

MATHEW MAGRO-FRY

THE MISSING PIECES

WHEN I WAS four years old, something funny happened: My mother sliced half my pinky off with a kitchen knife.

It was lasagna night, and I was perched on a barstool, helping Mom with prep work. I held a knobby carrot while she cut it into rounds. Picture me: a big boy, happy and proud to be of use. *Chop chop chop* went the orange circles, flying off the cutting board and onto the counter until—oops!—my pinky went with them, limp, small. The blood gushed out onto the cold laminate floor. Mom wrapped my hand up with a wad of paper towels and taped a freezer bag shut around my wrist. She snatched a Snoopy coffee mug, sticky with chocolate milk dregs from breakfast, and delicately placed my finger at the bottom, buried it with a handful of wet ice.

I don't remember much else—the drive, the pain, how long it took to be admitted—except for the unsettling woman who met us at the hospital. She asked me questions and didn't let Mom stay for the answers.

Do you feel safe at home? Does Mommy ever hit you? Has this happened before?

Yes, no, no.

In the end, they couldn't reattach the finger—something about the angle of the cut made it impossible.

YEARS LATER, when I was seven or eight, Mom asked me to remember the incident a little differently.

"This Christmas, when we go and you meet Grandma, we're not going to tell her about the carrots, okay?"

This "Grandma" character was a stranger to me—someone who existed only as a voice on the phone. There was Dad's mom, who was of course my grandmother, but I called her Alice. Alice was kind to me and lived nearby so we saw her often; she always had a pack of Smarties for me, which I took even though I couldn't stand the chalk they left behind on my teeth. Grandma, on the other hand, lived on the other side of the country—a place called "Virginia."

The story Mom cooked up was this: Something happened to me as

a baby, before I was really even a baby, while I was still inside her belly. My pinky just never grew in all the way.

And then I told her the story *I'd* come up with: God was making lasagna and his knife must have slipped, because off went my pinky before I even knew what a pinky was.

Mom had a look when she was profoundly worried. Even that young, I could clock it. Her eyes were glossy and small and exhausted. The corners of her mouth drew back and formed tiny wrinkles. Normally, she was always fidgeting—picking at her cuticles, pushing hair out of her face—but worry had a way of setting her deathly still.

She pulled me close. “Oh baby,” Mom said into my shoulder. “How ever are we going to get through this?”

WE'D MAKE THE TRIP in Mom's car. His name was Maurice, but Dad called him “Shitbox.” I loved Maurice like he was my brother, or maybe a very close uncle. While Mom and Dad were inside, packing, I went down to tell him the plan.

“Virginia,” I said. “You'll have to go a long way. Have you ever been there? I haven't.”

The night before, Dad spread a huge map across our dinner table. He smelled of cigarettes and sweat like he always did after work, and I hung on his back while he traced our route with a pencil.

“It'll be tough, but we can get there in two days. Maybe three. Probably three. Did you know I met Mom in Norfolk? I was in the Navy, and she was home for summer.” He looked over his shoulder at me, then pointed out this mysterious Norfolk with his thick, hairy finger.

“If you want to be specific, though,” he went on, “she's actually from Suffolk. That's over here.” He moved his finger a little to the left. “And that's where we'll be going.”

Whenever my parents spoke of the great Before time, which is to say a time before they had me, I fell into a hushed awe. At that age, I had a great reverence for their love story. Maybe because it was the only one I knew. Regardless, I was always missing pieces of the whole picture, always trying to bridge the gaps of what they'd left out. Alice told me everything there was to know about Dad's childhood, how he was a troublemaker, getting into fights, but never went past when he left home for good.

“How many states are we going to hit on this trip, Chuck?” Dad asked.

"I know how to count." I was hungry for his stories, to hear about Suffolk, and resentful of our quick departure from the subject. I'm sure he could tell. His allegiance, though, was to my mother. For whatever her reasons were, we wouldn't be treading that ground.

"Then count."

It took a moment. "Seven," I said.

"And six of them are going to be brand new to you. Cool, right?"

