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Selections from jars of Wilda Point

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SELECTIONS FROM JARS OF WILDA POINT

by

Christian H. O'Callaghan-Leue

A Thesis

Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York

In Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

College of Arts and Sciences

Department of English

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ABSTRACT

My creative thesis is titled Selections from Jars of Wilda Point. It consists of five short stories from a larger linked collection. These stories are linked through the theme of what and why the character keep what they do in jars or bottles and by the fictitious town in Coastal Maine called Wilda Point. The five stories are titled by what is in the jar and the year it's taking place, "Keys, Year 1984" "Ghosts, Year 2008," "Cross Words, Year 1951," "Jude's Life, Year 2014," and "Crosswords, Year 2016." They are character-driven, and each reflects the larger project for their exploration of the human experience of grief, longing, relationships, sacrifice, fear, love, and obsession. Along with writing these stories, I researched Maine and the magical/marvelous/fantastical real, and gathered short story collections from around the world, most of which have a touch of magical realism and are predominantly written by women.

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Introduction

I worked on five stories from a linked short story collection titled Jars of Wilda Point for my creative thesis. As part of this, I compiled and read books about Maine and short story collections by women from around the world, studied colors, botanicals, and witchcraft, and educated myself on the magic/marvelous/fantastical real and the reimagining of folk traditions and fairy tales. The stories take place in a fictitious town in Maine called Wilda Point. Each story is themed and titled by what the characters keep in jars and bottles. They also answer the question, “What’s the myth?”

The collection was born from a submission call with the theme “harvest.” I chose not to write about food but instead investigated the meaning of harvest. The words “gather” and “collect” caught my attention, and I began to question what and why people collect anything. I started with myself and collecting sea glass, an activity I’ve done since I was a young kid at my grandmother’s side. I still do it today. There is something meditative and calming about walking up and down a beach, picking up small pieces of sugared glass. It also provides a reminder of my grandmother. It’s the feelings I experience more than the result that matters. I began thinking about other things people collect in jars. This was in 2020, the first summer of COVID, so I made driveway visits with neighbors in Maine to ask them about the jars they keep in their windows, what they collect, and why.

The stories focus on obsession, desperation, grief, love, relationships, longing, want, fear, obligation, and survival, all with a touch of the magic/marvelous/fantastical real. The stories are character-driven, focusing on their internal shift and why they collect what they collect. This

wasn't a collection when I started my Masters; it evolved and grew from my coursework. The Transatlantic Romance Gothic class I took with Dr. Lilley my first semester helped that evolution immensely after I presented on Washington Irving and researched the folk traditions he used to create "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and "Rip Van Winkle." Most recently, in Textural Practices with Dr. Elam, I spent the semester deep-diving into Lydia Davis and Grace Paley's use of brevity and absence. I wrote two new flash pieces, "Tears, Year 1978" and "Stones, Year 1955," as part of my final paper about Davis and Paley. These stories are now part of the larger collection.

The stories began with three flash pieces "Glass," "Seeds," and "Light." All three were eventually published. "Glass" (appendix 1) appeared in *The Los Angeles Review* in August 2021. While watching the comet NEOWISE and the Perseids meteor shower, I spoke with my cousin, who had survived ten days on a ventilator due to COVID, beat cancer, and is Vietnam Vet. He told the story of a glass jar filled with sea glass that he and his brother collected the weekend between one returning from Vietnam and the other deploying. Their mother, my great-aunt Hazel, had them gather the glass to give them time together. She wrote a note and placed it in the jar with the glass. The jar still sits undisturbed on my cousin's shelf. "Glass" is the story of two sons drafted to serve with one weekend overlapping between them. Before each son departs, Ava, the mother, has them collect 365 pieces of glass from the beach, one for each day, and after they leave, she puts a blessing of protection on each piece. I wrote a follow-up as part of my final paper for Dr. Elam's class, and it is one of the stories included in my thesis. "Tears, Year 1978" takes place ten years after Ava's youngest son is declared missing in action with no further news. She is collecting her tears in bottles because she is not ready to deal with the uncertainty of her

still-missing son. There is a third, titled “Empty, Year 1987.” It’s about Ava letting go of the sea glass and tears she’s been holding onto.

“Seeds” (appendix 2) was published in the *Paper Teller Diorama 2021* anthology with *Great Weather for Media*. It’s about a young woman named Oona who is dealing with the childhood trauma of surviving a car crash that killed her parents and was raised in the wood by her grandfather. She obsessively gathers seeds, dries them, and keeps them in jars. Her favorite are asters, primarily because of the various lessons taught by her grandfather. For example, aster smoke is used to scare away snakes and evil spirits. He tells her a modified version of the aster myth from Greek mythology, of the goddess Astraea crying and her tears touching the ground, then turning into star-shaped blooms. Instead, he tells her they fell from the sky when she was born.

“Light” (appendix 3) won second place in the *Chestnut Review Stubborn Writers Contest* for Flash in Winter 2022. This piece is about Phoebe, who lives independently and gathers light and warmth in jars to use inside her house during the winter. She collects sunlight, the full moon, the aurora borealis, and fireflies. Her neighbors tolerate the strange woman until the modern system fails in a storm one day, knocking out the power. It’s the conflict between the old ways and the new methods. This piece went through several endings in the writing process. It was inspired by the mason jars I keep in my backyard filled with strings of solar-powered lights.

This thesis is comprised of five new pieces. “Keys, Year 1984” is about five-year-old Mary, who has just moved to her new house in Wilda Point and discovers a doorknob on the fence surrounding the backyard. The story follows Mary over eleven years as she finds keys almost daily and tests them on the gate. She believes Gnomes live inside the garden and offers them treats in exchange for listening to their secrets and stories, which she then writes down. At

thirteen, she's told it's time to grow up and stop writing childish things. This reflects what girls often go through at that age. She starts trying out different styles and personalities while continuing to find keys. Mary eventually returns to the Gnome stories after a teacher encourages her. This story was inspired by a friend who finds lost keys everywhere she goes and by the process of growing up as a girl. This story plays off one of the elements of the magical/marvelous/fantastical real by playing with the numbers of an object.

“Ghosts, Year 2008” uses the New England tradition of setting ghost traps in the upper corner of doorways. This story ties into “Seeds,” “Keys, Year 1984,” “Money, Year 2017,” and “Witches, Year 2018.” While their parents are out for the night, Mike helps his younger sister Charlotte attempt to capture the three ghosts she believes are haunting their home. Charlotte thinks capturing the ghosts will solve the family's problems and make everyone happy. The New England tradition for trapping ghosts differs from the more popular and well-known Southern tree bottles, which ward off and trap evil spirits. I research traditional methods for trapping, storing, and managing ghosts and how ghosts can disturb a home.

