

WOMEN OF THE MERE: STORIES

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the University of
Tennessee at Chattanooga in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree
of Master of Arts: English

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
Chattanooga, Tennessee

May 2019

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ABSTRACT

Women of the Mere is a literary-horror short story collection imagining contemporary, Southern women who have a draw toward the unpredictability and danger of the macabre. Based on personal experiences but fictionalized through the poetic lens of negative capability, each story takes place in modern Tennessee and follows female protagonists with uncanny, “familiar”-like connections to animals that are stereotypically portrayed as horrifying or dangerous. These women feed giant snakes, chase hallucinations, menstruate gray blood, and sneak rats into hotel rooms. My craft essay examines how negative capability can be used to create horror on both a sentence-level and thematic scale, based upon David Jauss’s *On Fiction Writing* and using examples from my own work as well as others that have influenced my horror writing.

DEDICATION

To my Mom and Dad, and the house they built by the deep woods and dark caves of
Duck River.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank both the English and Psychology faculty at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga for nurturing my growth as a writer and scholar. I am grateful to Dr. Thomas Balázs, my thesis director, for his in-depth line edits and sincere feedback, and my committee members, Dr. Sarah Einstein, for her overflowing wisdom and kindness, and Professor Sybil Baker, for teaching me the spirit of literary citizenship.

A special thanks to Dr. Nicky Ozbek, for encouraging me to pursue my writing career, Dr. Christopher Stuart, for inspiring me to apply for a Master's in English, and Dr. Andrew Najberg, for addicting me to the workshop process in my first Creative Writing course as an undergraduate student.

Finally, thanks to Gavin Hasty and Jora Burnett, for listening to me read parts of the thesis aloud and reassuring me to trust my prose.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

H.P. Lovecraft once said that fear of the unknown is the oldest and strongest human emotion. Suspending readers in an unknown space with conflicting answers and unclear conclusions has always been key to sparking intense conflict and memorable endings. Negative capability, a term coined by John Keats, is “the ability to remain in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” While typically associated with poetry, I believe negative capability can also be used to explain elements of horror fiction that rely on ambiguity and to achieve their effect. In my craft essay, I will examine three short stories from collections that have influenced my thesis project: “Ava Wrestles the Alligator” from Karen Russell’s *St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*, “Beast” from Samantha Hunt’s *The Dark Dark*, and “The Husband Stitch” from Carmen Maria Machado’s *Her Body And Other Parties*. Building upon insights gleaned from David Jauss’s *On Writing Fiction*, I will briefly explore how negative capability can occur at the sentence-level with similes, before moving on to a more in-depth examination of how negative capability can be used on a larger, thematic scale to create horror in the short stories mentioned above, as well as my own short stories.

Negative capability is an aspect of literary expression that gains its power from its acceptance of contradictions. Jauss refers to the power of contradiction in negative capability as a way to create artistic meaning through “both-and” contradictions, in which opposites can find unity as one complex whole. One example Jauss provides of these contradictions holding power in

the human language is in his break down of the words “cleave” and “sanction.” He writes, “witness the word *cleave*, which means both to part and to cling together, and *sanction*, which conveys both approval and condemnation” (Jauss 188). He goes on to explain that writers can incorporate “both-and” contradictions on a sentence level—most notably through similes—to make prose more powerful and fresh. “If, for example, we write the words ‘flat as a,’” Jauss says, “our first thought will most likely be to add the word ‘pancake,’ but if we choose that word, we have succumbed to cliché and failed to create anything new” (188). By creating fresh language through contradiction and negative capability, I believe writers can also use Jauss’s idea of the “both-and” to create a subtle sense of horror on a sentence level.

Two brief examples of using contradictory similes to achieve negative capability occur in Karen Russell’s short story “Ava Wrestles the Alligator.” In “Ava Wrestles the Alligator,” Russell deploys “both-and” similes by pairing pleasant imagery with grotesque imagery to elicit a sense of dread and horror. The story follows Ava, the young adult protagonist, who witnesses her sister become possessed by an otherworldly boyfriend. At one point, Ava craves and seeks a sexual encounter from an older stranger after growing jealous of her sister. The scene heavily relies on similes to convey the complex horror and excitement of losing virginity.

In the scene, Ava encounters a creature called Bird Man while alone in the swamps of Florida, and he sings a mating call that entices Ava to take part in what she later calls, “a pretty bad thing” (Russell 13). The first time Bird Man places his fingers on Ava’s lips, she describes the sensation as a “touch [that] feels like getting out of a bath and putting your filthy clothes back on” (Russell 12). The “both-and” contradiction in this simile that creates a sense of dread is how Bird Man’s touch is not only comparable to getting out of a bath, a pleasant image, but also to putting on filthy clothes after getting clean, an unpleasant image. Russell could have kept the

simile simple and only touched on the image of getting out of a bath, but because she complicates the image with the second, grotesque image of wearing filthy clothing, she creates a “both-and” image that puts the sentence into a space of negative capability. The clean yet dirty image also meshes well with the conflicting image of losing innocence that Russell most likely intended to elicit a sense of dread in the reader.

Russell continues playing off the contradictory horror and excitement of a young adult losing her virginity in a follow up simile depicting Bird Man’s mating call as simultaneously innocent and tragic. Ava describes the single note Bird Man holds during his mating call as “an amber suspension of time, like [her] art class charcoal of Icarus falling” (Russell 13). In this simile, the arguably pleasant and nostalgic image of a charcoal drawing from a childhood art class pairs with the grotesque image of Icarus flying too close to the sun and dying in the ocean. The “both-and” image that raises this simile into a space of negative capability is how Bird Man’s mating call is simultaneously innocent, like a young girl’s charcoal painting, and yet also tragic, like the Greek myth of Icarus. The notion of something being both innocent and tragic also ties back to the contradictory horror and excitement a young adult may feel when her virginity is lost to a much older stranger.

Taking inspiration from Karen Russell’s use of “both-and” similes, my own short stories, specifically “Phases of the Shadow,” attempts to combine traditionally pleasant images with grotesque images to achieve a sense of negative capability on a sentence level. In “Phases of the Shadow,” for example, my protagonist and first-person narrator, Diane, a girl who is trying to control her stress-induced hypnagogic hallucinations, often gets upset around dogs because she associates them with her alcoholic father who breeds collies.

In one scene, Diane's boyfriend brings home a stray, solid-brown dachshund from work, and Diane describes him as holding the dog "like a newborn baby or brown paper bag of liquor." I intend for the pleasant and more expected image within the simile to be the comparison of the dachshund to a newborn baby, while the grotesque and unexpected image is the comparison of the solid-brown dog to a paper bag of liquor. The brown bag is specifically upsetting for Diane, because I establish throughout the story that her father is an alcoholic. While dogs are traditionally incorporated in horror stories as guardians to the protagonist, throughout the entirety of "Phases of the Shadow," dogs are instead a symbol of domestication and addiction for Diane. In doing this, my ultimate goal was to create a "both-and" image that would put the sentences containing descriptions of dogs in "Phases of the Shadow" into a space of negative capability—since dogs are simultaneously a reminder of both family and fear for Diane.

During the climax of "Phases of the Shadow," a final simile that encapsulates Diane's complex anxiety toward dogs appears in the prose after she witnesses her boyfriend and father encounter each other for the first time. As Diane's stress peaks, she becomes plagued by auditory hallucinations in her bathroom. The ringing in her ears suddenly turns into "nails scratching at [her] skull," and she realizes the sound "is like a thousand dog paws scraping across a wooden porch." The goal of this simile is to create an inverse relationship in which the grotesque image of nails clawing a brain is paired with the traditionally pleasant image of dog paws. The "both-and" relationship within this image is intended to put the sentence into a space of negative capability by turning the harmless sound of dog paws into an auditory trigger for Diane's fear of her father. In turn, my goal was to turn dogs, which are traditionally portrayed as "man's best friend," into a conflicting image of both domestication and family within the sentences they appear in.

These small-scale examples of unexpected similes moving short story sentences into a space of negative capability can also be used on much larger, thematic scale with “both-and” conflicts to create thematic contradictions. When a character is unable to tie together contradictory or ambiguous things, the conflict they have is more powerful. For a writer to achieve “both-and” contradiction on a thematic level in their works, Jauss believes they must first throw away their familiar, convergent thoughts. Jauss says, if writers don’t destroy their first convergent thoughts, “we will end up with red-haired characters with fiery tempers; plots in which boy meets girl, boy loses girl, and boy gets girl again...potted themes like ‘love conquers all’ and ‘beating your wife is not nice’” (189). In short, in order to enter a space of negative capability, writers must create conflicts that will not offer their readers traditional outcomes or clear themes. It is through this journey into contradiction that I believe negative capability can also create horror and a sense of dread.

Samantha Hunt creates a sense of horror through conflicting themes in her short story “Beast.” In “Beast,” an unnamed first-person narrator turns into a deer at night after she cheats on her husband. The conflict of bodily transformation in “Beast” puts the narrative in a space of negative capability because of the contradiction Hunt’s narrator faces when cheating lets her both gain a sense of identity outside her husband, and yet at the same time turns her into a herd animal that gives into primal instincts that may cause her to lose her husband.

The conflicting theme of identity and marriage is most prevalent during the finale of “Beast,” which takes place when the narrator tells her husband about her ability to turn into a deer at night, and he agrees to stay awake to watch her transformation. The final scene consists of the narrator’s husband turning into a deer alongside her, as the two disappear together in an unending herd of other deer in the surrounding forest outside of their home. During this scene,

the narrator notices how “each [deer] looks exactly the same, a flood of the ordinary” (Hunt 68). She in turn is “humiliated by their numbers, by the way they clump themselves together desperately like insects” (Hunt 68). As she steps out to follow her husband into the massive group of deer, the narrator admits she is conflicted with choice to either follow after him, or to stay behind and keep her identity from merging with the herd. “I feel their plainness rising up to swallow me,” the narrator says as she decides to stay by her husband’s side (Hunt 68). The scene could have been crafted in a way in which the narrator was only afraid of losing her husband, but because Hunt crafted in the additional conflict of the narrator’s intense fear of losing her identity the theme of identity and marriage is moved into a space a negative capability.

Ultimately, there are two primary levels of “both-and” contradictions Hunt crafts into “Beast’s” themes of transformation. Throughout all of “Beast,” the narrator is both ruled by her primal desires—which cause her to cheat on her husband—and yet she fears these biological drives may also draw her away from her individuality and into a dependency on a mate/husband. Both of these contradictions escape convergent thought and work to create a sense of horror and dread in “Beast” through the theme of transformation.

Carmen Maria Machado’s “The Husband Stitch” is another short story that creates horror through conflicting themes. Urban legends traditionally told around campfires—such as that of the Hooked Man and the girl with the ribbon around her neck—make an appearance in Machado's “The Husband Stitch,” as a way for Machado to further complicate her protagonist’s relationship with her husband by comparing their marriage to a timeless horror stories that the couple already know the ending to. These urban legends also put “The Husband Stitch” in a space of negative capability by creating a metaphor in which the turmoil of monogamy are viewed as scary campfire tales the protagonist simultaneously loves, fears, and suspends her

skepticisms for. One urban legend used in particular is of the girl with green ribbon around her neck.

In the final scene of “The Husband Stitch,” the protagonist, who’s always had a green ribbon tied around her neck, runs out of resolve to keep her husband from taking the ribbon off of her. Throughout the duration of the short story, the protagonist’s husband has begged her to let him see what is underneath the ribbon, and at one point even forcibly tries to remove it from her. After their son leaves for college and the couple seems to have reached the peak of their marriage, the protagonist’s husband asks her one final time if he can take her ribbon off. Despite everything the protagonist has already given her husband in life, she finally comes to terms with the fact that her ribbon is “the beginning and end of his desires” (Machado 30). While she recognizes that her husband “is not a bad man,” she also recognizes that he cannot handle her having something that is not also his and “to describe him as evil or wicked or corrupted would do a deep disservice to him” (Machado 30). She then finally allows her husband to remove her ribbon, and she dies as her head comes loose from her body. As such, Machado purposely crafts the couple’s marriage to be a contradictory source of both happiness and permanent dissatisfaction. Machado could have written the relationship as only abusive, but because the protagonist sees the good in her husband, the conflict becomes contradictory and complex.

Machado’s ability to turn marriage into a “both-and” conflict that escapes the traditional theme of finding completeness, arguably places “The Husband Stitch” into a space of negative capability. The sense of dread and horror Machado crafts through her contradictory portrayal of marriage manifests in how her protagonist’s long-term relationship with her husband never seems to satisfy both characters and eventually places the protagonist in violent situations brought on by the husband’s desire to see what’s underneath a green ribbon on her neck.