IN THE MORNING, I sat in the back row, middle seat so I could see both parents. Dad was behind the wheel, letting Maurice warm up. Mom had swaddled herself in a thick blanket, pulled her feet onto the seat, and leaned against the window. We idled while Dad and I listened to Mom breathe—desperate breaths, inflating her whole body. We'd planned to take off right at six thirty, but the minutes ticked on. We couldn't leave until she said. Even I knew that.

"Do we really have to do this?" she asked, eventually, muffled by the blanket.

"Jo, we don't have to do a damn thing we don't want. Not one damn thing."

Her head flopped backward onto the rest. She looked at Dad. "Seven years just doesn't seem like enough time. I have a bad feeling about all this."

"Fuck it," Dad said, then glanced at me and winked. "Who cares? Let's stay. Mom'll have us over. She'd love to. You know she loves Christmas."

Silence. Mom was thinking it over. "Does this mean we aren't going to Virginia?" I asked.

They both turned to look at me. When I think of them now, I see them just as they were: Mom, her dark hair cut short and her brow furrowed; Dad, his crooked teeth and chapped lips, the goatee, the single gold earring. Young, in a word.

"Let's go, babe," Mom said to Dad, and we went. He put Maurice into reverse, and we drove to the freeway, somber as a funeral procession.

THE DRIVE ITSELF is blurry. Open fields and early mornings—I remember cows, black walls of trees late at night, my parents bickering about where to stay. We stopped at a gas station in Texas to stretch our legs. It was the biggest I'd ever seen, bigger than my school, even. Mom and I wandered through aisles of snacks, of hats and kitschy souvenir

belt buckles embossed with bronze armadillos and longhorns, cowboys far out on the range. A harmonica met me at eye level as we went to check out; I dropped to my knees and begged Mom to buy it. I was completely making a scene—Mom would rather die than make a scene. I knew this.

In the car, a rule was quickly hammered out stating I could only play my new instrument for five minutes on the top of the hour. The rule changed if it was dark out; the harmonica needed to rest during the night and dry out from all of my spit.

“Don’t want any rust, right?” Dad asked.

Another time, perhaps in Arkansas: Mom and Dad yelling at each other in the front as I hid under a blanket, waiting it out.

“It’s *your* fucking family, Jo. I didn’t ask for them!”

“I’m just saying—can I speak?—I’m saying that if you go there with an attitude, it’s going to show.”

“I don’t need this. I’m driving all this way, you know how they’re going to act but *I’m* in the wrong because I’m dreading your terrible mother. Look at me”—at this point the car swerved a bit—“I’m the bad guy!”

“Dan, please. God!”

This went on. We pulled into another gas station. I could tell because they all had the same deep-yellow lights that hummed through the shroud of my blanket. I poked my head out. Dad was in the car, but Mom wasn’t.

“Hey, buddy.” His voice was so gentle after they fought. We stared at each other in the rearview. Dad’s skin was jaundiced from the light, his eyes bloodshot.

“Mom and I are just stressed out from all this.”

“Okay.”

“Someday you might get stressed when you visit us. I hope not, but sometimes parents and kids don’t get along. Mom’s trying to figure it—”

“Where’s Mom?”

“—out. Inside. She’s inside.”

When she returned, Mom threw a stuffed moose at Dad as she got in. He held it in his hands, silent.

“I’m sorry,” she grumbled, then yanked her seat belt on. He looked at her, at the moose, at me. Dad chuckled and started Maurice.

As we drove away, all I wanted was the moose. I was so jealous of Dad because he’d gotten a present, and I hadn’t.

VIRGINIA CAME TO US under cover of cloud. The rain dumped so loudly, so violently it drowned out the radio completely. Dad flicked it off. A distinct, nearly visible desperation was leaking from each of us: Dad, to keep Maurice straight and on the road through the storm; me, to see what was happening; and Mom, perhaps just to stay alive.

“We going to the hotel first?” Dad asked. “Or is it too early?”

“Probably too early. Plus, if we go to their place now, we can use the hotel as an out later. Tell them we need to go drop our stuff off.”

“I love the way you think, Jo.”

She looked at him. I could tell she was trying to smile. Since Tennessee, Mom had been pinching the skin of her left forearm and pulling it to a point before it slipped out. The spot she'd been doing this had turned pink. I reached forward and held on to her elbow.

“How ya feeling, Charlie?” she asked.