There is a three-part set of stories titled “Cross Words, Year 1955,” “Jude's Life, Year 2014,” and “Crosswords, Year 2016.” “Cross Words, Year 1955” is about two people, Steve and Irene, and the sacrifice they're asked to make to keep the town of Wilda Point and their parents (long-time business partners and best friend couples) happy and thriving. It follows the changes in Maine and America during the turbulent mid-century. I wanted this piece to feel like an old black-and-white TV show and a fairy tale. Jude, the primary point of color in the story, is a binder, and I used a combination of fairy tales and folklore to create the idea of her taking Steve and Irene's voices. I leaned heavily into the concept of sacrificial magic.

“Jude’s Life, Year 2014” is about Jessie and her mother going through her great-aunt Jude’s apartment after she passed away. Jessie sifts through large jars her great-aunt kept as a form of journaling. She knows Jude well but also realizes that Jude had many secrets. Jude wasn’t allowed to share her skills and secrets with Jessie because Jessie’s mother forbade it. Many of the little things Jude does with Jessie, like ringing bells, are traditional forms of protective magic and spellwork. “Crosswords, Year 2016” is about a young married couple, Jessie and Weston, hitting the seven-year itch. Jessie is burning the crosswords she collects from the couple Steve and Irene from “Cross Words, Year 1955” because she thinks they bring the spark back to her marriage instead of simply talking to her husband. She stumbles into using magic without training and discovers there are consequences.

Some authors I used as inspiration for these stories are Kelly Link, Carmen Maria Machado, Helen Oyeyemi, and Karen Russell. I was lucky enough to meet Helen Oyeyemi in 2018. She shared her process for writing What’s Not Yours Is Not Yours by researching lesser-known folk traditions and creating new stories inspired by them, which spoke to my heart and became part of how I approached this collection. My first exposure to Karen Russell was Vampires in the Lemon Grove in 2019 after picking up a used copy at a bookstore. The title made me so curious. The title story is a fascinating example of taking something extraordinary, like a vampire, and reducing him to surviving off lemons and what that does to a once ferocious creature. I read Her Body and Other Parties by Carmen Maria Machado when I could not sleep during the early days of COVID. Her story “The Husband Stitch” sent me down a rabbit hole. It was based on “The Yellow Ribbon” in a children’s book, In A Dark, Dark Room And Other Scary Stories by Alvin Schwartz, but it is an even older folktale that evolved into a campfire tale. The color of the ribbon changes over time, but the essence of the story is held firm in

Marchado's version. Kelly Link's "The Faery Handbag" from Magic for Beginners is one of many of her stories I adore. I'm singling it out for being both simple and complex. She created a world within a world and explores the special relationship between a grandmother and granddaughter. Sometimes it takes a removed generation to see what's so magical about an eccentric older person. Link's use of a simple element of a hairy handbag holding the entire civilization of Baldeziwurlekistan, which is moving at its own time and speed while everyday life is occurring, is brilliant.

While writing this thesis, I've compiled a list of primarily short story collections, many with touches of the magical/marvelous/fantastic real, some of them are linked, and many are by contemporary female writers from around the world, often with a strong sense of location. This is a collection that I'm continuing to grow and enjoy. Ludmilla Petrushevskaya, Lesley Nneka Arimah, Tea Obreht, Samantha Hunt, Jan Carson, and Roisin O'Donnell are a few of these writers. The ever-growing list is included in the bibliography.

The setting of New England, especially Maine, is a crucial character of its own in these pieces. I lived there before moving to Upstate New York and spent time with my grandmothers there while growing up in Western Massachusetts. Maine holds a place deep in my heart. Coastal Maine is geographically fascinating because of the unique craggy coastline, the Gulf of Maine, and the joining of the tall pines and the ocean. Much of the American coast south of Maine is more heavily developed. There is magic in watching the sunrise over the drink, which brings the music of the wood and the ocean into a distinctive symphony and a particular fragrance. The wood and the sea are two settings that hold so much mystery and mythos. Maine's people are made up of an interesting blend of ethnic communities, each with its flavors and traditions—the Native community of the Wabanaki tribe comprised of the Maliseet, Micmac, Passamaquoddy,

and Penobscot. The early white settlers and those families who came in slowly over centuries included German, French, Irish, English, and Dutch. There are French-speaking pockets throughout the state. Over the past few decades, Somali refugees have found a safe haven in the Lewiston/Auburn area. These groups didn't enter all at once, streaming in as they would to a big city. It's been slow and in waves. They brought foods like sauerkraut, bean suppers, and potatoes, languages, music, and stories with each group. The traditions and lore change slowly and are a regular part of life. The seven generations' approach to fishing and the celebration of King Neptune's arrival to kick off the Lobster Festival are a few.

My goal is to pull from the myths, lore, magical tradition, and fairy tales we as people have clung to as means of survival for millennia. Lore can mean a lot of different things. New Englanders have kept to these traditions for luck, protection, control, understanding, and community. It's in the everyday expressions, "Red sun in morning sailor take warning, red sun at night sailors delight," "Never buy a green car," "I put away the snow shovel, for sure it's gonna snow now," "fairy mats are out, the fog will clear," "Pinecones are high, gonna be a rough winter." Note how many are about the weather. There are so many more that are part of everyday conversation that I thought everyone knew until their uniqueness was pointed out to me. Combining these old wives' tales, the lack of control over the elements, managing fears, and feeling an amount of power and knowledge over something there is no control over. Maine's economy still relies on fishing, working in the fields for blueberries and potatoes, and working in the woods, anything involved with felling and processing trees. These little expressions and charms are the last feelings of control a person may feel over a still-wild landscape.

Wilda Point is named after my great-grandmother Blanche Wilda Johnson. A woman larger than life at a smidge over 5 feet tall and still a legendary figure talked about around South

Thomaston and Rockland, ME. Blanch Wilda died at 92 over 40 years ago. She was from away and made Maine her final home. My great-grandmother inserted herself into the community and improved every aspect she touched. She didn't alter the environment or force what she thought Maine should be but found neglected spaces for community gardens, like old unused railroad tracks or the empty glass front of a church. She threw parties and opened her doors to the neighbors. She was herself—a bewitching firecracker. The geography of Wilda Point is in the Mid-Coast region and is located on one of the many peninsulas called “fingers.”. Most of the stories take place in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Some are from as long ago as 1702.

Because the stories are linked, I took time to create a timeline (appendix 4) of the years the stories take place and wrote a complete discovery and revision draft of all twenty-four stories to understand better how they connect. This helped a great deal in creating consistency and characters. It also impacted some dates because I pulled from actual historical events and am not yet ready to write about COVID in this way. As I progress with these stories, the dates may be zhuzhed. This also led to my changing how the titles are written. Instead of the titles simply being what's inside the jars, they now include “Year” and a date. I may change a few to represent the years covered by the story.

While working on these stories over the past year, I've been the Graduate Assistant for the New York State Writers Institute, Editor in Chief of “Barzakh Literary Magazine,” and served on the Creative Writing Committee. These roles gave me a chance to meet and speak with authors as well as raising other writers and artists up. I moderated a panel at Albany Bookfest and two author events with Elisa Alberts and Jennifer Egan. Being in these roles was priceless for the experience and the information gained. I am honored to be named the Thayer Arts Fellowship Finalist for Writing for 2023.