In my own short stories, I plan take inspiration from Hunt's and Carmen's use of "both-end" conflicts to both move my stories into a space of negative capability and create a sense of dread. One story in particular from my collection, "Eating the Tail," follows an anxious college student, Linda, who is forced to take a road trip with boyfriend and his pet boa constrictor along the mountains of Chattanooga while their apartments are fumigated for a flea infestation. During the drive Linda is tormented by strange nightmares of turning into a flea, and she becomes fixated with imagining feeding things that stress her to the boa constrictor. My intention for the "both-and" conflict of Linda wanting to feed the snake resides in how her character is simultaneously driven to take care of others—in this case her boyfriend's hungry pet—and to also quell her anxiety by imaging the sources of stress in her life being eaten instead of actually dealing with those stressors in a rational way.

During the final scene of "Eating the Tail," Linda and her boyfriend are finally able to buy a rat for the boa constrictor at Petsmart. Linda asks to feed the snake herself "despite needing rest and needing to stop taking on extra jobs." Linda is driven to feed the snake because of an interaction she had inside the Petsmart with a student from the class she TA's for. The student saw Linda buying the rat and stared "wide-eyed at Linda's bites, as if they [were] syringe marks." Linda wonders if the student will tell the others from her class about the incident and realizes she "wants to imagine [the snake] swallowing [the student]," as she has done with every other stressor in her life. When Linda goes to feed the snake the rat, she hesitates, "staring down the snake's throat again, in a trance," and has the sensation that "both [her and the snake's] stomachs are aching." The snake then begins to bite Linda to get to the food, and her hand becomes covered in blood. The student from before hears Linda's screams and threatens to call the police when she comes outside the Petsmart doors to see Linda and her boyfriend with the

snake. Linda, for the first time in the story, finally snaps, and instead of just imagining one of her stressors disappearing, physically retaliates against the student by sticking out her bloodied middle finger.

My goal in writing this scene was to create a contradictory desire for my protagonist in which she wants to feed and take care of something else in order to make herself feel better. The “both-and” conflict within Linda’s goal resides in how her desire to feed the snake also comes from a place of resentment for those who cause her stress. In other words, Linda is simultaneously driven by her concern for the snake and her selfish desire to run away from her problems by imagining them being eaten. In turn, I tried to craft the ending to thematically reflect how Linda fails to feed the snake because she isn’t taking care of herself. In fact, the snake is only able to catch the rat in the parking lot, as Linda finally retaliates against the student in physical way that isn't just imagined in her head. Following Hunt’s and Machado’s lead, I wanted to try and craft the final scene of “Eating the Tail” to take the convergent theme of “you have to help yourself before you can help others,” and put it into a space of negative capability by having the person my protagonist tries to help be a snake who she secretly wants to see eat people.

I intend to use negative capability on both a sentence-level and thematic scale. Because of the inherently obscure elements negative capability and horror can create, I also intend to use the supernatural to further fictionalize my personal experience and move my prose into a space of the shared spectacular. In short, I am turning to the Keats’ use of negative capability as a concept, rather than to critical theory terms such as “the uncanny” or “ambivalence,” because I find it more useful as a writer considering issues of craft. To me, negative capability is not a theory but rather a mode of creative expression that can lend itself well to the horror genre.

CHAPTER II

WOMEN OF THE MERE STORIES:

Women of the Mere

“There was once a stubborn old woman who refused to leave her home after she was told the dam would be built on top of it.”

Eve’s dad always starts his story this way.

Cricket and June bug chirps echo off the Wartrace dam on these damp, Tennessee summer nights whenever she follows him outside to the back porch to stare into the trapped water of the man-made lake.

Eve’s dad can’t help himself. He loves scaring her, and Eve loves to try and not be scared. They live about fifteen minutes away from the nearest town. Coyote cries and owl screeches are as numerous as the stars. Her dad’s stories used to send Eve into her room shivering afterwards, but now she is in the fourth grade, and she is proud she can keep her eyes from watering and her skin from prickling whenever she looks outside at the lake. The Wartrace dam and its sharp monochrome colors at night have always done this to her, even before she was old enough to speak or understand the word water. It’s as if the woman has been staring up at Eve, and perhaps all little girls, from the lake since before man made up a story about her. Before Eve or her father had lived there. Before there was a dam or a lake. Before there was a word for

water or father. Time and time again Eve will sit in her dad's lap and squeeze at his rough hands as he tells her his story about the old woman—as all fathers have always done.

And every time his story ends with, “I'm so glad you're a good girl who listens to her father and who knows not to go without me to the water.”

This summer, Eve decides she wants to be scarier than the old woman in her father's stories. She sprints through the fields beside the lake, pretending the tall strands of grass are an army of disembodied green hands reaching to hold her down. The June bugs' wings glisten like oil on fiery pavement when they shoot up out of her way. Eve grasps for them. She imagines if she collects enough of their iridescent shells inside her pockets, she'll use them to create a totem to ward away the old woman, and she will never be scared again. The shells gather and pile in a secret jewelry box hidden in Eve's room, until fall comes, and the June bugs retreat from the fields as the tall grass is turned into hay-bales by tractors.

Eve hates these tractors, and one evening as they leave the field, she flings herself at one of the new hay bales they've made. The straw nips and creeps up into her clothes. Eve throws herself at the bale over and over, each time sliding down to the bottom before starting again. She keeps on like this until the sky grows dark. She is determined to defeat the disembodied hands she'd imagined during the summer. She can't stop thinking about how she will tell her dad how she climbed all the way to the top of the bale by herself. She pants and growls like a small wolf, too focused on victory to remember to be scared of the woman in the lake that watches her from several yards away.

Right when she finally has her toes and fingers firmly gripped into the hay, her tiny chin just barely high enough to see beyond the straw, Eve's dad sneaks up behind her. She is panting so loud, she doesn't hear his approach. Mid-air, he pulls Eve to the ground and shrieks directly

into her ear, sending her into a fit of hysteric sobs. When the two come home, and Eve walks through the door still crying, her mom, Lynn, has a fist knotted in her gray hair.

“I can’t believe you let Eve keep playing in that hay for such a mean prank.”

Lynn’s voice is always soft, like the veiny insides of a newborn rabbit’s ears, but tonight it’s more like a growl. “Her legs are going to be covered in rashes for a solid week. Look, she’s already starting to break out.”

Eve stares down at her knees, and is shocked to see her mom is right. Bumps have risen up all across her skin like little angry eyes. She didn’t know hay could do that. She’s never played in it before.

“Oh, stop being sour, woman,” Eve’s dad says. He drops down next to Eve and wraps an arm around her shoulder. “You’re fine, right? You’re my tough little fighter?”

Eve wipes her face, suddenly aware that her dad and mom may think she’s crying because she’s scared.

“I am, yeah,” Eve says. “But dad, did you see how I was about to—?”

He pats her hard on the back, pulling her into a tight hug before she can finish.

“See? That’s my girl,” he says.

Eve’s face burns against her dad’s chest. The first itches begin to teeth across her skin as he continues patting at her back. She’s suddenly too exhausted to detail the battle with the hay she’s been narrating inside her head all afternoon long.

“Hey, you want to hear a story about the little girl who got lost in hay?” Eve’s dad asks.

“Yes,” she lies, voice muffled against his chest. Would he think Eve wasn’t tough anymore if she said no?

“No y’all, not tonight,” Lynn says. “You’re going to get us in trouble if Eve ever tells her teachers about all these awful stories you keep telling her. Knock it off.”

“Oh she’s fine, she’s fine.” Eve’s dad tickles her sides, causing some of the hay still inside Eve’s clothes to scratch her. “Isn’t that right, Eve? I raised you better than to become some scared little old lady like your momma?”

Eve nods anxiously, then jolts her head up from his chest to turn on her mom. “Yeah, Dad raised me tough,” she says.

Lynn’s fist further knots into her grey hairs. She is four years older than Eve’s dad—they having met when she was a senior and he was a freshman at their high school in Shelbyville—and he constantly makes it a point to tease her about it. He’s the breadwinner, while Lynn’s the stay-at-home mom who paints. When Eve’s dad gets back from work, he often jeers that Lynn needs to get a hobby, or sprint through the fields everyday like Eve does. It’s these comments that make Eve feel, even at this young age, she desperately wants to be more like her dad.

“Why don’t you just go to bed before you start spurting more gray hairs?” Eve’s dad gently pokes Lynn’s side as he teases her.

“Stop it. Eve, promise me you won’t play in the hay again.” The hand that was in Lynn’s hair now grips at her apron. “And Eve, I want to put itch cream on you before you go to bed.”

“Let her be, Lynn” Eve’s dad says. There’s no need to dramatize a little rash.”

As the fight begins, Eve sneaks off to bed, relieved for an excuse to skip out on another late night story. She is fast asleep, when she is startled awake by her mother’s slimy hands rubbing itch cream against her legs.

“I used to want to play in the hay,” Lynn says. “But it just breaks our sensitive skin out too much. You can’t do that again.” The moonlight pouring into Eve’s dark bedroom seems to glow on her mother’s face.

Eve, too exhausted and sore to respond, grumbles and tries to pull away from Lynn’s cold, cream-coated fingers. For a while she struggles to keep rolling away, but then finally dips back into sleep when Lynn makes it clear she isn’t going to stop grabbing at Eve.

When Eve wakes up again, her mom is gone, and enough time has passed through the night that the layers of cream have somehow managed to sink into her skin. Eve stretches her arms out across her sheets. She flinches when she feels strands of hay brush against her skin.

Eve sits up in the dark, tiny heart lodged inside her throat, and sees that a perfect circle of straw has been placed around her body. Almost like a bird’s nest. The June bug wings she’s been collecting are scattered like jewels across it.

“Mom?” Eve whispers. “Dad?”

Her bedroom door is still wide open from where her mom entered the room earlier in the night, but the moonlight reveals Eve is alone.

Did her dad walk by in the middle of the night, find the door open, and decide to play another trick on her?

At first, Eve means to rush out of her bed to lock the door before her dad shows up to complete his creepy joke. But when what she thinks is her mom’s silhouette enters the doorway, she settles back down in her sheets.

“Momma, could you please shut—“

The woman drops onto all fours.

Eve goes silent.

A gnawing sound crawls into the room with the woman. Something rolls back and forth inside her toothless mouth. As Eve shrinks back into her pillows, the old woman creeps forward faster until she's in the rays of moonlight. Light refracts off of her naked, pale body. The smell of lake saturates the room. Streams of water drip down the roll off her glistening, bloated skin.

Eve feels a tight pinch in her stomach. As she crumples forward to grip at her lower abdomen, Eve's hair fans out across the sheets in front of her. In between the strands, all Eve can see are the witch's starlight colored irises, and the gummy smile that peels upward around the hay inside the old woman's mouth.

Still on all fours, the old woman trots forward towards the foot of Eve's bed and drops the straw at the girl's feet, like a mother wolf who's brought a fresh bone for the pup she watched earlier from the lake.

Hum-like growls fill the room.

Eve faints from the pain in her stomach.

When she wakes in the morning, the old woman is gone, but something grey now covers the inside of her legs and sheets. It's silvery and ripe, like seal fat. Her stomach still aches. The jewelry box is wide open underneath her bed.

At first, Eve's too embarrassed to tell her parents. But once she realizes the grey liquid is coming from in between her legs—she decides she may be dying and needs to tell someone. With tears in her eyes, she goes to find Lynn in the kitchen, and shows her the grey liquid staining the inside of her legs. Eve's dad is in the living room, watching the news, but she doesn't dare let him see her crying.

Lynn's face is unreadable when she sees the grey liquid. She whispers, "Here, let me show you how we hide it," and rummages through the part of the counter where she keeps her paint.

Eve, confused and scared, says nothing as Lynn makes it a point to show her where she keeps her tube of red acrylic. The two then quietly walk back to Eve's bedroom, where Lynn mixes the red pigment with water and smears it across the stains on the sheets. The grey liquid darkens into an almost brown color when it merges with the paint.

"We always pretend it's blood," Lynn instructs Eve. "For some reason, this bothers them less."

"I don't understand," Eve says, shaking.

Lynn nods. "Let me tell you a real story."

THE END

Phases of the Shadow

I wake up tasting dust and horse hair. For a while, I trick myself into believing the remedy for this is to find Hunter's lips in the dark, and press myself against him until my hallucinations pass. He knows. Within the first three months of us dating, he's woken to find me kneeled at the foot of his toilet, mason jar from his pantry gnarled in my fingers, as I try to trap something only I can see crawling across his bathroom tiles. I am so focused on aiming the jar, I scream when he flashes his cellphone light on me. After that, until we move into our own place, Hunter holds me down if I try to get up at night.

"My roommates heard you scratching at the floor with this thing," he says when he opens the sealed mason jar the next day. "Diane, I know your night terrors are harmless, but if the boys ever came outside their rooms and saw you crawling on the floor like that, they'd probably go for the gun hidden under Bryan's bed."

Dad also considers my nightly hallucinations something along the line of "harmless." As if I am some sleepwalker that needs protection from stumbling into furniture, or one of the mindless, purebred herding dogs on my family's farm that have to be chained down during thunderstorms. But I have complete control over my body. Just not the things it sees. And I'm not sleep walking.