I shrugged and let my chin droop until it rested on the center console.

Our deceleration as we pulled off the freeway made my stomach feel strange and light. The rain picked up even harder.

“Oh God,” Mom said. I looked up, and we were in a forest.

Mom's old house was at the end of a street in that forest. Her neighbors were so spread out, it was hard to believe we were in a neighborhood at all. Towering, barren trees shot from the ground, like the long fingers of a huge skeleton reaching out to snatch us at journey's end. How had Mom, who raised me and was my best friend, grown up somewhere so far away from the place I called home? Someplace so different? Nothing made sense. Home was a second-floor apartment in a modestly sized complex; the place was tiny, even to me, and the outside was a little shabby: faded paint and gutters full of dead pine needles. Mom's house, though, was somewhere a princess might live—so magnificent I didn't believe her when she pointed it out. Red-brick walls, four chimneys poking out of the roof, stone steps leading up to a front door we could drive Maurice through. All this behind a metal gate.

“We're here,” Mom croaked.

Dad rolled down the window and pressed a button and the gate buzzed, rattled open. We drove forward. All of a sudden, the rain cut, and the silence was deafening.

The driveway was packed with cars—all shinier and less dented than Maurice—and my heart dropped. That many cars meant that many people. Desperately, I wanted to be far away, in the truck stop in Texas,

or at Alice's, eating her chalky candy and saying: Thank you, may I have some more?

"What do you think, buddy?" Dad asked me.

"Big," was all I could force out.

Dad parked behind a blue truck. I watched the house, waiting for a horde of strangers to burst from within; before we could get out of Maurice, the door opened and two wiry black dogs sprinted toward us. An old man waved from the doorway. Dad waved back.

"Mom," I said, but she wasn't listening, only pinching her forearm again with an urgency; when the skin slipped out of her fingers, she went hunting for it anew: pinch pinch pinch.

Dad got out and opened my door, helped me to my feet. The old man came over and shook Dad's hand.

"Dan," he said. "Good to see you. Drive was all right?"

"Sure, Jerry. Smooth all the way."

They went to the trunk and began unloading. The dogs, nearly my height, circled me, sniffing my hands, my shoes, my butt, my face. I wasn't sure if they wanted to love me or eat me. I was frozen stiff and standing in a puddle of cold water.

"Leave him alone. *Get*," Mom said, now beside me. "They're giants, huh?" she asked.

"My girl," Jerry said, leaving Dad to the suitcases and going to her. He held Mom's shoulders; she smiled the same hollow smile she'd conjured on the freeway. Jerry pulled her into him and squeezed so tight, Mom squeaked.

"Hi, Daddy."

"My girl," Jerry said again. From the porch, a woman watched us, arms crossed. By her fingertips, she dangled a small glass filled with brown liquid.

"Let me look at you," Jerry said to Mom.

Dad stood next me and put a hand on my back. "Jerry," he said. "This is Charlie."

Jerry processed that for a moment and then slowly squatted down until he was my height. He exhaled in my face; his breath was campfire smoke and candy canes.

"Hello, my little friend. Do you know who I am?"

I tried to push behind Dad's leg, but he held me where I was. I shook my head.

"Well, I'm your mommy's daddy. I'm your grandpa."

There was no telling what I was supposed to say; we practiced a lot of things in the car—the pinky story was recited in every state—but not this. Slowly, I extended my hand, the left, all fingers attached, out to him.

“Hello, sir,” I mumbled. Jerry smiled; Jerry laughed; Jerry took my hand in his wrinkly one, shook it, and tousled my hair.

“Southpaw, huh?” he said, bemused. “God, Dan, he looks *just* like you.”

“He’s got your eyes, Daddy,” Mom said.

“He just might. He just might.” We looked at each other for a bit longer. I scrutinized his jowls, searching for any kind of recognition. His long, gray teeth and the black lines separating them, his white-as-snow hair—was there a spark? If this was my grandpa, surely something inside of me knew this, no?

No. He was a stranger; he was friendly, clearly excited to meet me, but there was no way Jerry could be my grandfather. I knew better than to say this aloud.

