheets.

Thursday evening, January 11th, 2017.

“What the fuck is wrong with her face?” She heard a man’s voice. She kept her eyes shut, she didn’t want to know what his smooth countenance looked like.

“She’s conscious right now, she can probably hear you,” a woman responded. The woman bent next to the bed, taking a pulse, straightening covers. It was still too much effort to open her eyes.

“My name is Laura, I’ll be taking care of you,” the woman’s voice said as she tucked. She felt Laura pick up her wrist gently on her ugly, mangled hand, massaging it gently from wrist to inner elbow. She realized that her fist had been cramped and clenched. As Laura massaged, she felt the muscles slowly uncurl and relax. They hurt horribly when they were pressed on, but a minute later all the pain evaporated, like steam coming off the sidewalk after rain. A needle was pressed into her arm. Machines beeped.

“Do you remember what happened?” Laura asked.

“Yes,” she said.

Of course she remembered. The feeling of everyone’s eyes on the walk to the beach, burning her already angry, inflamed skin with stares. Or the others, who turned away pointedly, glancing around her feet, maneuvering complicated figure eights on the ground as they looked anywhere but at her. She wore a long blazer that she own. It was navy blue and slightly saggy, with large pockets. It ended around mid-thigh, too casual and floppy to wear to presentations. The large pockets worked nicely though. She had shoved a ton of batteries in them, filling them until they were bulging and lumpy.

She sat by the ocean for a long time before she walked in, measuring the steady beats of the water against her feet. It was cold. She didn't like that. She had been expecting cold beach water, but it made it harder to muster up the courage.

It was a secluded section of the beach: quiet, with only the sound of the breeze rushing past her indifferently, the thud of the implacable waves. Sand had found its way into the grooves of her hand, the puckerings along the mutilated wrist. It chafed against the sensitive skin. She absent mindedly played with cigarette butts as she stared into the water, counting each piece of trash that floated by: the rings of a six pack, a deflated beach ball, a used condom. The batteries clacked against her thighs. The deep solitude of it all almost made her reconsider.

The day was gray, and the water wasn't providing any reflections. But there in the sand, next to her, of course was half of some disregarded compact mirror.

She was just as familiar with her face as she had been, before, but somehow it always came as a surprise. The pink buckling where she used to have an eyebrow. The taught, shiny red spider web along her jawline. The lax crater underneath her cheekbone that sank into a kind of pooling. It spread languidly down the side of her neck, her collarbone, like a mold. It wasn't a neat break, either, between the two sides of her face. There were little spots of spillage, like lava, running down the other side of her nose, tainting the untouched skin. Most of her once-plump mouth looked like it had been eaten by a mother. Her forehead too bore irregular reaching tendrils, flashing lightning streaks. Her toes had lost feeling from being submerged so long, but she was unsteady on her feet regardless. A shiver went up her spine as the water hit her inner thighs; her nipples; her ears. It reminded her of the ice bath they put her in after the explosion at the plastics factory.

"We'll be moving you to a clinic tomorrow," Laura said. "But for now, you just rest."

Sunday evening, November 9th, 2025

She deserved a bath after that. It would probably help her calm the shaking in her limbs, too. She either had enough energy for the dishes or a bath; this decided it.

Taking of her clothes was slow. The bathroom filled with the roar of the water against the tub floor, and steam rose in great lungfuls. When she glanced up, the mirror had been coated with a smooth slick of graceful water droplets: a shield. Her ears rang, adjusting to the silence, when she shut the water off. She slid into the water, sighing audibly, and sank. Her trembling slowed as she lowered herself, tucking her chin into the warmth and letting the soothing water bob against her lips and the bottom of her nostrils.

Her eyes closed.

Monday morning, August 2nd, 2016.

She had five minutes before she had to walk into the meeting. Her eyes locked on her reflection in the mirror – she knew exactly what she would find, but she was never sorry to see it again. Her grey blue eyes, smoky and large, perfectly lined in charcoal. Her full lips pursed in a hint of a smile she couldn't help. God, the sight of the smooth, soft curve of her cheek and neck were beautiful. Her eyebrows raised, her bangs glanced her dark brow. Her black blazer and pencil skirt hugged her chest and hips beautifully. The dark cherry silk tank top underneath sent beautiful hints through peeps in the blazer – top of the chest, top of the waist. Her best look. Her heels hit the floor with a satisfying percussion as she walked down the hallway and into the meeting.