Mom tells me she sees ghosts and angels whenever she gets caught between sleep and waking. I know we're just hallucinating. Hypnagogic hallucinations. Up to one-third of people will experience them in their life. Ours get worse when we're stressed. Sometimes I sit up, even

walk toward the squirming shapes, squinting with red-cracked eyes in an attempt make the pale-skinned girls and horse-headed men dissolve—even though Hunter will drag me back to bed if he catches me. My brain has to unscramble itself from my nightmares on its own time, and I can't force it to go faster. I want to learn how to make the hallucinations stop.

“Remember the spell of tornadoes that hit Bedford county when you were little?” mom asks the first time I start seeing things when I wake up.

“That summer we were always hiding in the closet?”

I'm twelve. Dad hasn't sold Lilith or the other Tennessee Walking horses yet. Saddle oil and lemongrass still drift through the humid barn air where mom and I stand.

“Yes,” Mom says. “The visions are like tornadoes.”

She believes we should bunker down in our sheets. Hold our breaths. Do nothing, until the shadowy funnels coalesce and disintegrate. I go through multiple phases where I hate her for telling me that.

All the Tennessee Walking horses in the stable whinny and bray for the touch of her patient hands whenever Dad is done soring their legs with kerosene. By irritating the horse's skin with chemical burns, Dad forces them to raise their feet higher up off the ground when they walk. He makes money breeding and selling these special Walking horses, despite soring being illegal. Everyone in town turns a blind eye. Showing Tennessee Walking horses is a beloved tradition. They're pretty to watch. Mom is the one who removes the chemical soaked bandages from their legs, while I am the one who screams for Dad to stop whenever he heads with his dogs toward the barn wearing his tan work gloves. These horses, particularly Lilith, learn to associate my cries with his and his dogs' arrival. Like Pavlov's dogs, but the bell is me screaming, and the salivation is Lilith readying her hooves for Dad's dogs.

“I want to buy one of your parents’ border collies,” Hunter says, staring out through our kitchen window at our empty fenced-in backyard.

It’s our third week living together. We’re cooking dinner. Fireflies chase each other across the moist, uncut summer grass outside. Their flashes are crazed, desperate to find each other before an oncoming thunderstorm in the distance hits.

“No you don’t,” I say.

“I want to get a girl and name her Lilith,” he says. “One with blue eyes.”

Grease pops out of our frying pan and strikes my arm as I back away from the stove.

“Lilith?”

“It’s pretty sounding isn’t it?”

Hunter is still focused on the backyard and hasn't noticed me stepping away to swat the grease off.

“You’ve been saying it in your sleep.”

“You can’t name a dog Lilith.”

He turns, surprised, and then reaches for the fresh burn on my arm.

“Why not, baby?”

“Dad had a horse named Lilith.”

“Oh?”

“She kicked in three of the collies’ heads.”

In bed, Hunter lays closer to me than usual. It feels like his eyes are open and staring at me in the dark. His slow breathes blow down the part in my hair, keeping me awake. Streaks of white from lightning flash through our bedroom window onto our sheets, but I don’t hear any

rain. Directly across the bed, on the other side of the room, a full length mirror I brought with me from the farm leans against the wall. I stare pale-faced at my reflection.

“I didn’t know I was talking in my sleep,” I say. Mom never has.

“It’s hard not to listen,” Hunter says, staring into the mirror with me. “It started a few days ago. It’s cute.” He reaches across my chest and puts his hand over my grease burn like a bandage.

I hold my breath. Dad would call something like this cute.

“You talk about us,” Hunter says. “You told me you want a kid with blue eyes like your Dad’s.”

“No I didn’t.” I shoot up in the dark, pulling away from his hand.

“What kind of engagement ring would you want?”

“Hunter.”

“I know it bothers him that we’re living together without being engaged.”

“Dad doesn’t matter. Don’t worry about him.”

“I think he does.” Hunter reaches for my arm again. “Diane, let’s ask him if we can have a puppy. We don’t have to name it Lilith.”

Our rare fights are nothing like my parents’. Hunter and I don’t get out of bed until there is a decisive winner. There is no closing of doors, no feet tiptoeing down the stairs to get away outside. No being gently spoken to like a child. No soft crying in the dark. We turn the bedside lamps on so we can see every twitch. Every bared tooth. Every tear, if there happens to be one. This is our first argument in our new house.

“You’re being dismissive,” Hunter says. “Tell me why.”

When I can't answer, I lose the argument and am pulled back into the sheets with him. I think I'm just shocked by suddenly having a second thing I can't control while I'm sleeping, but can't put the fear into words. I have no idea how to keep myself from sleep talking, let alone ask Dad to sell one of his precious dogs. For the first time ever, instead of seeing contorted figures whirl across our bedroom that night, I wake to find Hunter's hand still wrapped around my burn. He wears a single, tan work glove. When I reach to pull it off, he grumbles in his sleep and intertwines his damp, cloth-coated fingers with mine. I don't breath until the hard rain comes. I'm terrified to smell Kerosene. My skin blisters.

"He said he ought to murder me," Mom calls to tell me the first week I move away to work as a manager at a new stable. The owner, one of Dad's competitors, offered me a full-time job a few months after I graduated high school. Hunter and I haven't started dating yet.

"Drinking Jack?" I whisper into my cell, even though my boss isn't around.

I'm galloping one of the newer, rowdier mares in a corral outside the barn to wear her out before the first group of summer campers arrive. It's early in the morning. My boss is in her barn oiling the Western saddles. Dew holds down bright green pollen on the tin roof like a slime.

"I think he was passed out from it at the time," mom says. "But, Diane, his eyes were wide open, and red, and he said—"

The mare flares her nostrils, spraying white foam towards my arm. I duck my phone down and then immediately jerk it back up toward my ear.

"—you, Pricilla."

"Mom?"

"He said, I ought to fucking murder you, Pricilla."

Gravel crackles under the suddenly still mare's hooves. She throws her head back and forth, smacking dew on the corral gates towards me with her mane. The water stings against my raised hairs. Dad doesn't have hallucinations like me and Mom, but he does act out when he drinks. Which is a lot.

"I'll just come home," I say.

"No," she says.

"He's probably acting worse because I told him I'm not helping with the farm anymore," I say.

"That's not fair to you," she says. The collies bark in the background over the static. A wind chime tingles. I picture my mom huddled underneath it on our front porch, watching the dew drip down the barn through dry, cracking eyes. The dogs pant and slobber at her feet. Completely surrounded.

"Yeah, but—"

"I want to see your new apartment."

She is at the new stable, bringing me a surprise lunch she made in my apartment, when Hunter and I first meet. My boss is a member of the Chamber of Commerce where Hunter writes articles for their online business magazine. I feel like a high schooler, as I sit next to my mom on a bench with the homemade chicken salad she's brought, and he interviews my boss and the summer campers in front of us.

"Will he come talk to you next?" she asks. She's antsy, running her hands up and down across her wrists. Staying in my apartment and not working on the farm must have her eager to get outside. She hasn't been picking up the phone when Dad calls.

I nod my head and grumble between large bites. Sweat glistens on my thighs and forearms.

“He’s got such a baby face, and those little kids are in love with him,” My mom’s eyes are wide despite the glaring sun. “Do you want me to go somewhere else when he walks over?”

“You’re fine right here, mom.” I leave a trace of grime on her blue jeans when I pat her knee.

She doesn't notice. Her lips part as two of the summer campers shove oats into Hunter’s hand, and he follows them toward the gate to feed the horses, carelessly setting his recorder down in the gravel to return to later. He and my boss are laughing with the kids, seemingly having forgotten why Hunter is here in the first place.

“They should know better,” I say, taking a moment to wipe my brow with a napkin. “We have some trail riders who wouldn’t notice they’d trotted over that recorder until they were cleaning it out of their horses’ hooves.”

“Go pick it up for him, then,” Mom says. “Introduce yourself.”

“Dear lord.” I shake my head and snicker, noticing the way her fingers have begun to knot into one of the t-shirts she borrowed from my dresser. “You can barely contain yourself.”

“I like him,” she says, not taking her eyes off Hunter for a second. She is smiling, which is something she has rarely done while staying with me for the past few days. “I could see you with a man like him.”

The summer campers are pulling Hunter in different directions, and he’s making promises to see everything they want to show them. His button down and pink-plaid tie are coated with dirt from the campers.

“Oh yeah?” I say.

“A laid back, gentle man,” she says.

“Mom, you don’t know—“

“Your father would be so uncomfortable around all those kids.”

I look closer at Hunter after that. I realize that I kinda like his childish dimples and the strange tufts of red in his thin-haired, golden beard. His unassuming, brown eyes. When my boss introduces us, Hunter’s hand is soft in my own. My mom disappears back to my apartment, but I don’t stop her. Hunter asks if he can stay a bit longer after our interview to get some photographs of me galloping one of the mares for the article. He tells me he loves horses, but isn’t brave enough to ride the rowdier ones like I do. I tell him yes when he asks if it’d be alright for him to come back to watch me sometime.

“My boyfriend wants one of your border collies.”

I stand tense and motionless next to the wall in my kitchen, as if there is a cord attached to my cell phone. I’m home early from the stable, and I have about a half hour until Hunter gets off work.

My dad doesn’t answer at first, like he’s not sure who’s calling.

“Diane? Is everything ok, sweetie?” I picture his silver eyebrows jutting upward on his leathery forehead. There is both confusion and hope in his voice. “We miss you.”

I fight to keep my spine from unpinching. There are a thousand slobbery pants and sharp nails pattering on the wood porch in the background.

“The puppies go for fourteen hundred each, yes?” I say.

“Huh?” he says.

“Your collies. Are you still selling them for fourteen—“

“What? Why the hell would you ask that? They’d be free for you, Diane. But—“

“It’s not for me.” I fight to keep my voice clear and sharp like a snapped pocket knife. I want control. “My boyfriend wants one. I will pay you for it.”

There’s a bark.

“The college boy? The one at the Chamber? How are you two doing? It’s getting close to three years now, right? I still really want to meet him.” Even more barks echo over the static as Dad’s voice grows higher in pitch. “We miss you Diane.”

For a moment, my bare feet feel like they’re sticking with sweat to the laminate floor. My face burns. Maybe I could be a bit less short with him?

“I miss you too, Da—“

“Ouch. God damnit, Daisy, will you sit the fuck down?”

There’s a thud, followed by a sharp whimper in the background. The blood drains back down from my face, and I shake my head. The pants and paws scatter in the background.

“Dad—?“

“Sorry, honey. Mom hasn’t been working with the dogs as much as she should lately.”

“How are you two doing?” My tone becomes sharp again. I don’t talk to Mom much after the summer she hid from Dad in my apartment. I guess I was frustrated she went back to him.

“Fine, fine. She’s fine. Hey, ask your boyfriend—“ A pause. Then a swallow. A table clinks as glass is set on it. “What’s his name again?”

I don’t answer him. “Just tell me how much I’d need to pay for a puppy, Dad.” My fists are clenched. I just want him to answer my question like I asked him to.

“Your boyfriend’s boss at the Chamber?”

“Um, yes?” I’m getting angry now, and I’m afraid he can tell.

“Ask him how she’s holding down the fort. I was reading the other day that she’s the first female one,” he says.

“I’m hanging up,” I say. “Text me how much the dog will cost later.”

There’s a creak as Dad suddenly sits up. “Oh, come on Diane, stop being so short with me. I’m just asking a question. You know, my buddy, Clyde’s uncle used to be the CEO of the Chamber. Do you remember Clyde?”

“No, Dad.”

“Oh, come on now, Diane. You remember Clyde? He’s a good ole boy.”

“No. I’m hanging up, now.”

“We like to joke around that your boyfriend’s CEO—“

Later that evening, I get a text asking why I was being such a bitch. When I don’t answer, a few hours later I get an apology text. Then an I-miss-you text. Then another bitch text. When Hunter finally pulls in the driveway, I’m ready to snap on him for being late, even though I have no reason to. I’m embarrassed for playing into his puppy fantasy and calling my Dad. I know I shouldn’t have called him, but ever since Hunter brought up getting a collie a week ago my sleep talking has gotten worse. Now I wake myself up, I talk so much.

My bare feet pound against the wet lawn as I charge toward Hunter’s Toyota parked next to my truck. The sun has gone down. The car lights illuminate his boyish grin. Something brown and skinny is slumped against his oxford shirt. He holds it close to his chest like a newborn baby or brown paper bag of liquor. Before I can snap at him, he jogs toward me, leaving his car running, and holds his free arm out for a hug. The brown thing’s long ears flop up and down as he runs.

“A wiener dog?”

If my voice is harsh, Hunter doesn't pay attention. He's too busy patting the loose folds of the dog's pink belly. It's old. Barely able to raise the white lids over its horizontal sagging eyes.

"She was wandering around the parking lot when I got off work today."

Hunter coos at the dog.

"And you decided to bring her here?"

He giggles, like my frustration belongs to a character in a sitcom.