Dad and Jerry hauled our bags to the house and Mom walked me up the stairs and onto the vast porch. The woman in the doorway watched us approach. She wore an oversized, forest-green sweater and black pants, and a string of pearls hung from her neck, each one bigger and more brilliant than the last. Her hair was short like Mom’s, but bronze and strawlike. A lazy U was stamped in red lipstick onto the rim of her glass, which she shook absentmindedly, then drank from.

Mom said: “Hello, Mom.”

She grinned. “Is this Charles?”

Mom nodded. “Say hi, Charlie.”

“Hi.” I was holding on to her leg fiercely, so tight I’m surprised Mom didn’t yell at me.

“Well hello, Charles. I’m Rosalind. Your grandmother.”

She held her thin, bony claw out to me—Rosalind’s nails were long and sharp, painted the same red as her lips. Mom patted my back. I took Rosalind’s hand in my own and was shocked when it didn’t crumble into dust.

INSIDE, THE PARADE of faces was unending. Cousins: Ross, Edgar, Peter, Elizabeth, Richard, Little Timothy, Clarissa, Clarice, Stephanie, who wasn’t present, but she’d be there soon. Uncles: Paul, Big Tim, and Albert. The uncles were unrelated to Mom, who only had sisters.

Their names were: Clara, Penelope, and Eleanor, who requested I call her Auntie Lane. Clara and Penelope had no such preference. I was the youngest person there, just as Mom was the youngest daughter. Everyone kept using the same word when they made the connection: neat.

After the battery of half-hearted introductions, Mom took me on a tour. The house felt quite like the museums she was always dragging me through. Paintings hung on the walls in great, golden frames; miles of wallpaper stretched room to room: tiny animals frolicked through the house, foxes chased hares, and stags stared at me with stoic indifference. Off a room Mom called the “foyer” was a spiral staircase. I wanted to slide down the banister so badly, like I’d wanted nothing before, but Mom wouldn’t let me.

“I used to slide down this when *I* was a kid. Know what happened?”

“You had fun?”

She smirked. “No, I broke my tooth. See this?” Mom pulled back her lip and pointed at one of her front teeth. It looked just as it should: white and straight. “Half of this is fake. They glued it on when I was a teenager.”

This sufficiently terrified me, but the stairs were still something to behold. Stairs *inside* the home? Had Mom grown up on a movie set? I couldn’t comprehend it. When there was always one more room to follow the next, I kept asking her, You lived here? Really?

And she would nod and tell me yes, she did, for eighteen years and then the summer after she left, she met Dad and they had me.

“Wow.” It was all I could say. If not for all the strangers and how they frightened me, I would have stayed forever. I’d seen where Dad grew up, many times. Alice still lived in that same trailer. Dad’s name was carved into the floor in the living room; a pair of his shoes still hung on the powerline out back. Alice’s home had no more secrets to discover, but every mote of dust in Mom’s house was a revelation.

IT WAS DARK OUT when Mom told me we weren’t going to the hotel anymore.

“We’re staying in my old room tonight. Me and Dad on the bed, and you’ll get your own cot, so no sharing with us.” I tried hard to read her face, but her feelings were illegible.

Later, Jerry started a fire in one of the three living rooms. The fireplace was taller than me, a gaping mouth butting from the wall. Rosalind sat on the floor next to it, the glass in her hand never less than

half empty. I kept waiting for all the people to leave—surely they had houses of their own—but they never did. It seemed *everyone* was staying the night. All of Mom’s family. Some of them seemed thrilled to see her, but others didn’t speak to her at all and were merely the shapes of people Auntie Lane pointed out. I liked Auntie Lane enough, but I wanted everyone else to leave, or at least leave us alone. I felt watched by my cousins, like some strange animal they’d spotted in the woods. I was a freak. They did not welcome me to play with them, but this did not deliver me any relief from their presence.

No one had asked about my pinky. No one had noticed.

Upstairs, both my parents sighed deeply and melted into Mom’s bed. I looked through a keyhole in the door: nothing. The hallway was dark. Below, someone cackled.

“Come away from there, baby,” Mom said. I climbed onto the cot, right at the foot of their bed. It was rigid and wide, deep as a canoe. Dad had taken his shirt and jeans off and was laying in the bed in his tighty-whities. His feet, still in tube socks, rested on his pillow. He propped his head up on his fists and talked to me.