The primary goal is to continue the momentum started over this past year and complete the collection. While working on my thesis, I discovered the best time of day for me to write and have created a support system and schedule that I hope to maintain after graduation. I aim to complete the stories over the next year and a half to two years. I will continue reading through the collection of books I've created as the list grows, and deep dive into better understanding the magical/marvelous/fantastical real, folklore, and fairy tales will also continue. Attending AWP, 2023 allowed me to visit a linked short story panel. One of the areas they addressed was the need for an anchor story to tie the collection together, which connects with the Strange Stories class I took with Aashish Kaul in the fall of 2021. In many of the hybrid books we read, the authors included instructions on reading and understanding their work. This anchor story serves a similar purpose by explaining why a collection is linked and how best to engage with it. The piece titled "Witch, Year 2018" is the anchor story for this project and needs a great deal of polishing. Another item they addressed was how to order a collection. I asked Jennifer Egan about this when I moderated her Craft Talk for the NYSWI. The structuring of a collection takes time and care to guide a reader through the stories. These are essential ideas to keep in mind as I move forward.

Keys
Year, 1984

When Mary was five, she discovered a doorknob on the fence that engulfed the yard behind her new house. Climbing vines thicker than Mary's fingers clung to the slats stained such a dark brown they looked wet under the vegetation. The dark, imposing wood beyond made the girl's feet itchy as it encroached on the fence and the vines and seemed to be gobbling them whole. Mary wrapped her small hands around the dull brass knob with splotches of blueish green and tried to turn it in one direction and then the other. It wouldn't move. She shook the door with all her might. But still, it wouldn't budge. Mary kicked it with the toe of her pink Chucks, and nothing. Finally, she knocked gently and listened with her ear pressed against the cool wooden gate, as she often did in hopes of catching secrets when her parents closed themselves away to have grown-up chats. A faint tapping low to the ground and whispers she couldn't quite catch came in response. Mary pulled her hands away from the knob and ran towards the kitchen door, calling to her father.

"Open the gate. I want to go in."

Her father lounged at the large kitchen table that filled the bright nook but was barely big enough to hold the seven members of the family. Coffee percolated on the counter, close enough that he could reach over and grab it while hardly leaning back in his chair. On the table sat toast piled on a plate with butter melted into the tiny holes and pots of marmalade and jam at the ready. His voice rose over the top of the New York Times to meet her, "And what gate would that be?"

"That one." Mary pointed towards the kitchen door.

Without moving the paper, he replied, “I’ll ask the owners. Maybe they know which key unlocks it.” He reached his hand over to the counter, picked up a large ring filled with keys, and shook it. All the shades of yellows and silvers jumped around and clinked together.

“That’s every key in the whole wide world.” Mary flopped into a chair with her arms crossed and her bottom lip stuck out.

Two weeks earlier, Mary’s family had moved from their bigger house in Western Massachusetts to the cramped one in Wilda Point, Maine. Her father was the new American Lit professor at Vincent College. The house was a perk to lure him up. “Who can argue with free housing for a family of seven?” she heard her father say to her mother as Mary pressed her ear against the warm white door of their old bedroom. Soon after, everyone was rushing around with brown boxes, wide tape, and bubble wrap that Mary got in trouble for popping between her fingers and jumping on with her peach-colored jelly shoes. She was instructed to “sit over there” as her parents and older siblings packed, cried, said goodbye, and hugged people Mary had never spoken to before and never would again. Every room of the new house still had skeletons of empty bookshelves and pregnant boxes waiting to be unloaded. Her father’s full schedule of classes had already commenced, and he couldn’t bring himself to walk into the unfinished rooms. He pressed his hands to his forehead and announced that it stressed him out to even look at the mess.

“Have some breakfast with your old man.” He put down the paper and removed his glasses. She climbed onto her knees, leaned her elbows on the table, and watched her father spread marmalade across the buttered toast. “Would you like some strawberry jam?” Mary nodded. Her mother hated when they mixed the two spreads. She worried it would cause bits to

blend back and forth and ruin the pots. Her father took a second spoon, plopped jam on top of the marmalade, then swirled a knife through the red and orange blobs. “Don’t tell your mother.”

The two sat together in the quiet hush while the rest of the family, her two older brothers, Mark and Marvin, and two older sisters, Millie and Mabel, were driven between errands for school supplies, new clothes, the latest snacks everyone was eating, and the library. Mary had just started kindergarten and had none of her older siblings’ busy needs. She hadn’t made friends yet, not the way her older siblings had. Talking to new people made her feet itchy, and her mouth felt stuck with peanut butter. Instead of approaching the slide or the monkey bars or joining the other kids on the swings, she sat on the edge of the playground and read books she found at the town library. She’d made the mistake of saying the books in her classroom were for babies, which her teacher didn’t find amusing. After that, she brought her own.

Mary didn’t like being loud. Her siblings were in middle and high school and constantly slamming their feet as they flew around the house, yelling from room to room. She didn’t like to play tapes, records, or the TV at full blast and shout over it the way they did. She didn’t participate in the arguments over what to watch, what music was considered cool or lame, or what video to rent. Occasionally her sisters would brush her hair as they watched a show they’d circled in the TV Guide. Her brothers made space for her on the sofa when they noticed her. But none of them spoke to her. They were busy talking to each other about their days. A world Mary, they liked to remind her, was too little to understand. Mary preferred walking around the fence in the yard or curling up with a book in a chair. But her favorite thing was to sit near her father as he read.

Once her father noticed she was sitting there, he’d read out loud. He never looked for books just for her. He simply read whatever was in front of him at the time. Whether Melville,

Hawthorne, Hemmingway, or Thoreau. She tried her best not to interrupt him with questions. Even when she didn't know all of the words or the stories' meanings, it was his voice she longed to hear. His pace quickened at the exciting parts, and she'd sit up straighter with her hands clasped under her chin. It slowed at the quiet, and her spine relaxed. Sometimes he'd stop, put his finger on the page and close the book around it. His eyes meeting hers, he'd retell the story in words she better understood. He'd ask her what she thought happened next. She did her best to answer, but the story rarely went in the direction she imagined in her head.

“What do you think is behind the gate?” her father asked as he brushed crumbs off his lap onto the floor.

“A zoo,” she said with her mouth full of warm, yeasty bread and butter and sweet jam.

“Hmmm. Interesting. What kind of animals are in there?”

“Penguins. A zebra. A tiger. A sloth.” Her father smiled and raised an eyebrow. “We learned about sloths at school,” she shrugged.

“Ah.” He licked a marmalade and jam glop from his shirt. “If it's not a zoo, what else could it be? No one's feeding the animals, and we don't hear them. So, what else could be in there?”