"Hunter, don't you dare laugh at me. She could have fleas or worms, or—"

"I know, I know. That's why I was late." He talks to the dog instead of me, rubbing his nose against hers. "We got that all taken care of at the vet today."

The old dog's naturally squinted gaze makes her look as if she's narrowing her eyes at Hunter, like he's an idiot.

"And you didn't think to ask me? How much was all that?"

"Oh, not much. And I wanted it to be a surprise. You'll fall in love with her. She reminds me a lot of you." He puts his free arm around my stiff shoulders and pulls me into to his chest. The wiener dog only further narrows her eyes at me and snorts in my face. A single yellow tooth peeks out of her lip at me.

"She does?"

"She's scrappy and cute," Hunter says.

This is the first night I start having auditory hallucinations. Doris—the name Hunter chooses for his skeptical, old wiener dog—sticks directly by his heels, eyes perpetually squinting like she's waiting for him to trip over something. She seems to know that he needs to be guarded, but refuses to sleep in between us. Her single yellow tooth winks at me again after she finally

slinks off to some far corner of the house to sleep. Around midnight, when I wake myself up talking, as I have done for the past week, I think I can hear her crying somewhere. Hunter is still fast asleep. He's adjusted to my sleep talking the same way he's adjusted to my hallucinations. In that moment, I'm certain Doris's ghostly cries are no different for him as well—just another harmless, quirky thing to sleep through. A “cute” story to tell some co-worker or old roommate later. I grit my teeth and let my gaze drop down to where his hands are sprawled out across the sheets.

The leather work gloves are back. They keep coming back. I see them on Hunter almost every night, now. As I glare at them, willing my mind to make them disappear, like I have so many other hallucinations, a second whimper joins in with Doris's. Then a third.

It's as if someone has set my hair on fire. I roll out of the bed and fly to the window. My fingers twitch and rattle the blinds. Scanning the backyard for the wild pack of dogs Doris must have summoned to the house, I imagine my eyes are glowing. The tips of my bared teeth feel like sparks are jumping from them. I begin stalking the house for Doris.

The whimpers increase until they become weak howls. They remind me of puppies newly separated from mom—a cry I learned while helping raise the collies on the farm. As I reach the kitchen, I know these howls are too young sounding for any of them to belong to Doris. When I find her fast asleep underneath the kitchen table, I can no longer deny the noises are inside my head. Some part of me knew already, but didn't want to believe it. I drop to the floor on all fours and rub my face against the cold laminate. The thud I make must startle Doris out of her sleep because she abruptly scuttles past me back toward the bedroom. Or am I imagining this too? I have only ever seen or tasted invisible things. Hearing them is new. Without checking to see if

she is still asleep or under the table, I rear up and crawl after the sound of frightened paws scraping against laminate.

I am still on all fours when I enter the bedroom and almost crash into the full length mirror across from the bed. My reflection snarls at me. The howls, which grow shriller and shriller, are now like fiery smoke. I'm gasping for air. Practically howling for it. Doris, if she's not a hallucination, is on top of the bed, shaking.

As I reach out to see if my fingers will go through her, Hunter sits up and stares down at me.

His beard has turned thick and silver.

His eyes, bright blue.

“Diane, honey? Get back in bed. We miss you.”

After two weeks of hiding out in my apartment, Mom decides to leave and check on Dad the night she gets a call from a neighbor warning her there are multiple shotgun blasts coming from my parents' property. At first, I'm hesitant to let her leave, but when we both try to call Dad and he doesn't pick up, I follow her back to the farm separate in my own truck. If Dad's been drinking Jack, all things—the worst things—are possible.

It takes a little under an hour. The county roads have only a new moon to light them. At least two miles separates our house and the concerned neighbors. Every light in their home is on when we drive past the dirt road to their driveway. They're sitting in the living room, up close to the windows as if expecting our headlights. Expecting a show. The collies bark and howl in the distance when we park next to Dad's truck at the edge of the farm. Cedar trees fang the horizon beyond the tin roof of the barn, concealing the main house and dog pens shaded beneath their

branches. Between both buildings is an half-acre wide fenced field, which stretches several more acres into the cedar trees, for the Walking horses.

A single light on the front porch is on. None of the horses are out. And all the dogs are chained in their pens, collars rattling and clanking in the distance.

Mom reaches for the heavy rolling door of the barn, no doubt more prepared to check on the horses than on Dad, while I jump the fence to head toward the house. Both of us shout Dad's name. At first, the collies hush at the sound of our voices. Then they start howling, making the blood in my ears boil when I jump the other section of fence. I haven't missed the dogs at all. In fact, I become so annoyed by their cries, I don't notice Mom stop calling Dad's name from the barn when I start yelling at the collies to shut up. Only when the dogs finally quiet down, do I notice the tingles of the windchime on the front porch—and the shotgun laid beneath its hollow shadows. Multiple boot-prints and whiskey bottles surround it. Clots of horsehair and blood clump against the steel and glass. Before I can put together what's happened, two trucks with trailers hitched to them rumble up behind the cedar trees. Their headlights blind me when I turn to face them. They're driving way too carelessly and fast for off road. I'm surprised I'm not hit once they round the corner of the house and slam on their breaks. As they park facing the barn, the porch light faintly refracts off a small smear of flesh blood shimmering across one of the trailers' doors. Dad is out of the first truck before it's completely stopped. The other men are hesitant to join him. There's excitement and guilt in everyone's eyes.

“Diane, honey, what are you doing here? Is your Mom—?”

“Why the fuck didn't you answer our calls?”

“Watch your damn mouth, child.”

The dogs bark from their cages at our raised voices.

His face blisters. “You girls are the ones who left me alone on the farm, remember?” He sways while he slurs his accusations at me.

The men in the trucks murmur and nod their heads at each other.

Someone in the far back spits the word “bitches.”

I hate them all. All these gross, drunk men who associate themselves with Dad, despite him illegally practicing sorning. I imagine them dancing and clapping like morons at his Walking Horses, “How high can you get this one to raise her feet?”

Chains rattle inside the dog pens. Several collies rear their heads in howl.

I shout over them and gesture toward the empty bottles on the porch, “Just how much have you all had? The neighbors told us they heard gunshots. What the hell have you been doing? We were scared you’d hurt yourself, Dad.”

“Hurt myself?” Dad’s voice cracks into a forced laugh. “Oh, quit being so dramatic already, Diane. Me and the boys just broke out some drinks to celebrate finishing up our big project together.”

Before I can ask what he means—Mom is screaming from inside the barn.

I break away from the men and charge back to her. My insides are brittle. I imagine my knees chipping apart into icy pieces as I jump both sections of the fence. Mom pushes aside the barn door before I can reach her. She’s pale, staring directly through me, but also screaming my name. I hold my arms out to her, but she walks right past me. Her eyes are cracked red, like she’s woken up from one of her dreams. She doesn’t seem to see me.

“What did you do to her?” she shouts at the trucks from across the field. The beads of sweat on her brow flash like lightning in the headlights.

The matted blood and horse hairs are still fresh in my mind's eye. Are there dead horses in the stable? Were the men shooting at their feet? Or did Dad finally punish Lilith for killing his collies?

I leave Mom screaming at the trucks and push aside the rolling doors of the barn. Inside, none of the lights are on, and once the door automatically rolls back into place behind me, everything goes pitch black. Only the white hum of distant stars are able to break through the shadows casted by the timber of the barn walls. Kerosene fumes broil the air, while the sweet perfume of horse sweat is absent. There is no whinnying or braying. No stomping of hooves or fanning of tails. There is no life here anymore; all the stalls are empty.

But there is pain. I can feel it quaking in the dust toward to center of the barn where something lays sprawled out across the hay. Long fingers, like they were pulled from their sockets, stretch out from a silhouetted figure with knotted hair. Her head is cocked upward from the floor, staring directly at me, but not moving or breathing. With her belly flat to the floor, her needle-like legs twist upward as high as they can manage toward the ceiling. Pale blue eyes blink at me from the center of her warped face. She begins to shiver, and the sound is like sheets of paper crinkling against one another.

Out of habit, I slowly turn away to reach for the light switch—as I would with any hallucination. Except this time, instead of still being there when I squint at the figure in the light, the apparition disappears, and I realize that I was staring at a mound of bandages. They're the ones Dad uses to sore the horses; Kerosene oozes from them like pink sap. He must have recently torn them all off and piled them at the center of the stable. Above the heap of bandages on the ceiling are two long chains. I realize they're the ones Dad uses to hook the horses' halters

in place when he's soring their legs. He must have torn all their bandages off in hurry—but where were the horses now?

Underneath the pile something shivers again, and the bandages rustle. A blue-eyed collie, probably only ten weeks old, bounds out of the heap toward me. She whimpers and cries when I hesitate to pick her up. The dumb thing is covered in Kerosene, and I don't know how to wipe her off without irritating my own skin. The barn doors roll aside behind me, and Dad walks in. The puppy tries to dart back into the pile of kerosene-soaked bandages. I grab her before she can, and the chemicals seep into my clothes.

“What do you think, honey? The boys helped me finish up earlier today.” Dad's slurred voice booms through the empty barn. “I sold them. All of them, the sires and the mares.”

I can't answer him. I'm too busy trying to hold onto the puppy. She's barking and howling and kicking against me, eyes locked on her hiding place. Both our skins burn.

“I sent them away for you,” Dad says. “Mom and I can make enough money breeding the dogs.”

The night after my first round of auditory hallucinations, I lay in bed with Hunter and tell him about Dad selling the horses. I tell him about Dad's drunk friends, and how none of them ever explained the gunshots or blood stains. I say I have a theory that Dad used the guns to corral Lilith into the trailer, because she was so wild and unruly. I tell him I don't talk to Mom much anymore because I'm angry she stayed at the house that night. I tell him how she wouldn't look at me, how she seemed frightened to. I tell him how she muttered under breath that selling the horses was a punishment, not a gift.

I don't tell him about what I thought I saw in the barn, and how I believe Mom saw it too. I don't tell him I think Mom saw that same girl, but really saw me. And I don't tell him he's turning into my Dad at night.

When I finish, Hunter simply pats my back, and says, "You've been thinking too hard about it, Diane. Your Dad sold those horses because he loves you and finally understood how much you hate what he did to them."

I don't sleep that night.

I watch him sleep.

I wait.

The hallucinations never come.

The next week I'm irritable because I'm not sleeping at night anymore—I sleep in short bursts during the day, so I can keep watching Hunter sleep. I think this is how I can control my hallucinations. My eyes are perpetually cracked red and the noises in my ears are sharp. We constantly fight about Doris. Her weak stomach and frail bladder. He cries a little when I finally tell him that I want to take her to a shelter. He asks why I've suddenly turned into such a heartless, control freak. I tell him he's not exactly turned out to be what I signed up for either. When he asks what I mean, I can't explain. I can't stop thinking about him turning into Dad. I start imagining him waking up in the dark to see my red eyes glaring at him, my body upright and cataleptic next to his—and he jumps into his car terrified and drives far away. At work, I begin getting short with the horses, and my boss has to pull me aside to warn me we can't start running things like my Dad did at his farm. She reminds me that she hired me because she thought I wanted to be better than him. I cry a little.

On the day I finally break Hunter down into giving up Doris, Mom's car pulls up into the driveway as we are pulling out. We all bolt out of our vehicles at once, like there's been an accident. I freeze when I see Dad get out of Mom's passenger seat. He's holding a puppy, and I can't decide whether or not it's an accident the collie looks identical to the one I found the night Dad sold the horses. She has pale blue eyes that immediately lock onto Hunter's boyish face. Doris growls at her. My Dad grins.

"I told you Diane would go ahead and find herself some cheap dog," he says to Mom.

Mom says nothing back. She's too busy leering at me like I'm a ghost. I know she recognizes the red in my eyes.

"Are you Mr. Boone, sir?" Hunter shuffles Doris up and down in his arms, until he settles on just leaning her against his hip like a baby. He frees his right hand to shake Dad's. "What's that you got there?"

"Diane called saying you were asking about puppies. I wanted to surprise you." Dad squeezes Hunter's hand and flashes his teeth. "It's about time we finally met."

Hunter's round eyes immediately swell, and he shudders like a set of chains are unraveling from his tight throat

"A surprise? Diane, is this why you've been so weird about, Doris? You knew?"

I can't bring myself to speak. I'm afraid I'll throw up. The whole moment feels unnatural and upside down; a lie don't want to fall into, but probably should to feel sane. My ears are ringing. I suddenly don't care about control or warding away the hallucinations—I just want to curl up in bed with Hunter and pretend the last few weeks haven't happened. I want to pretend my Dad is the kind and collected sham he's putting on. I want to pretend I'm a healthy girl who loves dogs.

“Yes,” I say. “I knew. Surprise.”

My Dad, uncomfortable and confused, just plays along and pitches the idea of keeping both dogs. Mom says nothing. Hunter haphazardly nods his head at random parts of Dad’s spiel and smiles weakly.