“What’d ya think, Chuck?” he asked. “Does it feel funny seeing where Mom’s from?”

I looked around the room. Jerry told me earlier they hadn’t touched it since Mom left, only to dust. There was a phone on the nightstand next to Dad’s feet. A plastic Mickey Mouse, the black of his fur sun-faded, rested his elbow on the red receiver. Posters blocked out almost every inch of the yellow walls, all bands Mom played in Maurice and forced me to sing along with her: The Cure, Patti Smith, Duran Duran, David Bowie. Morrissey, the man who sang most of my lullabies, stared down at me from the ceiling. His face was in shadow and his skin was purple.

“It is kind of funny,” I said.

“God,” Mom said. “If my mother snipes at you one more fucking time, Dan. She just can’t keep that vile mouth shut.”

“It’s okay, Jo.”

“It is not okay.” Mom whispered with violence, a tone usually reserved for quick discipline when we were out at the mall or the bank. “All she does is cry to me on the phone—‘my daughter has *absconded* from me!’—but we show up and she can’t play nice? No, Dan, it’s not fucking *okay*.”

“Look, I know you’re stressed—let me finish?—I know you’re . . .

feeling the pressure, okay? But let's remember I'm the home team, right?" He thought about it, then reached over and heaved me onto the bed with his strong, rough hands. I squealed. I loved when my dad lifted me like I weighed nothing. "We're the home team. This, right here? This is your family. Not those people out there. Not if you don't want them to be. You want to leave? Then let's go. Let's get the fuck out."

Mom's eyes were wet and trembling. She started to stammer, then gave up, collapsed onto a pillow, buried her face in it. A roar of laughter from below. Mom groaned. "Not tonight," she said. "Not yet."

Dad let me go and rubbed her back. "Whatever you want, baby. We'll hop in the shitbox and leave when they're asleep. I clog the toilet, and you palm the good jewelry. Charlie'll pour bacon grease down the sink. Whatever you want."

IN THE MORNING, Mom woke me early. Her hair was matted and it didn't look like she'd slept.

"Grandpa wants to show you the property, Charlie. Would you like that? You're allowed to say no."

JERRY DROOPED OVER a steaming cup of coffee in the kitchen. Blocky ducks were knitted into his gray cardigan, mid-flight. He wore big, dorky glasses and black rain boots. Mom made the handoff. I was wary to be without her, but I was starting to like Jerry, despite my reservations.

"Ready? Is he going to be warm enough in—?" He gestured at me.

"Charlie'll be fine," Mom said, patting me on the shoulder. "Thick material."

Outside, the sun had risen, but the gloom was so thick it was nearly dark. My breath fogged out in front of me—such a novelty to someone who'd only lived somewhere so warm. I huffed and hyperventilated, exhaling more and more to keep the cloud around my head from dissipating.

Jerry laughed, which turned into a cough. He pulled out a cigarette from a silver case and lit it with a match.

"Charlie, your family has been on this land for a *long* time."

In the distance, I could see a sliver of a lake, shimmering like a mirage. I wondered if it ever froze over, and if Mom had skated on it like they did in Charlie Brown. As we walked, the ground squelched under our feet.

“Long time. Have you learned about the pilgrims in school yet, buddy?”

I nodded. Every kid learns about the pilgrims every year, I said. “They came over on the *Mayflower*.”

“Very good. Indeed they did.” I looked up at him, but all I could see was the burning cherry of his cigarette through the orbiting smoke. “Our ancestors—by which I mean your many, *many* great-grandpas and grandmas—were pilgrims of a sort, too. They came here on a ship called *Susan Constant*. People related to you, Charlie boy, have been in Virginia since 1607. That’s a while, huh?”

I nodded. It was a while.

It started to sprinkle. We took shelter under what looked like a small church but without walls. White wooden lattice up to the steep spire roof, where a metal rooster spun with the wind. Jerry said this was called a “gazebo,” a word I had to try on for size before it felt right in my mouth. Behind the treeline, a blob of brown skittered through the foliage. Was it a deer? I’d never seen a deer before.

“Grandpa,” I asked Jerry. “Are you rich?”