Her eyes scanned the boardroom. The chairs were lined with men around a long, wooden table. She stared at her audience, paper clip men in thin, peeling suits, ready for her to blow them away. They were one mass of blinking eyes.

The boardroom was painted a professional gray. Each leather, swiveling chair stood tall, black, and attentive around the table. Each man was cut out from the setting around him, a blur of gray, blue, and black wool and silk. Brown brewed tea, black steaming coffee, musky Clive Christian, sharp and acrid Dolce & Gabbana: a thick atmosphere of rich and swooning scents hit her nose like cocaine. Each man held tight leather briefcases and glossy embossed folders. Senior business partners, management, good looking and athletic men in business suits, all wrapped around her perfect and manicured fingers from the first bright Powerpoint slide to Her snappy conclusion.

Doors were clicking around her and she felt everyone's eyes on her ass. Who needs any goddamn beach time with all that skin sagging sunshine when you can bask in sexual admiration?

She smiled.

Her heels tapped in syncopated time. She looked up at the chrome clock. There were still ten minutes until show time.

The office building she worked in was high and perfect. From the outside it was so clean: sharp in morning and evening sun. With a slight geometric slant to all the sides, it slid pleasingly onto the eye. Modern, fresh, and smelling of febreze, it was an American success story. The builders had run their hands over those perfectly constructed pillars, and the pleasure was almost masturbatory. The electricians had taken their cigarettes outside after perfectly dissecting and stitching the nervous system. The plumbers had pulled up their pants and put belts on for this

building, because this building was her building. Nothing secondhand, nothing scrimped. God, she hated cheapness. If anything sent a person to hell it was cutting coupons and sewing up pantyhose. And not that voodoo bull shit hell with all the fire, the real life hell of frayed nerves and collapsing marriages. With a little effort and confidence the world opened up, full of resources fresh and dripping and ready to be boxed, sold, and consumed.

It was so easy.

The clock plodded on. She never came early; she bided her time; she waited for demand. She pictured her life as herself eating oranges in the morning. Is there any fruit sexier than an orange? She loved that question, she could always see faces lighting up imaginatively. She slipped it into presentation whenever she could.

“Because, honestly, is there any fruit sexier than an orange?”

[Pause for a beat, dramatically, shift hips on heels and let their eyes and questions wash over her. She wondered how many of these businessmen would be clogging the toilets with paper toweled wads after this and it made her smile broader for the next part; the build-up; the foreplay]

“Experts now think that the fruit that started it all, that fruit in the Garden of Eden, that ultimate paradise of nakedness and animals and cornucopian vegetation, was an orange. The orange was the fruit that went beyond all of that perfection because it has just a hint of something more, something more passionate, deeper than even happiness. It’s no lemon and it’s no apple. You don’t cry over it and you don’t hand it to your Sunday school teacher, either. You eat it to get your pulse going. You eat it for a little sex appeal.

There's violence in all that juice and pulling, and think about those little tiny sinews that get ripped apart and bleed sweetness. Like sunshine dripping all over your hands. Like thigh muscles tensing and relaxing." [hip shift]

"You open up an orange and you bite with explosions and fireworks. It opens up to you if you pull on the pieces, and bursts all over your face if you aren't careful."

Every morning, she watched herself eat an orange in the big mirror that hung in her kitchen. She crossed her legs and let her calf muscles stretch and show. She admired the curves of her hips. She bit in and sucked, pulling at the pieces and enjoying the vitamins and sweetness. She was well rehearsed for morning-after's, looking over the coffee at a man while wearing his shirt. A lioness, ripping into an antelope haunch.

"Today, gentlemen, we are going to start a journey to turn your [insert whatever fruit might seem appropriate for the company. Small, homespun: clementine. Reliable, but stagnant: apple. Pathetic: lemon. She had lists for these analogies] into an orange."

It was really a beautiful introduction.

She worked in business management and truly transformed companies into oranges. It was all about presentation, presentation, presentation, she told her clients.

"If your billboard looks like what your son draws with his crayons, you can't expect to keep your lunch money past recess," She smiled wryly to remove the sting. She had minored in English and She liked playing these word games. Complex metaphors but so concrete, so tangible!

"And if you don't have a billboard, well, you probably didn't come to school with lunch money to begin with!" [Pause for slightly embarrassed laughter, launch visionary improvement speech].