Mary offered suggestions like pirates, a city of kittens, a single sad elephant, or a dollhouse big enough for her to play in. Her father listened and offered thoughts on her ideas and pushed her to finish the story. She sat back in her chair and looked out the window at the thick vines of ivy, viburnum, and honeysuckle, names Mary would later learn from her mother, claiming the façade of the tall garden wall. She thought of the quiet knocking on the other side of the gate and the whispers she swore she heard. “Gnomes,” she said.

“Gnomes?”

“Yes, Gnomes. That’s what’s in there.”

Her father chuckled at her serious face. “Why Gnomes?”

“Just do.” She shrugged and turned her attention back to her toast.

“Well, there you go.”

Later that afternoon, while her father was reading students’ essays and drinking fizzing glasses of Alka-Seltzer, Mary tested each key from the giant ring on the locked gate. There were so many keys that she had to use both hands to aim for the lock. Some gave off a metallic odor that lingered on her hands. Others felt grimy and sticky, and she had to wipe her fingers across her shirt. A few were tiny for little locks like the ones on her sister’s diaries or bike chains. Some were so long they ran from her wrist past her fingertips.

“Don’t be scared, ok. It’s just me. I’m trying to open the door,” Mary said to the soft voices that chattered away on the other side of the solid gate. Each key fit perfectly in the keyhole. But not a single one turned.

On Mary’s walk to school with her mother Monday morning, she found a key on the sidewalk. It looked like the one her parents used for the front door but had a bright pink mark.

“Look.” Mary stopped with the toes of her red Mary Janes pointed at the key.

“What a shame. Someone must have lost it.” Her mother looked around, but no one else was near them.

Mary picked it up and held it to her mom. “Look at the pink. What is it?”

Her mother bent down to inspect the key. “It looks like nail polish.”

Mary pointed at her mother’s coral lacquered nails.

“Sometimes people label things to keep track, and they marked that one to remind themselves what it was for.” Her mother checked her wristwatch. “Oh dear, put that down. We

have to hurry.” Her mother turned and scurried up the sidewalk. Instead of putting the key back on the ground, Mary slid it into her pocket and ran to catch up with her mother.

After school, Mary’s mother had ants on a log ready in the fridge—slices of celery with peanut butter and raisins. Mary disliked raisins but didn’t tell her mother since it was her brother and sisters’ favorite snack when they were little. Instead, she hid the raisins in a napkin as her mother focused on some new recipe she found in the paper meant to feed a large family on a budget.

While Mary crunched her celery and licked peanut butter off the roof of her mouth, her mother asked her what she’d learned that day. Mary explained that Billy blew milk bubbles with his nose, and they weren’t supposed to touch Janet’s weird rash. Her mother turned from her concoction and looked at Mary. “Did you learn anything useful?”

“Everyone else is doing their letters and numbers, but Father already showed me. So, I read my book.”

“Your father and I have got to meet with your teacher,” her mother sighed.

When Mary finished her logs with no ants, her mother told her to go play outside.

Mary ran to the gate, removed the key from her pocket, and tried it in the lock. She wiggled it back and forth. Again, it didn’t turn. She played with the knob, and tiny voices started to chatter. She got down on her hands and knees.

“Hey, Gnomes. It’s just me playing with the door. I won’t hurt you. I brought you a gift.” She opened the napkin, took each raisin, and slid them under the gate. “I don’t like them, but you might.”

She dropped the key back in her pocket, then skipped around the side of the fence farthest from the wood flapping her arms and mewling like the kittens she wished were on the inside of the fence instead of the chatty Gnomes.

When her father returned home that evening, Mary threw her arms around his long legs and slid down to the floor. The corduroy stripes on his slacks rubbed against her cheek.

“Well, hello, Mary.”

“What about the key?”

“What key?”

“The one for out back.”

“Oh, right, the key. They said they’ve never had one.” Her father patted her head and walked towards the kitchen, asking about dinner. Mary stayed on the floor, resting her chin in her hands. She thought the old owners were liars and mean and, like everyone else, didn’t want to share their secrets with her.

After dinner, Mary looked at the peanut butter jar her mother had emptied earlier that day, making after-school sandwiches for all the siblings and their new friends. “Can I have that?”

“You want peanut butter? Honey, we just ate. Are you still hungry?”

“No, that?”

Her mother looked at the jar, “What for?”

“Keep stuff.”

Her mother shrugged and started peeling the label with her coral nails. “Let me wash it first.”

Before Mary headed off to bed, her mother handed her the glass jar, still warm from the dishwasher. “Don’t forget the lid.” Mary grabbed it and started running. “You’re welcome.”

“Thank you,” Mary sang, running to the room she shared with Millie and Mabel. She took the key from her pants pocket that rested in the hamper, kerplunked it in the jar, closed the lid, and slid it onto her bookshelf.

Over the next week, she found at least one key a day as she learned her way around town. One in the water fountain of the library. One inside her cubby at school. One under the tree in the park where she liked to sit and read. And yet another on the grocery store floor. Everywhere she looked, there was another key. If she didn’t have a pocket to hide it, she slid it into the top of her sock until she got home and immediately ran to the backyard to test each key. But none of them turned. Each time she tried the lock, she would slide a treat under the gate and listen to the chatter.

The days grew shorter and cooler, and a sweetness wafted on the breeze from over-ripe fat apples and the decay of colorful leaves drifting to the ground in the dark wood. Mary’s siblings noticed her fascination with trying to get into the gate. They decided to help. First, by boosting each other up, but none could reach. Mark tried to shimmy the maple, whose limbs hung heavy over the fence but couldn’t get a good grip even though he was the best climber. He scraped his hands and cheek on his way down the tree. His cheek was left with scars that looked like claw marks.

Her father borrowed a ladder from the neighbor who told them he’d never seen the inside of that fence in his seventy years. It had been there long as he could remember, and he lived in this house most of his life. He’d taken the place over when his parents died. You know, back when kids had respect for such things like keeping a house their parents owned and taking care of it. In his day, girls wouldn’t run around shoving their brother’s faces into leaf piles and screaming at the tippy top of their lungs. Millie mumbled to Mary that his day sounded totally

bogus. The hunched neighbor called Mary over, and she stood mostly behind her father as the old man leaned in, breathing his stinky attic breath.

“So, you’re the one making all the fuss about getting inside.”

“Yeah,” Mary whispered as her fists gripped her father’s pant leg.

“What did you say? Speak up.”

Mary looked up to her father, who nodded, “Yessir.”

“Why?”

Mary gave a tiny shrug in return.

“Well, be careful little girl. Some things aren’t meant to be disturbed. Like my peace.”

He raised his voice in the direction of the family, who were all talking loudly over each other.

Later her father tried to use the ladder, but it didn’t extend far enough. Marvin helped Mary fold paper airplanes from the drawings she’d done at school. He launched them for her, but they wouldn’t fly high enough to make it over. He tried adding paper clips and tape to the nose and tearing little flaps in the backs of the wings. The airplanes went straight and far when he threw them across the yard and the driveway and even went clear over the house. But all dropped like stones in front of the fence. Instead, they flattened the papers, loaded them with NECCO wafers, and slid them under the gate. “They’re yummy, I promise.”