He choked. “Ah, you could say we’re—well, we’re well off, Charlie. Does no good to go around saying the word ‘rich.’ Breeds resentment. Do you know that word? ‘Resentment?’”

The backyard went on forever. Jerry had taken me through the garden of sculptures, white-faced with petrified eyes. Some had gray and green and yellow mold growing on their cheeks and foreheads. Their stares unsettled me very much as we passed through. Jerry pointed out a graveyard down the way, but I didn’t have the guts to visit. Further still, there were a few cabins squatting together, separate from the main house. They were shoddier, less cared for, plain.

“How did you get to be ‘well off?’” I asked.

“Well, I think the easiest way to look at it is, the Henrys have been on this land for oh so many years, and when you stay somewhere long enough, you reap the rewards of, eh, *tenure*. Our wealth comes from a series of continued ownership. We’ve owned things—land, water access, that sort—and people paid to use them.” He took a choppy breath in. “Even used to farm out here, too. Before my time.”

“Who lived in those places?” I pointed to the cabins. From the gazebo, I could see inside the windows—tiny and cramped. Nowhere I’d want to sleep.

Jerry exhaled deep from within himself. He looked at me, the cabins,

then smiled, lit another cigarette. “You ever had coffee, Charles? Would you like to try some? Nothing better on a day like today than a nice coffee with cream.”

IT WAS CHRISTMAS EVE. Mom’s family had a tradition of opening one present at the stroke of midnight, but Mom didn’t want me to participate. We were in the kitchen and I was hiding behind her legs. The house was somehow even more crowded than it’d been before.

“What is he? An infant?” Rosalind asked. She was mixing some black goop in a glass bowl; it reminded me of the tar Dad poured at work. “It’s tradition, Josephine. You came here just to sleep? Let him stay up.”

“He’s young, Mom,” Mom said. “*You* weren’t letting seven-year-olds stay up that late.”

“Perhaps not Clara, but after Penelope was born, there was no keeping things separate. You certainly stayed up until midnight.”

Mom was pinching her arm again. The two of them had a remarkably similar way of speaking—how theatrical they were, playing off of each other in some desperate balancing act, their tones seesawing over one deep chasm, then back the other way. It was strange: There was so much of each woman in the other, so plainly obvious, and yet a hulking difference persisted beyond my field of view. To look at Rosalind was to view a picture of my mother, but the frame was busted and the glass had shattered.

“Fine,” Mom said. I grabbed the spot on her arm with both hands and she smiled at me, wanly.

The energy in the house dwindled as day turned to night. Jerry gathered most everyone around the piano where he sang—quite terribly and out of tune—Christmas songs I’d never heard. Dad and I snuck up to our room, where we found Mom, and the three of us hid there until Auntie Lane came by to ask Mom to take a walk with her. From the window, I watched them stroll past the front gate, then pass a cigarette between themselves until it burnt out. When she returned, Mom couldn’t stop laughing at everything I said, which persisted through the evening until presents were handed out, just a few minutes before midnight. Rosalind selected each one. The Christmas tree scraped the ceiling. It couldn’t have fit in our apartment back home even if we turned it on its side. I wondered what Alice would make of it.

What’s the big deal? Santa don’t care about a tree, I imagined her saying. Alice knew I didn’t believe in Santa Claus but still spoke about him

like he was a close and personal friend. I loved Alice. I missed her so terribly. If Santa *were* real, Alice would have popped out from the present I had resting on my knees.

“All right everyone, five seconds, and—go!” Rosalind announced. The cousins ripped into their presents like vultures: RC cars, video games, a bike. Mom looked at me and nodded. I opened mine slowly, peeling strips of tape and folding wrapping paper back. Some of the cousins were already begging their parents for batteries by the time I’d finished.

It was a desk set. Mom had to explain it to me. A few pens and a leather cup to hold them, and something to put your paper down on top of. It stung, seeing all of the amazing, fun toys my new cousins were playing with, but I knew better than to reveal this. Anyways, my real presents were back home. We hadn’t brought them with us. Mom was fuming, though. Her nose trembled.

Dad got an electric razor. Mom didn’t open her present. It sat wrapped by her feet. She kicked it under her chair.

I WOKE UP to the sound of Dad snoring. He was splayed out in bed, alone, legs spread wide. It wasn’t big enough for two people. It was hardly big enough for Dad.