All caffeinated, all prepared, in a leg and pencil skirt, with a presentation to give. God, life was good, god, she loved this outfit, god, if her mother could see her now. She followed the second hand until it told her it was ten o'clock. She turned on the overhead, curved her eyebrow, and spun to face her supplicants with a pointed smile. And then, and then there was just heat all over her face.

Sunday night, November 9th, 2025

She would have done the same thing if she were Jamie, there was no doubt about that. But she still sometimes checked her phone, absent mindedly, wondering if he had called. Of course it was unreasonable to expect a fuck buddy to hang on after she had become unfuckable. She wouldn't have done it for him. But there was something warm about Jamie, something tender. He would peel her oranges sometimes for her, before she had even waken up, and would leave them with tea on little plates on her nightstand. She had always rolled her eyes. But now she thought it was the kind of thing that might have suggested a secret love for her, a secret love that might still want to get coffee sometimes, at least. But he never called.

The empty house was completely gray when she left the yellow light of the bathroom. She should have left a light on somewhere, she hated walking out into this.

The act of getting dressed seemed like too much effort. She walked downstairs and into the living room without flinching at the mess and blood still left in the kitchen. She turned on the TV and lay down on the couch, shivering. She had left the windows open downstairs for too long. She wrapped the slightly moist towel more tightly around her shoulders as she crouched on the couch, clicking through the channels passively.

She was bored by the newscasters voice whose dull and monotonous tone droned about the months Washington state had left because of rising radium levels; the overflow of landfills

that had started a new trend of throwing trash anywhere, accompanied by the video footage of a brunette woman in a black trench coat wading through shin high garbage in New York City; the increase in accidents because of flying plastic bags getting caught on windshields. Her attention was momentarily caught by the mention of Boston Harbor – the image of batteries floated through her mind briefly – but it was only to mentioning the rising pollution levels, the death of a man infected with a super bacteria after falling into the Harbor on his Saturday evening walk. She changed the channel.

Some comedian blabbered on, voice slathered with self-aggrandizing annoyance, about how people complained when he talked about the “real” issues, that all they wanted was to be “entertained”. She changed with channel languidly, eyes starting to droop even though she was still shivering slightly in the cold moisture of her post-shower hair. She cycled through aimlessly, lazily, until she found something worth watching. It was bikini week on America’s Next Top Model – it was a rerun, but she liked that. The procession of smooth butts and breasts, one after the other, calmed her eyes.

She picked up her reading. It was the hundredth time she had reviewed her fifty page thick packet on WonderSkin©, the surgery the doctor had told her about the morning after the explosion. She had finally saved enough money and made the appointment. It always helped her fall asleep – the reassurance that something beautiful was coming, something more awe-inspiring and worshipful than even her original tigris of a face.

Diagram A showed the way that the burnt and mottled skin was peeled back from the bone of a human face, flayed in ragged but regular strips, pulled taut and pinned onto a surgical mat as it was slowly stripped and cut, pulled to the side again, and then cut again. The white glaring orb of the eyeball was exposed in full.

Diagram B showed the way that fresh skin was removed from a pig. It had to be still alive so the skin would be fresh, pliable, able to regenerate in its new host. Only the softest skin was used – beneath the neck, around the eyes, behind the ears. The diagram outlined the prime areas in thick dotted lines, red as the flesh of a blood orange. Then it showed a picture of the skin removed, the way the flaps were scraped of bristles but kept bloody and raw, ready to be grafted. There was no after picture of the pig, but the imagination could supply it easily enough – red tear marks around the eyes, red streaks running out from behind the ears, a red neck beard stretched down across the chest. All the dotted areas turned into open pits dribbling thick juices. The description said that the pig was gauzed after the surgery and left alone – in three months, it was ripe for the harvest once more. An individual pig could yield over 200 harvests in its lifetime.

Diagram C showed the patchwork peels being fitted together on the human face once more. Painstakingly sewn together, the mask could fit anyone, could be molded into any shape. Collagen and careful moisturizing erased the topographical scars in 4-12 months, depending on the extent of damage. Hers would probably take the full 12; she would need harvest from three and a half pigs once all was said and done. The eyeball became lidded in the multi-step picture, the cheek plumped and attached the bridge of the nose, the hairline next to the ear. A chin reappeared. Features took shape, molded into place.