Finally, her mother grabbed the toolbox from the garage and started working on the hinges.

“You got your woman out doing man’s work?” the neighbor shouted in their direction, jabbing a pair of loppers at them.

“Better her than me. I’d probably lose a finger.” Her father wiggled his digits and smiled at his wife, watching her select just the right tool for the task. But the hinges wouldn’t give.

“It’s like it was put together with the best glue ever,” her mother sighed and hugged Mary close. “With all you kids, I could use glue like that.”

Over time the family got busy and stopped looking for ways inside the fence. Still, Mary continued to find keys through elementary and into middle school, in stores, at the doctor’s office, on her walks to school, visiting her grandparents, on family trips across New England and down to Florida, on school field trips, and in the grass at her brother and sister’s sporting events. She slipped each key into her pocket or sock and tested the gate when she got home. But not a single one turned. Then, each was deposited into a jar that rested on a shelf. When the jar filled up, she asked her mother for another from spaghetti sauce, mayo, or green olives. Whatever was around. With seven people eating, there was always a jar around.

Over time, her sisters started leaving home for college and adult lives, and she took over their bookshelves. With her older siblings vanishing, the house grew quiet. The quieter the house, the more Mary couldn’t wait to visit the Gnomes and sneak them little treats. In return, the soft voices whispered to her, sharing stories and secrets. Mary loved little secrets. Sometimes she swore she saw small shadows and tiny feet under the gate.

Mary wrote down the stories. She often had to come up with an ending since the Gnomes chattered on for so long that she couldn’t stay to hear them finish. Her teachers praised her imagination and the charm of the little tales. “How sweet,” they would say, “How adorable.” Her father patted her head and told her they were “cute.”

In middle school, her teacher was less amused with the stories and told her to think about being less childish. One evening, Mary looked at her bare feet resting on the carpet of her father’s office with its blue and white pattern meant to look like clouds in the sky. She’d handed

her father a low grade and the letter in red ink across the back of her latest story. He had to sign it, agreeing to speak to his daughter.

“Be a writer,” he said with his hands on his forehead. “But these little stories of yours are a bit immature. Don’t you think? You’re thirteen and about to start high school, and you need to be a part of the real world. This obsession of yours was fine when you were five. But it isn’t anymore. It’s time to grow up.”

She looked around the cramped shelves in his office filled with big books containing big words and big titles he’d read to her when she was little. Books that never ended the way she thought they would or should. Stories, she realized, she no longer felt connected to. He handed over the paper with his signature in matching red ink and shook his head, “And no more letters from your teachers. It’s an embarrassment.” She snuck up to her room and cried.

Mary stored the Gnome stories inside a box she made in shop class. She painted the outside black so it would disappear into the shadows behind a pile of sweaters and blankets. Then walked to the town library and Cozy Corners Bookstore.

Mary found that asking men behind the counters resulted in the same names as were on her father’s shelves. But when asking women, she got names like O’Connor, Jackson, Plath, Woolf, Gilman, and St. Vincent Millay. Mary grabbed what could fit in her bag and dove in. At first, venturing into the worlds felt disquieting and foreboding compared to her little Gnomes, but as she continued to read, those feelings found balance. Her eyes shifted to the world beyond her backyard, the fence, and the locked gate. These women understood something. The something inside her that she couldn’t pinpoint. They had secrets, and Mary wanted to learn them. Their endings felt right. These women and others became guides for her writing through the rest of middle and into high school. She wrote of the dark paths in the wood behind her house that made

her feet itchy, of watching the fishing boats going in and out of the harbor, how crewless boats were tossed about in a storm, the fog that rolled in and out across the water, the haunted lighthouse, blizzards, and the abandoned cannery. And of the strange people, like her hunched old neighbor who always yelled at her with his attic breath.

Mary still found keys at her feet and, out of habit, picked them up and tested them in the lock. She continued to sneak treats to the chattering voices but no longer told them about her day or read them stories she'd written. Mary no longer sat and listened, looking for shadows and tiny feet. She looked elsewhere for secrets. Her teacher, with the red ink, praised her more mature writing and her ferocious appetite for reading. She wrote, "I knew you could do it!" next to a hot pink sticker of a unicorn.

With the new stillness around the house, as each older sibling moved on, her mother took a full-time job at the grocery store and quickly moved up to management. All her years raising a gaggle of kids translated well into managing employees. Her father wasn't a fan of Mary's new tastes in reading but approved of the more sophisticated direction she was headed. When they sat at the table, they no longer shared toast with marmalade and jam. She stayed behind her book, and he stayed behind his.

In her junior year of high school, her English teacher Ms. Turner held her after class.

"It seems we have a budding writer."

"I guess," Mary shrugged. Her black-lined eyes focused on the scuffed floor in need of buffing. The toe of her dark blue Doc Martens tapped a crumpled-up piece of notebook paper, revealing the glint of a key underneath.

"You're only sixteen. You should be excited about everything at your age." Ms. Turner smiled. Spirals of curls escaped the confinement of the bun she'd scraped her hair into that

morning. Mary enjoyed watching them shake as her teacher wrote on the blackboard during class.

Mary tapped the paper a little farther and put the toe of her boot over the key.

Ms. Turner sat on her desk and swung her feet back and forth. Mary half listened as Ms. Turner gave a speech about growing up being difficult and it being a chance to find yourself. Try on different personalities. Find passions. Mary only half listened. Ms. Turner stopped and sighed. “What’s the last thing you wrote that made you happy?”

Mary rolled her eyes, “I used to write dumb stories about Gnomes. But they’re for kids. They’re not real writing.”

“Because no one ever writes for children?” Ms. Turner shook her head, sending her curls into a dance party. “Would you let me read them?”

Mary sighed. “Can I go now?”

“Sure, but I want to see some of those stories by next week.”

Mary pocketed the key while Mrs. Turner filled out a hall pass.

After dinner, Mary went out back to test the key, and nothing. She ran her fingers over the bark of the thick vines constricting the fence. The sweet scent of snow floated on the breeze. Muffled chatter came through the gate, and she pressed her ear against the cool wood and listened. Light gave way to shadows. Mary ran inside and dug out the box from the back of her closet, pressed her back against the bedroom door, and sorted through the handwritten stories and drawings. She expanded her favorites into richer tales using what she learned from those complex, beautiful women. By Monday, she had a pile to deliver to Ms. Turner, who gave Mary a warm smile. Mary couldn’t return the gesture. Her feet were too itchy.

By midweek, Ms. Turner had purple pen marks on the pages. Clipped to the pile was a note encouraging Mary to focus on rewriting them. On her way home, with snow in the air and wind biting her face, Mary felt lighter than she had in years. She stopped by the grocery store to say hi to her mom and get a box of Nerds. Found a key on the ground by the sliding door and slipped it into her pocket. When she got home, she went to the garage, grabbed one of the old silver saucers she and her siblings used for sledding, and dropped it in front of the fence. She tested the key, which brought the chattering voices from the other side, and sat on the saucer. With her mittened hands, she cleared the snow from under the gate.