It was early, still dark out. I dragged myself out of the cot and checked the window to see if Mom and Auntie Lane were outside again. They weren’t. A sudden, heavy fear gripped me: What if I never saw my mother again? What if she could never leave this place? Her room, untouched since she’d left. Had it been waiting for her? To trap her away from me, lock her inside? I tried hard to push the thought from my head, but it persisted. I needed to find Mom. I needed to convince her she couldn’t stay.

The door scraped the ground as I opened it. Downstairs, I heard voices, but only two—not the army of people I’d been ducking. I crept forward; each step seemed to make the whole house groan. Once, my mother was the youngest in her family. Once, she slunk down those stairs, hugged the walls close, lurked toward the kitchen, and pressed her ear to the threshold of the door so she might hear the desperate conversation therein, just as I did, too.

“I will be pleasant when the situation dictates pleasantness, Josephine,” Rosalind was saying.

“He’s the father of your grandson. Can you just—pull the stick out of your ass, please?” Mom’s voice, now.

“And some father he’s turned out to be. The way Charles acts. Well, I suppose it all makes sense, when you look at the boy’s daddy. Couldn’t expect much more!”

“You are such a fucking cunt.” Rosalind let out a little gasp. “Evil. You are evil.”

“And you are a child, raising a child, with that brute you’ve got tied up upstairs. The two of you, playing house, not a care in the damned world.”

“I really don’t think I need parenting advice from you, of all people.”

“Oh I am *so* sorry you had to grow up in such a nice house, with such a fine family name, such a fine family. I’m sure your son has it much better, living in that crummy little apartment of yours with the roaches in the walls and the crack pipes in the stairwell.”

“You don’t know a single thing about how the three of us live. Delusional. You’re fucking delusional.”

“Delusional if I pictured a better life for my daughter, yes, I suppose I am. You’re lucky I let that man of yours into this house after everything he’s done.”

“What exactly has he done? He didn’t abduct me, despite how you act.”

“He may as well have. You were a child when you left this house. You’re not even as old as he was when the two of you met, are you?”

“And how old were you when Daddy wooed you off your feet? Served up like a cornish hen in your debutant dress.”

One of them slammed their fist down on the kitchen island. I couldn’t tell which.

“And look at the life your daddy gave me. Gave *us*. You bring your circus of a family back here and you embarrass me, you embarrass everything your father has ever done for you. If I had my say, you’d have stayed in this house until we found you a proper suitor, vetted, respectable. Instead, you bring back *him*.”

My dread morphed. Of course Mom didn’t want to stay here. Perhaps it was this woman, this witch, detaining her. If only I could prove how good of a mother Mom was, maybe Rosalind would release us. She could have the desk set back, Dad’s razor. We’d go, and everything would be fine. Maybe Mom would even buy *me* a stuffed moose on the way home. I looked down at my right hand, and the idea took me. There was nothing else to do.

I jumped from my hiding spot; Rosalind gasped and Mom whipped

around. For the first time since I'd been there, Rosalind wasn't wearing her pearls. Their absence was heavy. She could have taken off her nose and it would have been less noticeable.

"My mom is a good mom!" I shouted, as loud as I could muster. Mom seemed shocked by my volume; her name—Mom—echoed dimly through the house. "Look!"

I held my hand up as if to say "Stop!" I wiggled the nub that was my pinky. "When I was in my mom's belly, God was making lasagna, and he accidentally chopped my finger right off! Mom has never hurt me! She loves me and we are friends!"

I became conscious of how hard I was breathing: in, out. I'd roused the hounds and could hear their toenails clacking on the hardwoods, bounding toward me. A beam of juvenile sunlight shot through the window behind Rosalind and lit up her thin hair.

She moved toward me, but I took a step back. "What on earth is this boy talking about, Josephine?" She reached for my hand, but I didn't let her take it. "His finger? What happened to his finger?"

Mom seemed flustered. "He's, uh—there was a defect. When he was born. His pinky didn't grow all the way."

"What?" Rosalind covered her mouth with her hands. Through them, she said: "What kind of 'defect' is that? What else is wrong with him?"