As Dad breaks into his typical speech about how all his puppies are trained to be obedient and gentle, I take off inside toward the bathroom in my bedroom. Inside, I lean over the toilet, but nothing comes out when I gag. My vision is spotted, I’m so tired. The ringing in my ears has turned into nails scratching at my skull. It’s like a thousand dog paws scraping across a wooden porch. I want to scream.

As I walk out of the bathroom with both hands digging into my scalp and my eyes squeezed closed, there’s a creak, and I look up to see Mom and Dad standing across from me and the bed. Dad’s hands are also on his head, like he’s embarrassed.

“Diane, I’m sorry I didn’t warn you your Dad and I were coming, but this all kinda happened last minute. It was my idea,” Mom says. She’s still staring at me like I’m a ghost, and I suddenly realize her eyes are cracked-red too. “I’ve been having dreams about you.”

I open my mouth to ask where Hunter is, but then pause when my Dad opens his mouth at exactly the same time. Shivers take over my spine. Only when the front door to the house opens, and I hear Dad and Hunter enter with the dogs, do I finally accept who is actually staring back at me from the full-length mirror next to Mom.

THE END

Rat Race

Sunlight bleeds through the window of Mallory's hotel room, baking the air into an orange color as horrendous as the Knoxville running track that seethes outside among a screaming army of cicadas. Mallory's uniform and racing spikes, all Alabama crimson, are flared out across the hotel room floor; greedy embers trying to feed on her visitor's sweatpants and t-shirt that were thrown on top of them when the younger girl entered the room fifteen minutes ago. The heat, the cicadas, and those awful colors have Mallory's sticky skin crawling. She rolls to other side of her bed, away from her younger teammate, to scratch at the scabs on her ankles. She keeps her eyes on her suitcase in the corner of the room and wonders if her hidden guests inside are as antsy as her.

Lane, the younger, much shorter teammate, reaches over to stop Mallory before she draws blood from clawing her scabs. The freshman's fingernails, painted bright aquamarine, linger on Mallory's legs. Strands of her shoulder-blade length hair, also aquamarine, are stuck in the corner of her lip.

"You'll make them scar," Lane says, blowing her hair away.

"Too late."

Mallory takes Lane's hand and trails them up to her calve, where several tiger-like stripes crater her skin.

Lane's face scrunches up. This is their first time seeing each other's bare bodies in the light. Usually the two girls meet during the night at these hotels between races—when they know

their teammates next-door are asleep—but Mallory called Lane over earlier this time. She needs time to plot with the secret guests hiding in her suitcase alone tonight.

“What, you’ve never been spiked racing before?”

Mallory knows she needs to get Lane to leave, but can’t help teasing the younger girl’s shocked face first. There’s always a hint of competitiveness to their relationship.

“I mean, I was spiked a few times in high school, but this is excessive.”

Mallory grunts as she rolls off the bed to slap her calve.

“Well, remember this. It’s what happens whenever you get toward the back of the pack in college.”

“Whatever you say.” Lane blows another puff of air into her hair. “I think it’s just this college and this team.”

She sprawls her arms outward in the sunlit sheets where Mallory used to be, causing her unnatural hair to catch and glow in the light.

To Mallory, Lane looks like a sea nymph or naga—a creature who doesn’t quite fit in with the theology of her hellscape. Mallory on the other hand, imagines herself as a demon in the red sunlight. Her wire-like black hair and lanky, pale body have always paired well with the grim aesthetic of the rat lab she’s worked at on the Alabama campus for the past four years. Her conservative and Christian teammates never really warmed up to the whole rats and lesbian thing, so Lane was a welcome addition to the team for her. She’s been drawn to the new freshman ever since the girl joined the Alabama team last fall from Oregon.

Lane, on the other hand, is drawn to Mallory because of her record breaking times. Or at least, the record breaking times Mallory used to run before the previous coach was fired. Lane, who’d already been running sub-16 minute 5k’s at her high school in Oregon, originally intended

to compete with all the senior girls on the Alabama team to become faster—but since all those older girls had left in protest when the old coach was fired, Mallory was all that was left, and her times were already falling behind Lane's. The juniors, sophomores, and other freshman couldn't keep up with Lane either; she was the fastest on the team.

At first the two girls would just meet up in their hotel rooms to vent about the new coach and how slow the team was getting. Lane would slyly pry Mallory for the old training routines that made her so fast, while Mallory would drone on about how much she missed all the seniors who'd transferred away. After the first few times, they both agreed it just felt natural to keep their routine confined to the hotel rooms. Mallory likes that the college pays for the rooms they use for their hookups. The administration made it a point to not let the team know the coach was going to be fired until a week into the semester.

"If the me from high school walked in on us, she'd be so disappointed," Lane says.

"Wasting energy? Throwing your hips out?" Mallory shrugs. "Think of it as a warm up. Besides you literally say that every time you visit me."

"And you always say that exact same thing back." Lane cocks her head. "So what's wrong?"

"What do you mean?" Mallory turns away from the bed.

"You're skipping ahead already, like you're ready for me leave." There's a giggle, as if Lane is more pleased with herself for guessing right, than she is bothered by Mallory wanting her to leave.

"Aren't you worried about the Christ brigade catching us in broad daylight?" Mallory continues to keep her face away from the bed and rolls her shoulders uncomfortably. She's afraid Lane will see through this bluff too.

“At this point, I want them to catch us.” Lane stretches over the bed to grab Mallory’s arm. “I’m sick of them treating you like shit in front of me.”

“Oh, don’t worry. They’d be pushing you around on the track too if you weren’t so far ahead of them.” Mallory grimaces as she pulls away from Lane’s grasp. “Perks of being the highest on the food chain. They know they need you, and coach Victoria would get pissed if she caught any of them hazing you. Me on the other hand—“

“Mal, will you quit the ‘I’m so old and slow’ sob story, already?” This time when Lane reaches for Mallory, she yanks her. “I know you were born here, so you forget sometimes, but it’s because we’re in the damn Bible belt. Our team is a religious freak-fest, which is way worse than whatever weird pack mentality your old coach taught you.”

Mallory knows Lane can’t stand it whenever she talks about race times as if they determine whether or not someone is an alpha or omega, but she can’t help it. The old coach’s more intense training is permanently ingrained in her. Times and placing used to be life or death—part of the reason he’d been fired.

“So when are you going to tell me what’s going on?”

“Huh?” Mallory makes the mistake of looking at Lane this time. She thought maybe she’d shaken the younger girl’s trail.

“You’re all twitchy and anxious. Why do you want me to leave?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Mallory side-eyes her suitcase in the corner of the room to make sure it hasn’t shifted during their conversation. It’s not zipped up all the way.

“You don’t?”

“Lane, seriously.” Mallory lies. “Nothing’s wrong.”

The younger girl grins. “Rinse off with me then.”

In the shower, Mallory only becomes more anxious. Lane is purposefully dragging things out—making it a point to squeeze out every last drop of complimentary shampoo—but Mallory would rather play along than explain what’s hiding in her suitcase. She knows her plan is stupid. And she knows Lane will point it out.

“You ever think about cutting your hair?” Lane has to stand on the tips of her toes to massage the handful of shampoo into Mallory’s scalp. “I could give you some bangs tonight for fun?”

“No. And stop, you’re going to slip.” Mallory swats the freshman away.

“You have split ends,” Lane says.

“And you’re acting like my mom,” Mallory says. “What’s up with you? It’s like I’m the one who’s four years younger tonight.”

“Mal, we both know I’ve been the older one in this relationship since day one.” Lane grins. “But I’ll tell you why that is, if you tell me your secret first.”

“I don’t have a secret.” Mallory turns away toward the showerhead. “And I already know you act like you’re older than me because your times are so much faster than mine.”

Even though her eyes are closed underneath the water, Mallory imagines she can hear Lane’s grin crack into a frown.

“Mal, I swear to God. If you start with that speed hierarchy bullshit again tonight—“
There’s a pause. Then a scream.

Mallory knocks into Lane as she jerks away from the showerhead to see what’s happened. Blinking the water out of her eyes, Mallory just barely catches a glimpse of Lane darting out of the shower. A solid black rat sniffs at the place where the freshman used to be. Without thinking, Mallory drops down to get the rat out of the water.

Lane continues to scream outside the shower door. The freshman is dripping wet without a towel.

“Mal, why the hell would you bring one of your lab rats to a meet?”

“Hey, calm down. Shush. The others will hear.”

“If they find out you had that thing on the bus with us— You do realize they already don’t like you enough, right?”

Mallory ignores Lane and turns off the shower to grab a towel. She dabs the rat’s wet fur frantically. The rat cradles itself against her fingers. It’s one she’s been training for a while.

Lane cups her mouth, causing her fast breaths to hiss between her fingers. She’s discovered the other rats.

“Jesus, there’s more out here on the floor.”

“Seriously, Lane, shush. Someone’s going to come to check on us.”

“Aren’t you going to get fired for stealing these from the lab?”

“They’re not from the lab. They’re mine.”

Mallory walks out of the bathroom with the black rat still in her hands. Her suitcase in the far corner of the room has been completely unzipped. Two more rats sit sniffing at the floor next to it. Lane, who still stands completely naked and wet by the bathroom door, refuses to look at the rat in Mallory’s hands.

“This is Pan. I taught him and his sisters how to open bags,” Mallory says. She walks over to the suitcase and lifts up the top to fully reveal the tiny silver cage packed in carefully between her pajama pants and warm up suit. “I didn’t teach them how to open their cage door though. That’s going to be a problem.”

The two other rats run over to greet and sniff at Mallory's feet as she talks. Lane says nothing. Her pale face starts to turn red, like she's thinking hard about what to shout at Mallory.

Part of the reason Mallory kept her plan a secret from Lane in the first place was because the freshman has already warned her she can't handle rats. Mallory once offered to show Lane the lab rats she worked with as a way for the two girls to hang out outside of just their hookups in the hotels, but the discussion had not ended well. At least now Mallory knows for certain that Lane is genuinely afraid of rats, and not just of seeing her for something other than sex.

"I guess we'll have to sneak out to a pet store tonight and find a cage with a new type of latch, huh?" Mallory suddenly can't help but giggle at Lane's terrified face.

"We?" Lane says.

"You're in on this now," Mallory says. "I tried to get you to leave, but you might as well stay since you already know what's going on."

"Mal, I have no idea what's going on. Why you would bring these things to a meet?"

Lane shivers and gags as Pan climbs his way up Mallory's arm and into her long, wiry hair. The sun has gone down, and the cicadas are still screaming outside the window behind her in the darkness. Mallory reaches down into her suitcase to pull out the red clicker she uses for training the rats. Then she places Pan and his sisters on top of her pajamas and just barely zips the suitcase back up again.

From the bathroom door, Lane shakes her head into her hands. Mallory mashes the clicker four times and whistles. Within a minute, the three rats work together to stick their tiny paws through the loose opening of the zipper and pull it back down. The red that was building up in Lane's face disappears, and she gags again.

“Usually I have them open things from the outside,” Mallory says. “But I guess if you don’t zip the bag all the way up they can open it from the inside too.”

“Ok, sure. But why the hell would bring them here to practice that horrifying trick?”

“Well, I’ve got this plan—“

“Oh, of course you do, Mal. Of course.” Lane scoffs as Mallory reaches back down into her suitcase. “And you wonder why I treat you like the younger one. Just what kind of plan?”

“Just hear me out, ok?”

Mallory pulls out a solid black SEC track jacket from her suitcase and lays it across the bed in front of Lane. The jacket’s waterproof fabric is sleek, heavy, and incredibly expensive looking—aside from some red lettering below the SEC emblem that is coming apart in tatters

“Did you let the rats do this?” Lane scrunches her face up. “Mal, this is a conference championship jacket.”

“I know, I know, it was a stupid mistake, but listen—“

“Did the rats manage to do this on the bus ride here?”

“No, but—“

“Look, Mal, I know you probably have like two more of these in your closet back home, because your old coach was rabid, crazy about your team winning conference every year, but you’ve got to take better care of them.”

“You see, that’s the part I’m trying to get to, but you keep interrupting me.”

Lane takes a deep breath and shakes her head as one of Pan’s sisters crawls up on the bed next to Mallory. Upon seeing the jacket, the rat shoots toward the remaining red lettering. The freshman opens her mouth to scream again, but Mallory shushes her. The rat starts chewing the fabric.

“Some of the younger girls have this same jacket from when our track team won conference last year.”

Lane’s eyes widen, as she reaches to put a pillow between her, Mallory, and the rat.

“Okay, so what? You’re going to unleash your rats on their clothes for some petty revenge scheme?”

“I mean, they are the same girls who reported Coach and screwed over our training.”

“Who cares? Mallory, this is really immature and stupid.”

“They’re also the same girls who pretend you’re not gay to your face.”

“You think I actually care enough about those twats to do something this crazy? You’ll get us kicked off the team, Mal.”

There’s a hard knock on the hotel door.