“I know I haven’t talked to you in a while. I’m sorry. I brought you some candy.” She poured pink and purple Nerds on a sheet of notebook paper and slid them through the clearing. “I don’t have a good reason. It’s just... Well, whatever. I’ve missed you. I’m writing your stories again.” The voices chattered on, and Mary did her best to listen until the chill from the air blowing across the snow worked its way through her clothes, and she ran inside.

Mary worked on the stories every night until they felt ready. After a few back and forths, Ms. Turner mailed them off. A few months later, the snow thawed into crocuses and daffodils. And with them, a letter arrived from a children’s magazine out of Boston. They wanted to publish the six stories as a monthly series and asked for six more to fill a year. Ms. Turner beamed and heaped praise on Mary in front of the class. Mary’s cheeks grew red, and she looked at her desk with the tiniest smile on her lips.

After school, Mary tucked the letter into her pocket and jumped on her bike to head home. Her brain was so focused on the letter that she didn’t notice the approaching car that shot out in front of her, and she slammed on her brakes. She rested her feet on the ground to catch her breath and slow her heart. With her head dropped over her handlebars, Mary spotted an old key

on the sidewalk by the right toe of her deep purple high-top Chucks. It was the kind of key seen in old movies or illustrated in books. It had three interlocking circles for a handle and teeth like an H with a heart in the middle. The brass was dull with a touch of green, and the frayed strands of what was once a yellow ribbon clung to the handle. She picked it up and slipped it into her pocket beside the letter.

Once home, Mary dropped her bike in the front yard and ran inside, but no one was there to share her news. Her father didn't get home until after six, and her mother had left a message on the machine, sounding both frustrated and happy that she needed to stay and deal with a problem. She told Mary to grab a snack and that there were leftovers in the fridge. Mary took some chocolate chip cookies from the jar and slumped at the table. She picked at the cookies and squirmed in her chair. She couldn't take listening to the clock tick off the seconds and ran out the kitchen door, leaving the letter and cookie crumbs on the table.

Each step left an impression on the newly sprung grass in the yard. She sat before the gate, broke a cookie into pieces, and slid them under.

"I have to tell someone. The stories I wrote about you are being published. Kids are going to read them, and they're gonna love you. So, thanks." Mary laid back on the cool spring grass, resting her head on her arm. The smell of worms and thawing wet earth floated to her nose.

After the sun slipped behind her elderly neighbor's roof, she started to shiver and reached her hands into her pockets. Mary's fingers felt the key. She got up to her feet and, out of habit, slid the key into the lock. This time the lock gave, and the key turned, making a click. She felt the knob move, and the gate opened with a groan from so many years of waiting. Mary took a deep breath and stepped inside.

Ghosts
Year, 2008

"What the hell is that?" Mike pointed to the top left-hand corner of the doorway.

"What does it look like?"

"A mess of Dad's rope and one of Mom's blue bottles."

"Darn, it's supposed to look like a spider web. Or kinda like a lobster trap. Same idea but for ghosts." Charlotte rose on her toes, held the door jamb with her left hand, and pointed with her right. "The bottle's like the kitchen in Dad's traps. The lobster or ghosts goes in but can't get out. See?"

Mike shook his head, "Char, have you lost your mind? They're gonna be wicked pissed. You know Mom loves blue best." He looked around the room at their Mom's bottle collection. Reds, greens, blues, pinks, and clears. Her pride and joy. His shoulders relaxed slightly when he saw the blue glass bottle shaped like a fish. It was their Mom's favorite. She won it for a poem she wrote when she was Charlotte's age. The only prize she'd ever won that wasn't about being pretty. "Plus, there's no such thing as ghosts."

"Are too. And we have them, and I'm gonna trap them. Mom and Dad'll be too happy to notice."

"Damn it, Char," Mike studied his little sister, who only came up to his chest and always looked like the world rested on her. Mike walked under the web to inspect the contraption. He couldn't figure out how she'd hung it by herself. They knew how to tie knots from helping on the boat, but she was nine. *How the hell did she get up there? She's always doing the weirdest shit.*

He got tired of defending her and was tempted to let her get her ass kicked. Maybe it'd put a stop to these strange experiments and the freaky talk. Ghosts, fairies, spells.

Lately, she yammered on about the girl who went missing a while back. Char even found copies of the six dumb stories the girl wrote for some magazine out of Boston about gnomes living in her garden. *Gnomes, for Christ's sake*. A couple of months ago, Charlotte went to the girl's house and asked if she could check out the gnome garden. The owners slammed the door. That night Mike found her in her closet, where she hid when she was embarrassed or freaked out or their parents were fighting. Mike went over to yell at the people for making a little girl cry. But then he saw the deep lines cut into the couple's faces from the years of not knowing what happened to their little girl, reminding him of the beach after the winter runoff. Mike mumbled an apology for his sister's intrusion and promised it wouldn't happen again. He was her big brother and sworn protector—no matter how many times he got in trouble or cleaned up her messes.

Charlotte pushed a pile of books she'd collected from her favorite hangouts, Vincent College and the Wilda Point town libraries, and left them at Mike's feet. He shook his head. *What kind of child knows every librarian by name and brings them handmade cards for their birthdays?* On top of the stack was a notebook with the unicorn cover their Mom insisted on buying Charlotte for school. Mike knew his sister found cutesie crap humiliating but used it to appease their Mom.

"Ok, for poops and giggles, let's say there's a ghost. What'll you do with it once it's in the bottle?"

"Well, from what I read," she flipped through the unicorn notebook, "we have to stopper the bottle and seal it with red wax. Then bury it under a buckthorn. But first, I need a candle to

draw it towards the bottle." She looked up from her notes. Her big brown eyes and nose, all covered in freckles, looked all earnest like it was the truest thing in the world. Totally logical.

"They especially like blue glass."

"Ok. So first, there's rigging this stuff up, and I still can't see how you did this. And then stand here with a candle to bait the ghost? Do you have a stopper, red wax, and a buckthorn?"

Charlotte ran down the hall, her bare feet smacking the tired linoleum. A few minutes later, she returned with silly putty and wax lips left over from Halloween. "I can stuff the end with the silly putty and melt the lips."

"Do wax lips count as red wax?"

Charlotte strummed her fingers on her chin, "We have some red Christmas candles. I could use them with the lips to seal the deal. Get it? Seal the deal. Wax seal."

Mike rolled his eyes. Where did his sister come up with this shit? "Guess that might work. What about a buckthorn?"

She wiggled her toes and fingers. Mike could always tell she was plotting when her fingers and toes couldn't hold still. "Mom's roses. They have thorns."