"Nothing is *wrong* with Charlie—he just doesn't have—"

Rosalind looked at Mom so sharply it frightened me. Had I miscalculated? Made some critical mistake in revealing my pinky? But my pinky, or the story we'd concocted around it, was definitive proof, I thought, that Mom had never—*could* never—hurt me. Everything bad that had ever happened to me was accidental, out of Mom's control, thus proving her maternal efficacy. Someone was moving upstairs. The hounds had found me, and they were pushing me every which way with their massive skulls and bony rumps.

"You are *lying*, you little bitch," Rosalind said. "I know when you're *lying*."

Mom was pinching her forearm again. "I'm not—lying."

Rosalind rushed to Mom and snatched her wrists. "That beast of yours did this to Charles, didn't he? Played too rough, broke the boy's pinky so badly they had to amputate?" She shook Mom's wrists into her face. "Too scared to tell the truth?"

"What's going on here?" Jerry said from the hallway.

“Look at this boy’s finger!” Rosalind pushed Mom away and grabbed me before I could dart off. “Sliced clean off! His mother’s been feeding him lies about birth defects—no, this is negligence, plain and simple!”

“Let go of him,” Mom said, wedging herself between the two of us. “Charlie, go upstairs and get your dad, okay?”

“Mom?” I asked.

“We’re leaving, baby. Tell Dad to pack.”

UPSTAIRS, I FLOATED past the whole house unseen, a ghost in their midst. Uncles poked their heads out from their rooms, cousins snickered, and Auntie Lane rushed down to the ground floor. At the end of the hall, Jerry and Rosalind’s door was open. I knew Mom wanted me to get Dad, I knew I had a job to do, but I couldn’t resist. I walked right in. Who wouldn’t?

Their mammoth four-poster bed, bigger than Maurice, sat unmade, robin’s-egg-blue sheets sagging off and onto the ground. Heavy, velvet drapes were pulled shut, and it was as dark as a cave. One of the dogs had followed me inside; she watched me with big whale eyes and I pet her head. Her fur was coarse and cold and maybe even a little bit wet.

Two nightstands flanked the bed; I walked toward the one on the right. An empty glass smeared with lipstick rested atop a gold-leafed Bible, which sagged halfway off the ledge. Inside the nightstand: a nail file, a few crumpled-up tissues, a bottle of pills, and a red box that opened like a felt clamshell.

It was getting louder downstairs. The dog whined. Mom was in the middle of a scene, and we needed to leave. I knew we needed to leave.

JERRY WAVED GOODBYE from the porch as Maurice scurried us away. I waved back, but I don’t think he could see me. Mom was crying in the front seat, and Dad was rubbing her leg, saying things like, “Everything’s all right” and “We’re gone, now, baby.” I felt so rotten, I couldn’t even look at my harmonica. It sat on the seat next to me, fully charged from several nights’ rest, but for nothing.

Once Dad was sure we weren’t being chased, he pulled over at a roadside diner. We’d passed a few, but this was the first that was open. Inside, we all got coffee; I drowned mine in cream and sugar. Mom chuckled at that. Her eyes were so puffy I could hardly see the color of them: green, earthy. Same as mine.

When our food came, we dug in, quiet except for our smacking lips.

If you were watching us, it would have looked like we hadn't eaten in days.

Later, Dad pushed his empty plate away from him, rested his hands on his belly. "Well. That was certainly an adventure, wasn't it, gang?"

Mom laughed, hard, so hard her body shook, so hard people turned to look. "I've had better," she said once she'd caught her breath. "Too bad we aren't leaving with any presents though, huh?" She took me under her arm and kissed the top of my head.

"Wait!" I shrieked. "Stop!"

She let go and I reached into the inner pocket of my winter coat. I put the red clamshell on the table and opened it with syrup-sticky hands. I held the contents out for them to see: the necklace. The pearls were huge, like Rosalind had plucked the eyeballs from those ancient statues in her garden. It was heavy in my tiny grip. Dad stammered something incoherent, but Mom was silent. Her eyes, the ones that looked just like mine, just like Jerry's, were fixed on the necklace. I placed it into her hands.

The three of us sat there, marveling, until our waitress came by with the bill.

"Thanks for stopping in, folks," she said. "Come back and see us real soon."