She had everything ready – an outfit she had picked out a month ago hanging in the closet, a driver she knew from before and trusted to keep his eyes on the road, a private room reserved at an elite bistro in the city. Her eyes kept fluttering open as her heart raced with excitement – maybe after it all, Jamie; maybe after it all, helicopter rides over the bay; maybe, after it all, her job back. The steady hum of voices helped her settle down, and she fell softly to

sleep with her good hand curled next to her lips like a baby. She slept this way by default: good side up.

Her last thought as she fell asleep was that she was going to regret sleeping on wet hair when she looked in the mirror tomorrow.

Halloween

The masks hang on the hooks of the bedroom door, silently watching as eleven-year-old Jamie throws a temper tantrum. It had started when Jamie noticed that there were two masks, not one; two fairy dresses, not one. That was when Jamie realized that her mother must have invited someone else along despite Jamie's insistence on the fact that this was *her* night – her night, and no one else's.

The tantrum had escalated about twenty minutes ago when Jamie discovered that the girl her mother had invited was Laura – Laura, that awkward girl from math class who Jamie had never seen wearing a dress a day in her life, let alone a beautiful fairy princess costume like the one Jamie had picked out months ago from the thick JC Penny catalogue. Laura was always silent; Laura's hair was always unbrushed; Laura's backpack was a plain black sack with a few band pins stuck to it. Jamie always raised her hand first in class; Jamie wore her hair in intricate braids or soft, immaculate curls; Jamie's backpack was a clear plastic with rainbow sparkle accents. Jamie can't imagine anything worse than having to bring Laura along with her on Halloween – Jamie's favorite night, of all nights.

Jamie had a special routine for Halloween, and both her parents (usually) respected it. The month before Halloween, she started flipping through the costume magazines. She would circle about a dozen or so of her favorites in thick purple Sharpie; these were the eye-catchers. In order to be an eye-catcher, a costume had to be sparkly and brightly colored. Jamie also preferred her costumes to be magical in some way – something from a fairy tale, like Cinderella or a mermaid, for example. She would carefully cut the circled costumes out of the magazine once she had made it through the whole thing. These she then pasted onto a thicker paper, something

like construction paper or cardstock, and she would line up all the costumes, taping them to the bathroom mirror. This allowed her to contemplate her choices as she brushed her teeth or used the bathroom. As she decided against a costume – too plain, too ordinary, too like last year’s – she would rip it off the mirror and throw it into the trash. When she had narrowed it down to three (this year it was Belle from the Beauty and the Beast, the fairy costume, and a unicorn), Jamie would tell her mother it was time to go to the real store. There, Jamie would find the three costumes on the tacks and try them on. When she found the right one, she always knew immediately. Her mother would usually take her out to ice cream afterwards to celebrate the finding of the costume.

This year’s costume is especially nice. Jamie had narrowed her options down two weeks before Halloween and went to the department store with her mother on a windy and cold Saturday. Jamie had shivered in her corduroy jacket, so she pestered her mother into buying them two steamy hot chocolate to drink as they looked through the racks. Jamie didn’t even need to try the other two options on that year; after putting on the fairy costume, she felt decided immediately.

The weeks preceding Halloween Jamie had been obsessed with taking the costume out of the closet and laying it out on the bed. She loved straightening the edges, running her finger along the airy pink tulle, fingering the sparkling rhinestones sewed into the skirt. She would put the mask above the dress, her baby blue bedspread pushing up through the eyeholes, and place the wands next to the dress. She would lift up the hem of the skirt and place the waist of the tights inside, brushing the skirt back down over the waist band. This way, the tights appeared at the end of the skirt, falling down the side of the bed, as if there were real legs descending. Jamie

would place her white ballet flats underneath the pink tights, folding the feet into the shoes, as if the shoes were really being worn. Then she would stand back and admire the effect.

It was dazzling. Jamie loved the glittering mask, the pink dress, the way it all matched. Jamie loved imagining herself floating around the neighborhood in it, accepting candy graciously, patting little children on the head magnanimously with her magic wand. The other kids in her grade were going as Star Wars Jedis, scary clowns, or cats in low-cut skin tight body suits, fighting with their parents to let them leave the house in those horrible costumes. Jamie knew all the adults would love her above the rest in her adorable fairy costume – every smile of approval would be turned on her and her alone.