Mike shook his head. Their Mom's roses were just a gnarled clump of wild beach creepers. A crop of weeds like everything else in the yard outside their battered shack of a house, but still, she loved them. Said they reminded her of her grandfather. Their Mom gathered and preserved the hips in the fall and made tea during the winter. She let the steam from the steeping fruit dance across her face, telling the kids it kept her beautiful. He didn't think she'd be too psyched with Char turning the bushes into a ghost cemetery. Not to mention they always had ticks. He was going to have to help her. *Goddamn, it.*

Their parents were out with friends for the whole night. Some kind of celebration, a birthday or anniversary, or just some reason for adults to get together and act foolish. Char must've planned this for when their parents wouldn't be home. The siblings went to the kitchen, and Mike grabbed frozen fish sticks and French fries. Charlotte sat at the counter, their only eating surface, and swung her bare feet back and forth under the stool.

"Why do ya think we have a ghost?" he asked with his back to his little sister, afraid to look her in the eye.

"We have three."

Mike turned from setting the timer, "You think we got three ghosts? Why?"

"Well, there's an awful lot of tension in the house."

Mike snorted, "Tension?"

"Yeah, don't you feel it? Mom and Dad fighting. Dad sleeping on the couch. Always upset about money. Everyone working all the time. They never say anything nice to each other. You're never here. Tension."

Mike nodded his head. She had him there. Tension they got. While Charlotte hid at the library, tucked away in books, he rode his bike around. To see friends, to be alone, to pick up odd jobs. Cleaning out the back of the grocery or someone's basement or garage, washing down people's boats, mowing lawns, trimming trees, getting the gunk out of gutters. People knew he'd come around on his bike at some point, and they'd holler at him to stop. Whatever they needed doing, they knew he'd try his best, and he didn't demand much. The old folks were his best customers. Most needed his help, but they also liked the company. They paid him for his whole time, even when they kept him late, talking and feeding him tuna sandwiches, freshly washed grapes, and Pringles. He didn't mind staying long, and it wasn't the extra money. They spoke to

him with kindness and told him stories from their day or when they were his age. When winter hit, he snowmobiled with friends way past dark, cleared people's driveways and walkways, helped fill their pellet stoves, or brought in wood. They fed him stew and hot cocoa. All to avoid the tension. That feeling of all the air being sucked from his lungs suffocating him as he walked in the door. Their yelling crammed the hallway and rooms even when his parents weren't home.

Yup, tension.

"And you think ghosts cause that?"

"According to several sources, ghosts can create tension and make people fight. Not love each other anymore."

"Oh," Mike watched his sister review her notes.

"I think if we get rid of them, Mom and Dad'll feel better."

"Where are the other traps?"

"One to Mom and Dad's room and one to yours."

Mike leaned his elbows on the counter and spoke softly, "Char, why three? Couldn't one ghost cause tension like that? And why my room?"

"Well," she tapped her fingers on the counter as if it were a piano, but she didn't know how to play. "There's the fighting over money. Then there are the weird noises in the house that stress Mom out. The ones she keeps telling Dad to fix, and he says he doesn't hear. And because you never wanna be here. See, three."

He raised his hands in surrender, walked back to check the dinner in the oven, and moved the fries around with a spatula so they'd crisp up even. Mike was six when Charlotte was born. He didn't remember fighting before that. It crept up slowly. Over the past few years, it got real bad. The cost of lobsters dropped over the past two years cause of some trade war the president

started with a country that bought a ton of lobsters. His Dad and his friends tried to blame it on all sorts of things, but it came down to too many lobsters and not enough buyers. Meanwhile, everything cost more, including the ridiculous unicorn notebook. Charlotte never complained because she knew the dumb thing was more than a plain one, and it was a little splurge that made their Mom proud. She worked as many double shifts as she could snag waiting tables over at Home Cookin' Café. Mike piled on odd jobs and snuck money into the coffee can under the bags of broccoli in the back of the freezer where his Mom hid it knowing their Dad would never touch the vegetables, trying to make sure there was enough for groceries and the gas tank. Mike still worked for free on the boat. But he preferred not being around his Dad, who kept getting spinier and spikier, like stepping on a sea urchin barefoot. *Tension.*

"What if we catch these ghosts and nothing changes?"

"It will."

Mike threw away the bags from the dinner and took a deep breath. His chest felt tight. *What's gonna happen when this doesn't work?* He can't beat up his parents' failed marriage. They just didn't seem to care anymore. Even tonight, when they were getting ready to leave, their Mom got dressed up so pretty. They only ever saw her in the Home Cookin' uniform of jeans and a t-shirt or the sweatpants she slept in. But tonight, her hair was in soft curls, and her makeup all done up. Twirling for them in a flowery dress. She was beautiful. Their Dad didn't say a word. Like he didn't even see her. A part of Mike hoped Charlotte was right, and it was the ghosts, and they'd catch them and seal them up, and everything would be cool again.

The buzzer went off. Mike served their dinners and set up his laptop on the counter to watch Youtube videos while they ate. He loved when Charlotte laughed at skateboarders faceplanting or taking a nut shot. After dinner, she helped him clean up and load the dishwasher.

She was rambling about some drama between the kids in her class. Something about two boys getting upset over a video game. He tried paying attention, but thoughts about his parents, the tension, the ghosts, and how to take care of his sister when this failed created too much noise in his mind. It's why he kept so busy, to shut out the noise.

"Are you ready?" Char asked.

"For what?"

"To catch the ghosts?"

"Um, sure." *God, if you're real, make this work. If not, screw you.*

He followed his sister as they turned out the lights and gathered her supplies, stowing the three red plastic eggs filled with silly putty in her pockets. He carried the candles and the long lighter they used to start fires in the pit outback. He remembered when they did fires year-round. His parents snuggled up in one chair under the blue plaid blanket, speaking in low voices he couldn't hear, laughing in that way they only did with each other. But it'd been a while.

They stared up at the bottle trap. "Give me a candle and the lighter," Charlotte said.

"Hold on." Mike went to the kitchen, found a paper plate, cut an x into the center, and pushed the candle through. "This should stop the wax from dripping," he told her. "And I'll be holding the candle."

She crossed her arms and frowned.

"C'mon, I'm not, Dad. That don't work on me. So, what, I just hold it in front of the opening?"

"It'll lure them in. I put mustard seeds in the bottles as well, like bait. It's cheese versus peanut butter in a mousetrap. The candle is best, but the seeds work too."

"What?" Mike lit the candle and held it up. "Why mustard seeds?"

"They like to count them."

"Are you messin' with me? Good lord, ghosts countin' mustard seeds. So, uh, how long should this take?" Mike realized quickly that his arm couldn't hold the candle over his head all night.

"I don't know. Might take days."

"We don't have days. We have to finish all this before Mom and Dad get home in the morning. And we gotta clean up. Unless you wanna repeat of the volcano incident."

Charlotte's eyes grew wide, and she shook her head. They cleaned for a week to get the stains off the ceiling. Mike eventually gave in and bought paint to cover the dried blood-looking yuck. Mike smiled at Char as he thought of the new cuss words their Dad created when he saw it. She clicked on a small flashlight to review her notes, "No one has an exact time for how long it'd take."