Mallory and Lane go completely still. Goosebumps break out across Lane’s bare body. Both girls are still naked. The rat continues chewing the fabric, teeth grinding like power drills. They hold their breaths until there’s a second knock.

“Hey friends, are you ok?” It’s an older, female voice that shouts from outside. “I’ve been hearing your shouts from across the hall.”

“It’s Coach V,” Lane whispers through clenched teeth. She jumps away from the bed and heads toward the bathroom for a towel to cover herself with.

Mallory gathers the rats into her suitcase. This time she makes sure the zipper is tight.

The voice outside calls again. “Friends? Let me in.”

“Just give us a sec, Victoria.”

Mallory imagines she can hear Lane cringing from inside the bathroom. The younger girl hates it when Mallory refers to the new coach so casually.

Victoria was a junior on the Alabama team when Mallory was a Freshman, but when the old coach was fired a few months ago, Victoria was asked to step in as a temp while the university searched for a replacement. She has a son, named Gary. Everywhere Victoria goes, including this meet, she brings Gary along, like some sort of charm. He was born when Victoria was at her lowest—her first year of college—when her grades and race times were at their lowest and she spent her nights running wild in downtown Birmingham. After Gary’s arrival, Victoria transformed. Within two years she became a permanent team leader, a 3.8 GPA student, and a two-time SEC champion in the 800m. She was an icon among the Alabama running community. It was a biblical turnaround, and Gary was the cross whose arms she kept tight around her neck.

Mallory imagines little pale-eyed Gary is out in the hall with Victoria right now. Her skin prickles. He’s one of those babies that looks like a creepy old man when he stares at you. Mallory imagines Victoria and Gary could pose next to an medieval painting of the Madonna with child, and Gary would perfectly mirror the homunculus, judgmental eyes of man-baby Jesus.

When Mallory and Lane both have towels wrapped around them, the senior girl opens the door. Once they make eye contact, Victoria only half acknowledges Mallory. She’s busy holding Gary up in the air like a plane. The two-year-old is laughing wildly. A cicada shell is clutched in his hands. Only when he darts his head to look directly at Mallory and Lane, does Victoria make it a point to sheathe him back down at her side next to his diaper bag.

She’s the tan version of an angel, like all Alabama track girls. The crown of her long blonde hair practically glows like a halo. When she stands next to the younger girls on the team with the same identical blonde ponytails and sun-kissed skin, she looks like she could be all of

their older sister. Currently she's wearing an SEC championship jacket from one of the years the team won conference before Mallory joined.

"You two doing alright in there?" Victoria says.

"I flushed the toilet on Lane while she was in the shower, and she got pissed at me," Mallory says.

The corners of Lane's eyes and mouth twitch, like she's fighting off the urge to scowl at how bad Mallory's lie is. Mallory doesn't care. She's too busy eyeing the red yarn that spells out "champion" on Victoria's SEC jacket.

Victoria just barely raises her brow. "Lane why were you using Mallory's shower? Is there something wrong with the one in your room?"

"No," Lane answers honestly. A few damp strands of her aquamarine hair stick to her flushed cheeks. There's a spark in her wide eyes, like she's ready for more questions.

"So why did you shower in Mallory's room?" Victoria makes it a point to stare at Gary instead of Lane.

The four-year-old is frowning at Lane's aquamarine hair, confused.

Lane clears her throat. "Because I wanted to, Coach V."

"Well that's sweet that you two are getting to be such close friends." Victoria plays with Gary's brown hair. "But how about you two call it a night. Lane needs to go back to her room to think over her race plan for tomorrow. She's seated first in the fastest heat of the 5k."

"Sure Coach V, but Mal and I aren't—"

"Oh, by the way." Victoria cuts Lane off as she reaches into Gary's diaper bag. "I know you're not entirely into the team's Bible group, but we had a meeting the other night and we've decided to add a book club element to our activities. Here."

She pulls out a baby blue book with a teenage man and woman on the cover. Then hands it to Lane. The title reads, “Is God Saying He’s the One?”

“Just in case you decide to join us eventually.” Victoria tickles Gary’s chin, but he doesn’t laugh. “No pressure through.”

“Aren’t you going to give one to Mal too?” Lane’s voice has fallen flat, almost growl-like.

“Oh, Victoria already knows I’m set in my ways.” Mallory rolls her shoulders. “Believe it or not, Lane, there was a time, when Victoria was still on the team, where she also avoided bible study groups with me. In fact, on Sunday nights we used to use her fake id to—”

Now Victoria clears her throat. “Lane, could you go ahead and head to your room? Mallory and I need to talk about her race tomorrow.”

Without another word, Lane huffs out a deep breath and turns around to gather her clothes and dress. As the door slams closed behind her, Victoria leads Mallory further down the hall. Gary puts the cicada shell in his mouth as they walk.

“Mal, you’ve got to stop doing that,” Victoria whispers as she picks the shell out of Gary’s mouth.

“Doing what? Calling your fake ass out in front of the younger girls?”

“I need you to at least try to have some respect for me.” Victoria smiles weakly. “Lane is running Olympic trial times. We need her, and she didn’t come here to watch the person who’s supposed to help her get faster look like a fool. She’ll end up transferring next semester if she doesn’t think I’m a serious coach.”

“Don’t be stupid, Victoria.” Mallory punches her shoulder. “If Lane ends up transferring it’ll be because you keep pretending like you don’t know she’s gay—and because your training sucks.”

Now they’re both laughing in a fake, wolfish way. The two girls get that way when they’re alone together. Victoria’s training is laid back, but her old, razor personality comes out whenever she has the chance to be with one of the girls she used to run with. It’s the personality that rubbed off on both girls from their old coach. The personality of bared teeth and brutal honesty.

“Don’t get me wrong.” Victoria kisses Gary’s head. “I think you two are cute, I really do. But the rest of the team would get pissed if I played along.”

“Are you seriously trying to explain yourself to me, right now?” Mallory’s smile is jagged.

Victoria narrows her eyes. “Anyways, I don’t care to know what you two were actually doing in there. But you better learn to be more quiet.”

“Sure.”

“Because I’ll actually have to step in if the team starts complaining.”

“Of course.”

“And I don’t know what I’d do if—“

“Victoria, it’s really all good. I’ve been thinking about quitting anyways.”

The two girls both go dead quiet. Gary cries for his missing cicada shell.

“But you’re already so close to the end of the season,” Victoria says. “And without you, it’s just me.”

Mallory looks away. Gary's pristine blue eyes look her up and down. He points a finger at her, demanding to know where the shell went.

"We're the last of the old group," Victoria says, pressing the boy closer to her side.

"Well yeah, but it's not like we actually still train like that."

Victoria's laugh is one of pity. "Mal, you know we can't. Not if we want my temp position to become permanent."

They grow quiet again. Victoria pulls Gary up into her arms and rubs her nose against his head. The boy's clear eyes remain fixated on Mallory's wiry black hair. He drops his hand and starts crying again.

Mallory misses the days when he wasn't around. When she was a freshman and Victoria, still in her wild phase, would sneak beers into the hotel rooms for the girls who had done good in their track events that day. Coach Peyton knew but didn't care as long as the girls were celebrating good race times. He'd only call you out if your race sucked that day. As long as you were on the top of the food chain, you could get away with anything.

There was one night where some of the girls, playing a prank on Mallory after she'd beaten them in the mile, bought a live rat from Petsmart with their meal money and gave it to Coach Peyton with a red ribbon tied around its cage. They tried to claim that Mallory was the one who'd gifted it to him, saying something about her not knowing boundaries and being crazy, but Coach Peyton saw through them immediately.

"Are you bitches teasing my new fastest miler?" Mallory overheard Coach Peyton shout from the hallway. "Because it's not funny. Not only is she faster than you, but she's also working her ass off in that rat lab doing research."

He then came banging on Mallory's door, with girls who'd tried pranking her in tow, and asked Mallory to teach the rat a trick in front of them.

"Don't be shy. I know you can do it," Coach Peyton said.

"You do?" Mallory was confused.

"Of course I do. You're one of my best girls. I tell everyone about the amazing research you're doing on top of scoring Alabama fast times. It's important to me, and it should be important to them." He points back at the girls. "Take notes bitches."

Afterwards, Coach Peyton kept the rat. Mallory taught it how to roll over by rewarding it with crackers. Coach said he wanted to take it home to show his wife. The girls never bothered Mallory again after that. She knew as long as she was beating them, Coach wouldn't stand for it.

Those were her favorite years of being on the track team. When race times made her invincible. Coach Peyton cussed anyone out if they messed with her. Unfortunately, that hardcore attitude eventually led some of the girls to speak out against him.

"Just hold out for a bit longer. It's what Coach would want." Victoria nods, recognizing the faraway look in Mallory's eyes. She looks down Gary and grins. "Someday, you'll be thankful you did. And besides, Lane would be awfully lonely without you."

As if waiting to hear her name from the other side of the door, a fully clothed Lane bursts out into the hallway. Her fist is clenched around the blue book, like she's ready to beat it over Victoria's head. Mallory imagines she's been listening to their entire conversation with her ear pressed to the door. She hopes the freshman heard every single word. She wants Lane to understand that she doesn't need to respect Victoria. Victoria needs to respect her. She wants the old ways back.

“I’m heading to bed.” Lane makes it a point to stand on her tippy toes and kiss Mallory on the cheek in front of the temporary coach.

Victoria laughs awkwardly when Lane turns and hands her back the book. “Not even going to try and read it then?”

“Apparently, you already know it’s not for me,” Lane says.

Later that night, after the three girls part ways and Mallory heads to bed, she dreams of the bus the team drove to Knoxville in, vacant and empty.

Prayers from an invisible group of girls moan out and screech upwards through the steel of the chassis beneath Mallory’s bare feet. Her pale, glowing skin is a source of light compared to the empty black world that shivers beyond the bus’s windows. As Mallory walks alone through the aisle the hissed prayers grow louder and louder with each step until she finds the only thing besides her that appears to be on the bus.

Gary’s car seat. Swarmed with rats feeding on a leftover, blackened substance. Their fur is sodden dark red.

The dream halts when Mallory is woken by three hard knocks on her hotel door. When she opens it, Lane is on the other side, red-eyed and breathing hard.

“Are Pan and his sisters okay?” she says.

“Huh?” Mallory is still half asleep.

“The rats? Are they okay? Are they still in your suitcase?”

“What? Oh, no, they’re fine. I made sure to put a carabiner around their cage door. They’re not strong enough to open that.” Mallory hesitates for a second, thinking back to her strange dream. “Or at least, I think they’re not.” She suddenly feels the urge to check on them.

“You better be sure, Mal,” Lane says.

“Why? Has something happened?” Mallory says.

“I’m in on your plan, that’s what’s happened.” Lane stomps her foot. “Let’s get those bitches.”

The team’s morning prayer is barely audible above the screams of the cicadas. They have a shaded spot, in the upper left corner of the bleachers above the track, where they set all their bags down before the first race. Victoria leads the worship, asking all the other girls to gather with her in a huddle. Everyone bows their heads and closes their eyes. Except for Mallory and Lane. Both girls can’t stop staring at the backpack Mallory brought to the track. All of the team has brought matching red Alabama backpacks with changes of clothes and shoes, but Mallory’s bag in particular is special. It has a slight, rectangular bulge from the rat cage hiding inside. The only prayer Mallory and Lane have is that no one notices.

Last night, both girls decided the best time for Mallory to let the rats loose would be during the final race of the day, the 5k. The majority of the team, including Lane, was in that race, and any girls who weren’t would most likely get up to watch the race from a closer spot further down in the bleachers. Mallory has only one race today, the mile, and after she finishes it, she makes it a point to never leave her backpack’s side. Occasionally, she unzips it to check on the rats inside. Lane swats her arm every time.

“Stop it,” she whispers.

“I just want to make sure they’re still there,” Mallory says. She can’t get that weird dream from last night out of her head. And she can’t stop looking at Gary.

She feels like the two-year-old has been staring at her and her bag all day. Victoria has him strapped in his car seat next to her, so he can't wander off and hurt himself on the bleachers. Whenever she gets up to coach the girls from the track, she asks the team to take turns watching over him.

When the time for the 5k finally comes, Mallory volunteers to stay with him. No one thinks anything of it as they all get up to watch Lane and the others race. It's a track meet; all the teams leave their bags laying around during the events. No one is expecting anyone to bother their stuff.

Lane gives one brief nod to Mallory before her warm up, and then runs off with the other 5k girls. The rest of the team fights for a spot to watch on the bleachers below. Almost everyone is looking forward to watching the blue-haired freshman from Oregon run an Olympic trial time race.

As soon as the gun blasts and the screams cheering on the 5k start, Mallory unzips her bag and lets Pan and his sisters loose. She whistles and clicks the red clicker hidden in her pocket three times. The rats are immediately drawn to the familiar red colors of Alabama backpacks they recognize from Mallory's room. They associate the red backpacks with the red fabric they love to chew so much. Mallory has no concern that the rats will stray away from those bags, but nonetheless makes it a point to not take her eyes off Gary. The two-year-old immediately begins laughing and cooing as soon as he sees the rats. It's a reaction that unsettles Mallory for some reason. He keeps reaching out like he wants to touch one.