Except now Laura would be there, too. Dull, disinterested, black backpack Laura. Jamie rolls around on the bedroom floor, kicking her feet and screaming, forcing streams of tears out of her eyes. Jamie's mother yells, trying to explain that her father has a very important operation the next day, the one Jamie isn't supposed to tell other people about, and so Jamie's parents need some privacy. Jamie's mother tries to convince Jamie to get off the floor, to convince her it was logical to ask the other parents if they would be willing to have Jamie for the night. When Laura's parents offered, but said Laura didn't have a costume, it was their only option. Jamie's mother pleads with the screaming child, but Jamie is inconsolable. She continues her wailing even after the doorbell rings. Her mother leaves for a moment and returns with Laura, who is skulking, wearing ripped jeans and a black tank top. When Jamie sees Laura, she changes her cry, becoming more heartbroken and less enraged, sniffing and sobbing quietly. Laura goes to a corner of the room and sits down as Jamie's mother tries to whisper to Jamie to be polite. Jamie continues her wordless grief, slightly louder.

Jamie hears the garage door open. Jamie's mother leaves the room, and the sound of consulting parental voices can be heard downstairs. Jamie looks at Laura, sniffing. Laura stares at the floor.

"I don't want you here," Jamie says, which brings back the tears with a renewed vigor. Laura looks over at Jamie, her face blank. Then she looks back at the floor. Laura was the most boring girl Jamie had ever met, which she tells her father and mother once they enter the room.

Jamie's father sighs wearily. "If you'll just go nicely we'll buy you that thing you want."

"What thing?" Jamie asks, still sniffing.

"You know," her father says.

"What thing?" Jamie demands.

"What's it called?" he turns to his wife. "What's that thing? The Princess Fairy Doll House Galore?"

Jamie looks over at Laura, feeling slightly embarrassed. The other day in class, Jamie had claimed that The Princess Fairy Doll House Galore was so stupid and ugly that only blind five-year-olds would ever play with it. She had been feeling bitter about her father's reluctance to buy it for her. He was never like that before, but he had started saying things like she was "too old" and "had enough toys" lately. Laura still sits lifelessly, though Jamie thinks she sees a smirk on Laura's face now. Jamie flushes.

"Ok," she says quietly, and starts straightening out the skirt she had twisted in her rolling. She wipes a bit of snot away with the back of her hand. "Okay okay okay," she says as she pulled her tights up.

Jamie's mother shows Laura the matching fairy costume they had bought Laura, only in white, and how to get into it. It didn't seem like the kind of thing Laura would usually wear, so

Jamie is surprised that Laura doesn't object, doesn't argue or even make a face. If someone tried to force Jamie into Laura's clothes, Jamie would die before putting them on willingly. Jamie's parents leave the bedroom and close the door behind them, leaving Laura and Jamie alone.

Jamie lies on the bed, fiddling with the rhinestones as Laura slowly puts on her costume. Laura usually wears floppy shirts and thick denim that seem to levitate off of her actual skin, sheathing her in a kind of impenetrable bagginess. She peels off her clothes until she stands in the middle of the room in only a pair of green underpants with yellow polka dots. Laura's body draws Jamie's attention away from the rhinestones – something about Laura looks different to Jamie. Laura's chest looks softer and fatter; her butt has a bit of a rise to it. She looks good to Jamie, a body working towards something – much better than Jamie's own bare body, short and squat like a crayon with a small, bloated gut. Laura seems to notice Jamie's eyes. Without saying anything, Laura reaches out hurriedly for the white dress and begins to put it on.

When they are both dressed, Jamie realizes with a bit of rage that Laura looks much better than Jamie. Jamie looks like a pink balloon with sparkles on it; Laura looks like Tinkerbell.

“You better pull that skirt down or else my mother will say you're going to catch cold and then she'll give you my old squirrel costume to wear,” Jamie says. With more life than Jamie has ever seen Laura show before, Laura blushes a bright pink and starts pulling on her skirt, trying to bring it farther down her thigh. She keeps handfuls of the skirt clenched as they walk downstairs, stretching the tulle as far as it will go.

Downstairs, Jamie's parents both look tired. Jamie's father is leaning against a counter, his hand pressed to his forehead. He blows his nose, and Jamie realizes that he has been crying. Jamie's mother slowly rubs his back. Jamie is embarrassed by the scene and doesn't want Laura

to go to school next Monday telling everyone about how Jamie Fairfield's dad is a crybaby; she quickly says, "can we go already?" In five minutes, the four of them are walking out into the neighborhood.

The night air is cool and smells faintly of rotting pumpkins. The sky is just starting to get a purple edge of darkness; the shouts of children and the sound of doorbells ring out. Jamie takes a deep breath, a slight quiver in her chest as there often was after she has had a big cry. Halloween was going to be different than she had planned it, but already the way the light glimmers on her rhinestones and the plastic star at the end of her wand makes her heart swell with gladness.

At every house, they are exclaimed over, but of course Mrs. Peterson especially must hold them out on the porch, making them turn around so she can stare at their dresses. Jamie's parents smile indulgently on the lowest step while Laura and Jamie are center stage, blinking in the yellow, moth-ridden light. The gray wood floorboards creak under them as they shift their weight in discomfort.

"You girls are just the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," Mrs. Peterson says. Mrs. Peterson was an old neighbor, a neighbor Jamie's parents always had to remind her to be kind to. She was very sweet, provided cookies, and had a nice cat. She had short yellow hair, sagging wrinkles, and weak blue eyes; her blue eyes fill with admiration as she stares down at the two girls. Jamie enjoys showing off her costume, but Mrs. Peterson got boring pretty quickly.

"Thank you, Mrs. Peterson," Jamie says, hoping to leave, but Mrs. Peterson still hasn't given them their candy yet.

"And your wands! So sweet," Mrs. Peterson leans over to Jamie and places a hard fingertip onto Jamie's cheek. "Is this glitter? What a lovely idea!" Mrs. Peterson's voice had a

tendency to go up and down, warbling between shrill and shriller. She was so forcefully cheerful and appreciative that Jamie took a step back. Mrs. Peterson grabs a leaf of Jamie's skirt then, exclaiming over the pink tulle, saying what beautiful little girls they both were, explaining that they looked just like the little fairies she had in a book that they should come over and read sometime. Finally, she seemed to remember the candy.

The candy made Mrs. Peterson almost worth it. She always bought great, full size candy bars, almost the full length of the foot ruler that Jamie used in school, and gave them away generously. Everyone else on the block bought those "fun size chocolates" that took barely one bite to eat. Jamie always ate Mrs. Peterson's long candies first, savoring the triumph of another year's trick-or-treating with each mouthful. Smiling Mrs. Peterson reaches into her plastic pumpkin head and pulls out great handfuls of those long chocolates, dropping them into the girls' bags. They make a satisfying thud, rustling the other candies, providing a new pleasant weight and heft to the bags. Jamie looks over at Laura and gives her a knowing smirk, and Laura grins back. For a moment, Jamie feels conspiratorial and almost close with the other girl.

Jamie and Laura turn to leave but are stopped just as they are stepping off the stage-like porch by Mrs. Peterson's voice again.

"Wait! Wait! Girls, Charles absolutely has to see you," Mrs. Peterson said.

Charles was what Mrs. Peterson called Mr. Peterson. Mr. Peterson had frazzled grayish brown hair, a big beard, and a lazy eye. It never felt safe to pick a nose or squish a fly when Mr. Peterson was around – Jamie could never tell if she was being watched or not. He was quieter than Mrs. Peterson, but scarier. She was only boring; he was oddly menacing. Jamie had dreamed about his eye once – it had fallen out of his face and chased her around her empty school after hours.

Jamie looked to her parents, hoping that maybe they would tell Mrs. Peterson that they should keep walking, that is was nice seeing Mrs. Peterson as always but they should ready be going. Jamie's parents show no signs of budging, though. They relax against the handrails of the steps up to the porch again, talking to each other quietly. Jamie and Laura look at each other with despair and then turn back to face the green painted door. It feels like forever, standing there, waiting for Mrs. Peterson to open it again, this time with her lazy-eyed husband next to her. There is the sound of a bug hitting itself against a porchlight over and over again. A little gray moth climbs over Jamie's hand; she watches it without batting it away. Children laugh in the distance.

At last, the door opens wide. Mrs. Peterson is standing there with Mr. Peterson – he is dressed in faded jeans and a tan Old Navy sweatshirt. He has a Bud Light in his hand. Mrs. Peterson touches his shoulder as her shrill tones continue exclaiming over their beauty, their sweetness, how much they look like the little girls from the book, how the girls should all come over sometime and make brownies. Mrs. Peterson's wrinkles form a small jowl under her chin that is wiggling with her forceful cheeriness.