There's about fifteen to seventeen minutes until the racers finish the 5k and everyone returns to their spot on the bleachers. The rats have a field day inside the bags. Their chewing

seems almost as loud as the cicadas to Mallory. She's so focused on watching them, she barely notices the man walking up the bleachers toward her.

"Mallory? What are you doing up here by yourself?"

The senior girl's head practically rolls off her neck when she turns away from the rats and sees Coach Peyton. He's wearing a blue jacket, no Alabama gear, and his beard has grown out since the last time Mallory saw him. He stands two rows below her with his hand over his eyes to block the sun.

She jumps up. "What are you doing here?"

"Creature of habit, I guess." He shakes his head. "You girls are camped out in the same exact place I would have picked." He frowns when he sees Gary. "Your times so bad now they got you on diaper duty?"

"Something like that." Mallory can't help but chuckle. "This whole team is a wreck without you."

"Everyone except for that new Oregon girl." He nods. "She's got so much raw talent, even a green coach like Victoria couldn't fuck her training up."

In the background, Gary continues pointing and laughing at the rats from his car seat. Coach Peyton doesn't seem to notice though. He's too busy staring at the track with pursed lips.

"Are you here with your wife to watch the races, Coach?" Mallory tries to keep from looking at the backpacks.

"What? Of course not. She'd kill me if she knew I was here." He puts his hands into his pockets. "She wants me to look for other jobs. I don't think I can though. What about you though? You eating good? Sleeping enough? Your times absolutely suck now."

"I know, I know," Mallory says. Her palms are getting sweaty.

Gary is now screaming and crying for the rats to come closer. He's beating his fists on his car seat. Pan's head pops out of the nearest backpack to check out the source of the strange noises.

Coach Peyton's jaw goes slack when he sees the rat peeking out at the two-year-old. He stumbles up the bleachers to get a closer look, but Mallory juts up her arms to signal for him to stop. Pan falls out of the backpack, seeming surprised to see the tall man running up the bleachers toward him.

"The hell?" Coach Peyton says.

"It's just a new trick I'm teaching them. Don't worry about it, Coach," Mallory says.

"Have you been letting them chew on everyone's gear?" His brow is furrowed.

"I mean, just the girls who reported you," Mallory lies. The truth is, she has no idea whose is whose bag, except for Lane's. The freshman's backpack is the only one Mallory won't let the rats touch.

"Are you crazy, Mallory? Put them away, now. We're at a track meet." Coach shouts at her as if she is still one of his girls. His eyes are huge.

Mallory's shocked. "Look, Coach, I know it's petty and all, but you deserve some payback. I don't care if I get caught and kicked off the team."

"The team?" Coach Peyton says. "Who cares about the team? Alabama sucks now. What about your rats?"

"My rats?" Mallory looks back at Pan.

He's scampered away from the commotion to hide underneath the groove of Gary's car seat. The two-year-old fights frantically to reach his tail. Mallory's skin prickles as she thinks back again to her weird dream.

“Aren’t you worried about them running loose and getting hurt?” Coach Peyton points and nods at the car seat.

Mallory is suddenly torn between picking up Pan and explaining herself to Coach. Her head darts back and forth between the two. At the base of the bleachers the screams and cheers are increasing. There’s probably only two or less laps left in the race. Lane is leading, her aquamarine ponytail fanning out in the wind behind her like the puffed out tail of an angry betta fish. Compared to the rest of the Alabama team—who are a tight pack several meters behind her, all identical with same tan skin, blonde hair, and lanky stride—Lane looks like a force of nature strapped on top of a pair of short, pale legs. Victoria screams at the girls behind to try to close the large gap. The crowd is losing their minds over the significant lead the Oregon girl has. Pan’s sisters pop their heads out of their backpacks to check out the commotion.

Coach Peyton quickly reaches beneath the row in front of them to grab the rat closest to him. He pushes the first rat into Mallory’s sweaty hands, and then reaches for the second.

Mallory’s chest knots, she’s not used to seeing someone outside her lab be so willing to touch them.

“The little guy you trained for me and my wife when you were a freshman died a few years ago,” Coach Peyton says, gently handing the second rat to Mallory. He looks terrified, like he’s expecting its little heart to give out at any second. “I was always too embarrassed to tell you about it.”

“Seriously, don’t sweat it Coach. I already figured as much.”

Mallory doesn’t look away from him as she places Pan’s sisters back into their cage. She’s still stunned by his reaction to seeing the rats, his eyes seem to almost be watering.

“You do know they only have a lifespan of about two years, right?” Mallory says.

She gets up to walk over to Pan and Gary, head still turned over her shoulder in her coach's direction.

“Well, being on a team doesn't last forever either,” he says.

And then there's a loud squeak followed by a succession of choked screeches. Mallory and Coach Peyton both wince at the awful sound. Gary has Pan by the tail and is whipping him around in the air like a ragdoll.

Mallory charges across the bleachers to separate the frightened animal from the boy, but by the time she reaches the car seat, Pan has already slipped out of the two-year-old's sweaty grip and taken off down the bleachers to escape. The crowd below, who cheer and scream for the 5k runners on their last lap, part like an ocean after a few of the onlookers notice the oncoming rodent. People are shoving each other to get away from bullet-fast rat.

Pan dives through the gap and onto the orange track.

All the coaches on the track, including Victoria, scream at their girls to stay focused and ignore the chaos above, but a few of the racers coming around the straight away of the track can't help but look up. Lane, still way in the front, is one of them. She immediately breaks away from the inside of the track and begins waving her arms and shouting at Pan, like she's trying to scare the rat away from the oncoming pack of girls with spiked shoes behind her.

To Mallory's relief, Pan freezes up when the blaze of bright girl darts toward his direction, and she's able to pound down the concrete set of stairs at the base of the bleachers to reach the track right before he can decide on which direction to run off to next. Lane veers back into the inside of track, right as the large group of girls is about to reach her, and charges on ahead through the finish line. She just barely finishes in first.

Within seconds, Victoria is at Mallory's side shouting, "I have no idea what's going, but I'd go ahead and kick you off the team for it, if I didn't need you around to keep Lane company."

Mallory ignores her and looks back up at the bleachers to see Coach Peyton carefully zipping up her backpack to hide the rat cage. He nods at her once, then makes it a point to merge into the crowd of people pointing and shouting at base of the bleachers. Everyone is staring at the solid black rat curled up and panting inside her hands. Lane, who's bent over her knees at the finish line, is breathing just as hard, if not harder, but manages to give Mallory the thumbs up in between her dry-heaves. The other racers pile in behind her as they finish. Some of the girls from the other teams pat Mallory on the back and ask if she's alright as they finish. Some congratulate her for her fast time. Others thank her from warding the rat away from being spiked into a bloody puddle on the track.

Her own teammates, however, say nothing. They stand in a huddle and look back at Victoria for guidance.

"Well, what do you have to say for yourself?" Victoria shouts at Mallory again. "I'm assuming that's one of your rats, correct? Go ahead and explain to me why it's here interrupting my girls' 5k."

"I think I'll pass." Mallory wipes the sweat from her brow. "And you can go ahead and cut me from the team, because I officially quit."

"But Lane will be—"

"Oh, stop that, Victoria. I'm not going anywhere, and neither is Mal." Lane stands up from dry heaving in between the other racers. Her laughs are wild and hoarse. "You and the team just have to deal with it whenever I invite my girlfriend and her pets to come watch me race."

THE END

Eating the Tail

As Linda and her boyfriend park behind Bojangles to eat, the boa constrictor in the back seat rubs her nose across the top of her ten gallon glass aquarium, enticed by the smell of chicken biscuits. When Linda reaches back to tap the enclosure, the snake lurches toward the heat in her fingers. Mouth curled upwards on the other side of the glass, the boa's perma-grin belies her desperation. The constant churning of the car's heater seems to rattle the snake's scales, but Linda has to keep her hatchback running. There's three inches of snow outside and a heavy fog creeping down the Chattanooga mountains.

"Jesus, Ophelia," Drake, the boyfriend, says to the snake. And then to Linda, "I don't get it. She ate Thursday."

Linda twirls a strand of her greasy hair until it stands up straight on her head, like a horn. She presses her hands against the car window to soothe the burning of bedbug bites, and stares cross-eyed at the glass enclosure. She feels sorry for Ophelia, whose long, aching stomach never lets her rest.

The female boa always has her pink, double-rowed teeth spread wide at the sky. The snake's unnatural hunger keeps Linda and Drake scouting pet stores for jumbo-sized frozen rats. Some nights, after her part-time job, night school, and unpaid teaching assistantship, Linda stumbles into Drake's apartment in an exhausted trance, silent until she's had a chance to stare deep down into the female boa's throat. She imagines Ophelia's sharp, shimmering teeth sinking into the rude head lifeguard at the pool where she works, her insatiable college debt, and that one

male students who purposely drops his scantron every time she passes it to him in the Abnormal Psychology class she TA's for. She feels the snake's hunger as her own. She understands the permanent, fake grin.

The teacher in the Abnormal Psych class once asked Linda if anyone had diagnosed her with general anxiety disorder order before. Linda lied and said no. She's scared the teacher won't let her TA anymore if she tells him about all her nightmares and cognitive distortions.

Sometimes, late at night, she feels she's shriveling up in her bed and shrinking into an swamp of sheets. Her thoughts bite at her like insects, as she goes over all the things she could have said or done wrong the past few days. Most of the time she relives what she did the day before at the pool.

Instead of having dreams, she'll sees herself on the lifeguard stand, eyes twitching from child to child in the water. She doesn't want to make eye contact with the head guard, who the other male guards call Butters. He's known for the throwing the female guards' change of clothes into the pool. She can feel him staring at her hunched shoulders, as she rubs her palms in a nervous twitch across her life tube. The splashes from the shouting kids in the water grow colossal as they spray across her shrunken self. She feels like her wet skin is shriveling,

"You know what I do with the wet clothes?" Butters asks. He's been out of school a few years now but still wears his Kappa Sigma hat every day. He's a foot and a half taller than Linda, and towers over her as he leans on the guard chair.

"No," Linda's says. "You've haven't thrown any of mine in, yet."

"I stick them down in a corner of the popsicle freezer," Butters says. "Know why I haven't done that to your clothes yet?"

“Why?” Linda smiles because she knows if she doesn’t, Butters may switch his mind about her change of clothes that’s sitting in her bag back at the guard room.

“Because I feel like you actually know how to take a joke.” Butters nudges Linda’s shoulder.

Linda’s isn’t sure what Butters is talking about, so she fakes a laugh and starts strumming her palms across the life tube faster. Butters notices, grins, and then reaches over the tube to stop her nervous tick. Another female guard across the pool is watching. She shakes her head. Butters shouts at her to pay more attention to the children

“You never bitch and moan, about anything,” Butters says, scoffing at the other guard. “You just show up to work and hang.”

“Hang.” Linda echoes.

“One of the boys,” Butters says. “Speaking of which, how long have you and your boy been dating now? It’s getting to be a bit, yeah?”

Back in her car, Linda’s stomach is cramping up, but she doesn’t want to stress Drake, her “boy,” out by mentioning she’s probably about to start her period and needs tampons.

“It’s no big deal. We’ll just make a stop at Petsmart,” she says.

“No, it is a big deal,” Drake pulls at his own greasy hair. There’s stains on his sweatshirt from where he’s been in Linda’s car without changing for almost two days. “I didn’t bring her feeding box.”

Drake feeds Ophelia in a special box, so she doesn’t associate her own cage with feeding and accidentally bite someone’s hand when they reach in. He never gives Ophelia live rats, so she doesn’t have to get rough with her food. He thinks this makes Ophelia less aggressive.

“Hey, that’s ok,” Linda says. Now she’s anxiously braiding the greasy horn she’s made in her hair.

The first night Linda noticed the bedbugs, it was in a nightmare. She shrunk down and crawled among them for hours and hours. She didn’t want to stand out—she was scared she’d never wake up and have to live with the bedbugs forever—so she pretended to be one. She bit her sleeping body, over and over. She tasted her own blood. Grew a million different eyes and watched her sleeping body be eaten from a million different angles, lost track of where her mind ended and the bed bugs’ began. In the morning, Linda couldn’t explain to her roommates why she woke up in the middle of the night crying. She was scared they’d notice her paranoia, like the Psych teacher who asked about her anxiety, and think she’s crazy.

Butters was the first person other than Linda to notice the bites, but by then the bedbugs were out of control. What she thought was just a figment of her anxiety ended up being real.

Before Drake had a chance to get home and feed the snakes on Friday, his roommates had already started spraying. Some of it got into Ophelia’s scales. The couple didn’t have time to pack anything. They had to get the Ophelia away from the fumes as fast as possible. Now it was Sunday night. Nobody had wanted to take the scaly freaks in over the weekend. Both Linda’s and Drake’s parents lived hours away, and the couple couldn’t sneak a ten gallon aquarium into a cheap motel. And the fumigation would take days to clear up. They had to keep driving in the snow, only stopping to fill up on gas or to buy fast food. The car couldn’t be turned off for long, or Ophelia would freeze.