Mr. Peterson doesn't say a word. Although it is hard to tell for certain, Jamie feels positive for once about what he is looking at: Laura. One eye appears to be looking at Laura's right shoulder, the other one appears to rest on her neck. Jamie's parents still don't intervene even as the time stretches on interminably – Mrs. Peterson talking, Mr. Peterson staring with a crooked stare. His eyes seem to be each taking a thigh now. Laura looks at the planks of wood on the porch, the same red flush that had come over Laura in Jamie's bedroom when Jamie commented on her short skirt, comes over Laura now. Laura's hands tug at the tulle again. Jamie feels the same rage she felt before, looking down at her own square body and extended gut.

Jamie has never liked being looked at by Mr. Peterson, but suddenly she feels invisible and small next to Laura. She knows she isn't worth being looked at. She swats the moth off of her hand.

"You look very nice," Mr. Peterson says finally, only looking at Laura, and then shuts the door in the middle of one of Mrs. Peterson's sentence. The girls stumble off the porch, relieved to be set free.

The rest of their trip around the block is a sugar daze as evening slowly falls. The light in the neighborhood becomes a gray purple and the chill makes the girls sluggish. Jamie's anger still simmers, turned into a rough kind of irritation by the stomach-turning sweetness of the candy. Jamie takes her frustration out on Laura in many small ways: dashing in front of her to grab the best candy from one neighbor's bowl, "accidentally" stepping on her a hundred times, making fun of Laura's tangled hair. Laura never comments or responds, and Jamie wonders every time how somebody could be so boring.

Jamie's parents tell them at 8:30 it is time to go to Laura's house, where Jamie will be staying the night. They walk the few blocks to Laura's house while they eat their candy. Jamie has chocolate stuck to all of her fingers; Laura's is smacking a lollipop that has given her a bright red tongue and a halo of red around her lips.

Jamie has never slept over at anyone else's house before; she doesn't have any friends who would invite her. She is struck first by the way Laura's house smells strange and uncomfortable, a smell that Jamie has never smelled before. Laura's house is also dirty – limp piles of clothes in the hallway; used plates and cups left in the TV room; a ring of crusty brown circling the faucet in the bathroom. Jamie's house doesn't have a smell, and Jamie's mother cleans the whole house from top to bottom every Saturday. Jamie doesn't even know what the

crusty brown stuff should be, so when she uses the bathroom, she decides it's safer not to wash her hands. Laura's parents are nowhere to be seen.

Jamie sits uncomfortably on the TV room couch, trying to keep a safe distance between herself and the brown stain in the middle of the couch, while Laura changes the channels looking for cartoons. After a while, Jamie's sugar coma overpowers her discomfort. She relaxes into the couch and eats candy after candy from her bag. Eventually, they both fall asleep in front of the TV, neither one bothering to take off the costume.

Jamie wakes up to the sound of a slamming door. Laura is still asleep – she looks slightly sweaty. She was still sitting up when she fell asleep, so now she is slumped down, one hand by her side and slightly open, the other hand still holding a lollipop which looks like it might be stuck to the front of her dress. The skirt has hiked up her thighs until it just covers the top of them. Her chin has dropped onto her chest. She has even forgotten to take her mask off.

Someone is in the kitchen being noisy: breathing heavily, opening and closing the fridge, chomping on food, slurping. Something clatters loudly and sounds like it breaks. Jamie hears a man's voice say "Fuck!". Shoes walk around, making crunching sounds. The steps come closer, into the living room.

Someone who must be Laura's dad enters the room. He is tall, brown haired like Laura, in a flannel shirt, jeans, and work boots. He has a sandwich in one hand and bites it in great, wolfish motions, tenting his cheeks with food. He is illuminated by the moving light of the TV, taking on a kind of ghastly blueness. Jamie looks over at Laura, who is awake now. Her head is raised but she hasn't changed her position otherwise. Her eyes are wide open and stare at her father.

Laura's dad doesn't seem to notice the girls at first. He strides over to the TV, still eating his sandwich, making mushy noises with his lips and breathing audibly through his nose. He takes the remote from the top of the TV and starts flipping through the channels.

"Shit, shit, mega-shit," Laura's dad says as he changes. Jamie had only ever heard kids say those words before or people in movies, never her parents. He finally decides on a sports channel, turns from the TV, and sees them on the couch. Laura flinches under his eyes. He glances at Jamie, but doesn't seem to notice or care about her. It is Laura who consumes his attention. His sandwich is still raised in the air; he throws it on the ground.