“Ophelia will get bad habits if we feed her in her cage,” Drake says. “Besides she’s hungry, like, right now. We won’t be able to wait on a frozen rat to thaw.”

“Just this one time.”

They've been dating long enough that Ophelia is her baby now too.

When they first started the drive, Ophelia snuggled over Linda's shoulder like a sleeping infant, trailing down her torso and in between her calves, practically thick enough to be a third leg. The majority of the Ophelia's eighteen foot body coiled up around Linda's feet in the floorboards. As she spread apart her jaw to yawn next to Linda's temple, both girls' cheeks brushed. In the slow lane, a car sped up, skidding across black ice so the people inside could get pictures. Ophelia's spread mouth was wide enough that it looked as if she had Linda's forehead and chin caught in her jaw. The numerous iPhone flashes from the slow lane made the boa's needle-like teeth shimmer alongside the flurries iced on the window.

"We'll have to stop and put her in the cage," Drake says. "Or we're going to get pulled over."

"Can I hold her just a little bit longer?" Linda says. She pats Ophelia's back, as if that will make the chemicals that have gotten into her scales come out.

"If you can think of someone who will let us stay at their place, you can hold her all weekend," Drake says. He's already tried all his friends and been declined. Apparently no one wants to invite the devil's animal under their roof on a cold Southern night.

Linda goes through all the contacts in her phone, until she reaches Butters' name. He returns her text before anyone else.

"Sure, what'd you need? What are you doing tonight? Who are you with?"

Before Linda can respond, he calls, and she puts him on speaker.

"I'm with Drake," Linda announces, as if it's a spell that will keep her from shrinking whenever Butters talks to her at the pool. She strums her fingers over Ophelia's scales.

“Oh, I know what this is about.” Butters laughs. “She’s done spread them bugs to you now, hasn’t she Drake?”

“We’re fumigating this weekend,” Drake says.

The alcohol in Butters’ voice is coming through the speaker, along with loud music and people shouting over each other background.

“Well, Linda is my best guard, so her and her boy are always welcome at my place. Hell, I’ve been trying to get you two lovebirds to come over for a while now.”

“Thanks Butters, but there’s—“

“In fact, it kinda pisses me off it took both your apartments being bombed to actually come visit my place, but whatever. Can you pick up something before you head over?”

“Well, yes, but the thing is—“

“You know, me and the boys at the pool—“ Butters pauses to shout at someone in the background, then there’s laughter. And whispers. “Me and the boys—We—Drake, when you bring Linda lunch some days, it’s like we’re all getting to watch a scene straight out of the Notebook or some shit.”

“We have a sixty pound boa constrictor with us,” Drake says.

“Hell yeah you do my friend,” Butters says. “Just don’t be too loud over here when you’re giving it to—“

“A real snake.” Drake’s fingers choke the steering wheel. His gaze breaks away from the road to leer at Linda. “How do you put up with this every day?” he mouths.

Linda says nothing and squeezes Ophelia closer to herself. The boa looks up into her eyes and wraps tighter around Linda’s legs. To keep herself from shrinking, Linda imagines sneaking Ophelia into the pool. She pictures Butters’ smug face turning purple.

“Wait, like a pet. Like a real giant snake?”

Linda finally tries to chime in. “Her name is—“

“Do you two like do stuff with this snake?”

Drake puts on the brakes slightly. “What?”

The car taking pictures slides on ahead.

“You know, like in the bed. Do you ever—“

Linda chucks her phone across the dashboard as she ends the call. She tries to turn her bristling body away toward the window, but Drake grabs her shoulder first. Ophelia’s muscles tighten across Linda’s shaking legs, as the confused boa puffs a gasp of air through her nose. The scales on her jaw shiver as she jolts away from Linda’s temple. Drake swerves into the slow lane. The car ahead of them has stopped taking pictures.

“Hey, do you need me to come by the pool to—?”

“No.” Linda tries her best to stop shaking. The last thing she wants is to add on to Drake’s stress. She feels like an idiot for answering Butter’s call. She wishes she hadn’t tried asking for help. Everything is her fault.

“I mean, I knew your boss could be a total tool, but he doesn’t ever say shit like that when he’s sober, right? Tell me he’s not like that at the pool with you?”

“He’s not.” The bites on Linda’s shoulders itch as Drake squeezes her shoulder. Ophelia has crept her head around Linda’s face to taste the air between her and Drake.

“Because I swear to God, Linda, if you need me to, I’ll come in there Monday and—“

“Let’s just pull over and put Ophelia in her cage, alright?”

“Do you want to quit? I’ll help you if you want to quit.”

“Drake, everything’s fine,” Linda lies. Her throat is closing up on her.

They've stopped underneath a streetlight, and the sweat on Drake's brow glistens in the cold light. Ophelia has part of her head hidden in the collar of Lind's sweatshirt. The snake's slow breaths glide across Linda's goosebumps.

That night they take turns sleeping so the other person can drive. When Linda drives, she's so exhausted and stressed, she can't decide whether or not she's imagining the bedbugs crawling in and out of the air vents. The bites on her hands and feet swell up worse at night, and so she takes off her shoes and drives barefoot. As she takes the hatchback on a loop through Signal Mountain, she imagines someone coming across her and Drake's bodies if their car were to slid across the ice and crash.

When she trades Drake the wheel, she falls asleep in the passenger seat and dreams of her skin, shrunken and husk-like in the snow beside her wrecked car. The heat from the hatchback as it catches fire has caused the bedbugs hiding inside her body to finally burst out from her swollen feet. While the bed bugs crawl away and shrivel up in the snow, Ophelia watches from the center of the fire on top a nest of glass. Her scales glow like she's just finished shedding. As the hatchback sizzles around her, the boa's tongue flicks. She has burst through the cage. Eagerly tastes the flames.

In the morning when Linda wakes she feels swollen and bloated, like she's about to start her period even though she's not supposed to for another three days. The couple drives all day, until they make their Bojangles stop, and Drake points out Ophelia's mouth is spread wide searching for food.

By the time they arrive at Petsmart, it's five minutes before closing, and Linda keeps imagining she feels blood between her legs. The female cashier sniffs and glares at greasy Linda, who holds the live rat in a cheap cage while Drake keeps the car running outside. For a moment

Linda can't place where she knows the cashier from, but then recognizes the girl from the class she TA's for. When they make eye contact, the cashier jolts her head away, making it clear she doesn't want to acknowledge she knows Linda. In class, this girl sits next to the male student who purposely drops his scantron every time Linda passes it out to him. This girl watches every time and says nothing, Linda rakes her nails across the bedbug bites on her wrist. The sudden movement sends the solid white rat running in circles. The cashier stares wide-eyed at Linda's bites, as if they are syringe marks.

“Hey, do you happen to have a tampon?” Linda says. “Or a pad?”

“What?” the cashier says, still pretending she doesn't know Linda. “Ma'am, do know where you are?”

“I just thought—”

“No one sells tampons at pet shops.”

When Linda gets back to the car, Ophelia is still rubbing her nose back and forth across the top of her cage. Drake reaches to take off the lid of her enclosure from the open hatchback. He angles his body to block the falling snow from getting into the car.

“Hey,” Linda says. “Can I feed her?” She's thinking about the cashier, and wondering if the girl will tell the other students about tonight. She wants to imagine Ophelia swallowing her.

Drake opens his mouth to tell her no, but then pauses when he looks up and sees Linda's face, the moist, forced smile, the bites all up and down her arms, the goofy braided horn that's still twisted up in her greasy, brown hair.

“Yeah, sure.”

He's smiling now, thinking about Linda wanting to feed his special pets, creatures no other girl has wanted to touch. He's picturing her curled up on his apartment bed with a book,

like she usually does after her night classes, Ophelia wrapped around her shoulders like a shawl. He's not thinking about the bedbugs or the chemicals.

But Linda is. Her bites are boiling her.

I'm the dumb bitch who got us into this mess, she thinks. She just wants to make it up to Ophelia and Drake somehow, now. She wants to take on this one little extra job of feeding Ophelia, despite needing rest and needing to stop taking on extra jobs. Linda swallows hard and opens the rat's cage.

Drake takes the lid off of Ophelia's enclosure, and steps away from the open car door to give Linda room. The smell of sweat, leftover Bojangles from the night before, and rodent are thick in the cold air.

Ophelia's jaw is unhinged in her enclosure.

There's still no rat though.

"Linda." Drake peers over her shoulder. "She's ready."

But Linda's shaky hands are still struggling to catch the rodent by its tail. She's feeling dizzy from all of the blood those bedbugs sucked out of her. Her head is pounding. She's certain she's started her period.

Ophelia raises her head out of her enclosure, mouth wide open toward the moon outside the car door behind Linda's head.

"Linda."

She's staring down the snake's throat again, in a trance. Both their stomachs are aching.

"Linda."

Ophelia rears her head backwards. There's a hiss. The boa is halfway out the hatchback.

As Drake jumps backwards, Linda gives up on the tail and just squeezes down on the rodent's whole body. Blood drips from her hand as she takes it out of the cage. The rat has its teeth sunken into the soft spot between her thumb and index finger, its claws are peeling away at whatever skin it can. Linda lashes the rat toward Ophelia, who immediately strikes at all the hot blood.

The boa catches the rat, but not before accidentally striking Linda's hand several times first. Linda yanks her arm backwards. Ophelia latches her teeth around the rat. Both girls coil downward onto the asphalt. Ophelia lands in Linda's lap with the rat still in her mouth. The rodent bites and claws at her face. Linda feels Drake's arms pulling Ophelia away from her, and she screams at him.

"Let her eat. Let her eat."

Her bloodied hand is pinched up under her shaking arms. Ophelia is struggling in her lap with the rat. There's claw marks punctured deep into her scales.

Drake finally manages to get the animals onto the cold asphalt away from his girlfriend.

"Jesus, Linda," he screams. "You can't hesitate like that with food in your hand."

"I'm fucking tired," Linda says.

"Then why'd the hell you offer to feed her? I thought you were ready."

He's shaking.

"You think I'm a stupid bitch for not realizing I had the bedbugs. I know you do."

Linda turns away from him and starts clawing at her bites with her bloodied hand. She bares her teeth at the frosty asphalt, her skin is sizzling so bad. Ophelia's double rowed teeth are razor sharp. The blood just keeps coming and coming. She feels crazy for not knowing the difference between her anxiety and the bed bugs.

In the background the rat screeches.

“Linda, what? No way.” Drake’s round eyes practically suck up all the light from the moon. “It’s not your fault. You couldn’t help—“

Drake stops Linda from reaching up with her bloodied hands to wipe away her tears. There’s slaps on the asphalt from where Ophelia’s slick muscles are still contorting to hold down the rat. The boa seems somehow unbothered by the cold.

“No, I could have. I know I could have,” Linda says. She’s thinking about the Psych teacher. She wishes she hadn’t lied to him.

Drake presses his chin into the top her head. The horn in her hair now clings to his sweaty neck.

“You’re nuts,” he says.

“I want to quit,” Linda says. “I want help.”

The Petsmart doors swish open. As the cashier is shouting about calling the police to break up the freak show in the middle of the empty parking lot, Linda juts her bloodied middle finger up toward the moon. Drake doesn’t notice the commotion at the doors. He’s too fixated on Linda’s glistening red finger in the night sky, suddenly grinning despite his watering eyes. Ophelia turns toward the Petsmart, the cottony, white rat now stained and swollen inside her gaping, pink mouth.

THE END

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VITA

Jessica York was raised in Normandy, Tennessee by parents Dede and Michael York. She is the first of three children with two younger brothers named John and James. She attended high school at The Webb School in Bell Buckle, Tennessee where she competed in cross country and received Most Valuable Female Player three years in a row. After graduation, Jessica attended The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga where she obtained a B.S. in Psychology and competed on the collegiate track and cross country team. During her undergraduate career, Jessica worked as a teaching assistant for Dr. Nicky Ozbek. Under the supervision of Dr. Nicky Ozbek, Jessica's research titled "Finding the Lower Limits for Olfactory Detection of Vanillin Using the Wheeler-UTC Odor Threshold Test" was selected for student presentation at the 2016 Tennessee Psychological Association Convention. Jessica was awarded the Ulrey K. Wilson award for outstanding senior among the Psychology department, graduated Summa Cum Laude, and maintained her status on the Dean's List and as an All-Academic student athlete throughout her undergraduate career. Jessica went on to earn her Master's in English, Creative Writing at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, where she worked as a graduate assistant for Professor Sybil Baker and served as the editor for Catalpa Magazine. Jessica's profiles and business articles have appeared in publications such as Little PINK Book, Business Trend, and Floor Focus Magazine. Currently, she works as the Assistant Editor Digital at Floor Focus Magazine.