"What the hell is wrong with you," he says, quieter than he was before. Laura's hands both move to her skirt, trying to pull it down. The lollipop sticks to the front. "I said, what the hell is wrong with you? Did you leave the house looking like that?" Laura's dad tells her to cut trying to pull her skirt down, that he can see exactly what's going on here. Laura's hands wrap around her shoulders, her head bowed. "You're such a little slut," he says. "God, if I ever knew eleven year old girls were such sluts I would never have had you." Jamie is frozen. Laura's dad stands in front of the TV, the light from it still shines around his outline, but his face and body are black and inscrutable. Someone in the game must have scored because the sound of a cheering crowd can be heard beneath his shouting. The smooshed sandwich lays at his feet, the bread slipped off the lettuce and turkey. When he tells Laura he always knew that her mother should have had an abortion, he steps on it for emphasis, leaving dirt and a big footprint in the bread. "Do you think you look fucking cute in that? You look like a fucking whore". Jamie hears someone in the kitchen, crunching over things as they walk, sweeping. Jamie thinks maybe the person will come in and stop Lara's dad from yelling, but after a few minutes the kitchen is silent again and he is still yelling. He yells until he walks over and rips Laura's mask off and slaps her

with it twice. He then seems to notice Jamie, who has been sitting on the couch the whole time. The light of the TV shines on half of his face – his eyes look strange to Jamie, like two glass marbles. He shakes his head a little and mumbles something about teaching her a lesson and then stumbles out of the room again. He almost trips and lands on the side of the doorframe, clutches it for a moment, and then continues. Laura hears him stomp up the stairs and slam a door. She hears his muffled voice continue for a while, which are followed by strange thumps.

Jamie looks over at Laura. Laura has pulled her legs up to her chest and is resting her forehead on her knees. Her skin looks blue all over from the TV, like one giant bruise. Jamie gets up off the couch and walks into the kitchen. She feels shaky. The clock on the stove says 2am. Jamie has never been awake past 11 before. She goes to the telephone on the wall and dials her parents' phone number.

Suddenly, Laura is in the kitchen. Jamie has the telephone against her ear and can hear the sound of ringing. Laura hisses "if you tell anyone, I'll kill you." Jamie tries to tell her to shut up, that she knows what she's doing. "I need to go home, now," Jamie says. Laura walks over to a drawer, opens it, and pulls out a knife. Her cheek is bleeding, her skirt is askew, crooked and wrinkled from being slept in. The lollipop still clings to the front of the tulle. "If you tell them, I'll kill you," Laura says.

Jamie has never been threatened before in her life. The blade feels cold against her neck; she instantly hangs up. She follows Laura back into the TV room, feeling dull and emotionless. The two girls sit on the couch again, and Laura turns the channel until she finds a cartoon again. She sinks back into the couch, looking as boring and lifeless as ever.

Jamie feels boring and lifeless, too. She is surprised she doesn't cry or scream at Laura, forcing the other girl to let her go home. But it is all Jamie can do to keep her eyes on the screen, following the action of the animated characters.

"I don't care if you think it's weird," Jamie is surprised to hear Laura speak. "You just better not fucking tell anyone." Laura's eyes are fixed on the screen, her cheek is still bleeding and looks like it is swelling.

"I won't," Jamie says.

The two girls sit for a while in silence. Jamie feels her dress becoming more and more uncomfortable, the boning in the upper half of the dress keeping her stiff and upright, the tights and tulle scratching her skin. The smell of the house feels oppressive, the sound and sight of the cartoons grate on her eyes and ears, the used dishes in the family room take on a ghostly appearance. Jamie's palms sweat profusely against the skirt of her dress; her heart refuses to slow down.

She twitches, scared, when something falls into her lap. It is Laura's head. Laura has fallen asleep and slowly drooped to the side until her head fell onto Jamie's thighs. Her quiet breath pulls the top layer of the fabric up and down, slowly. Her face is smooth and blank, just like it always is, except the eyes are closed. The blood on her cheek has dried and already looks a bit scabby. Jamie puts one hand on Laura's head, and feels herself starting to calm down under the weight of another person, and there, under the quiet breath of the other girl who seems so unbothered by the still loud crackling of the television and the horrible scratchiness of the dress, Jamie cries for the second time that day, forcing herself to be quiet in order to protect Laura's sleep.