Mike switched the candle to his other hand. *What am I doing?* He looked down at his sister, reviewing her careful handwriting under their "for emergencies only" flashlight from the silverware drawer. She looked around. Mike guessed she was waiting for a ghost to appear.

"How will we know we caught it?"

"It says we should feel the disturbance lessen in the structure," her finger followed her careful bubble writing across the paper.

"Are you shittin' me? We should feel the disturbance lessen?" He hoped it meant the constant knot in his stomach would loosen, and he could sleep. Everyone thought he was dumb because his grades weren't good. But he was too tired for homework and taking tests. His head hit the desks when he fell asleep during class, and he'd wake up to see everyone staring at him. He worked hard and rode his bike around, trying to wear himself out, but he still couldn't sleep

when he got home. He made sure his sister had the quiet time she needed. She was the one. Charlotte needed a future. He didn't want her to be one of those girls who had a baby before the end of high school and never went anywhere. He needed her to get the hell out. Not tied to some jag' off just because they made a 5-minute mistake like their parents. He may not be an A student, but Mike did math just fine. He knew his parents were only sixteen when they had him. And he knew he had his Dad's life ahead of him, but not Charlotte. She was too weird and unique and smart for this life.

Mike had coffee cans of money stashed up in a section of woods with this old codger he did work for. The guy was nice enough, and he let Mike hide some things under an old oak at the edge of his property. He seemed to know without Mike saying. Just understood. Plus, the codger kept his business to himself and his granddaughter, so Mike didn't worry about anyone finding out.

If he was honest, Mike lingered when he worked there. He liked the old guy with his beat-up Red Sox cap, low mumble talk, and weezy laugh. But mostly, he liked the granddaughter. Oona was a couple of years ahead of him in school. Her eyebrows were always pinched together like they wanted to be a unibrow. He imagined her as an old woman with long silver hair and a permanent dent in that spot, still digging around her gardens. The nails on her thumbs were always long and sharp and could slice straight through a stem. When he caught her scent on the breeze, moss after a rainstorm, it made his heart beat faster, and he worried she could hear it. But he didn't think she noticed him except to order him around, which he didn't mind. Mike liked how severe and focused she was, always on a mission. He started going to the library with Charlotte to learn all the plant names, common and botanical, so he knew what Oona was saying and wouldn't look stupid or slow her down.

He felt peaceful working next to her, not talking. He could breathe. Plus, she understood saving. For her, it was seeds. For him, it was money. Mike didn't waste a penny on drugs, movies, or even a soda. It all went to fix his bike or put gas in the snowmobile or one of the coffee cans. One can in the freezer for his Mom. The rest were for himself, though he wasn't sure what for yet, and for Char. College ain't free. Even applying costs money. Getting there costs money. Books cost money. Spreading wings costs money. *Tension.*

"That's what most of them say. 'Lessen the disturbance.' Others say the bottle will look full."

"Full of what?"

Charlotte shrugged, "One says it will suck the light from the candle as it goes by. So, the flame will go out."

"Ah, yup, got that. At least that's more specific than lessen the disturbance." Mike shifted the candle back to his other hand.

Charlotte closed her notebook and lay on her back to look up at him, "It'll be nice, right?"

"What's that?"

"Lessening the disturbance."

"Yeah, Char, it'll be nice." *Seriously, God, you're a real dick if this doesn't work.*

They stayed like that for an hour, with Mike shifting the candle back and forth and Charlotte keeping an eye out for ghosts. Her blinks got longer and slower until she fell asleep, the flashlight still gripped in her hand. Mike blew out the candle and spread the blue plaid blanket over her, hoping a happy memory or two was trapped in its weave, making for a good dream. He wanted to "lessen the disturbance" in the house as much as she did. So, he took a stool from the counter, placed it under the trap, and relit the candle.

His head drooped forward as he nodded off. After wax dripped in his hair, stinging his scalp, he decided to nap on the couch and try again. He figured ten minutes, and he'd be good as new.

Mike jumped at the sound of his neighbor's lawnmower. He rolled off the couch and hit the floor. Every part of his body ached from the heavy sleep. Usually, he tossed and turned all night. He took a deep breath, and it felt different, crisp, and clean like the day after a big storm rolled all the humidity out to sea. He rubbed his hands against his face and got up off the floor. Charlotte was standing in front of the bottle trap.

"You caught it!"

"What?" Mike looked up. She was right. The bottle appeared full of water but thicker and foggier at the same time.

"I'm going to check the others," her feet smacked the floor as she ran down the hall.

"What the hell?" He inspected the bottle. It was almost as if the water was moving, but there wasn't any liquid.

"They're all full. You did it!"

"I didn't do shit," he mumbled, his brow furrowed. "Now what?"

"We take them down and seal them."

"Right." He got on the stool, put his thumb over the bottle's opening, and carefully pulled it from the web of rope. It was heavy. Like surprisingly heavy. He held onto the bottle, fearing dropping it and releasing whatever was inside. Once down, Charlotte took silly putty from one of the plastic eggs and smushed it into the top. "Get the red candle and the wax lips." He grabbed them and the paper plate from the night before. They sat on the floor while he lit the red candle and melted it and the wax lips over the top. Then they sealed the other two.

"We need a shovel."

They slid their feet into flip-flops, ran to the garage, and then out to their mother's scraggly bushes. As carefully as he could, he dug three holes. His hair and shirt kept catching in the thorns. Tiny scratches covered his face and hands. He kicked leaves over the loose dirt when he finished filling the holes.

"Now what?" Mike asked.

"We should say something."

"Like what?"

Charlotte wiggled her fingers and toes, "'There's an eyeball in the gumball machine. Right there, between the red and the green. Looking at me as if to say, You don't need any more gum today.'"

Mike looked at his sister.

"It's Shel Silverstein. It's all I know except the Pledge of Allegiance."

Mike shrugged, "Works for me. Farewell ghosts. I'm sorry you were unhappy and needed us to be unhappy too. May you find peace in our mother's pretty blue bottles under her great-grandpa's favorite bushes."

Charlotte hugged Mike, "Thank you."

"We need to clean up before they get home."

After they finished, they sat down to bowls of Lucky Charms and milk. They both enjoyed the swirl of colors from the marshmallows in the milk before it turned a sad gray. They looked towards the sound of the garage door opening. Mike jumped up, rinsed the bowls, and set them in the sink. His chest tightened, "It'll be ok no matter what, Char. I promise."

Cross Words Year, 1951

To understand why Steve and Irene's voices sat bound in separate scorch-marked emerald green jars wrapped in gold wire, you must first understand their parents. Their fathers were successful business partners. Their parents were the best of couples and the best of friends, with the occasional rumor of something more, but no one dared give that more credence than it deserved. In fact, anyone who spoke sideways about the couples found themselves no longer included. Perhaps the couples were a tad drunk on their own wonderfulness, a bit obtuse with a healthy dash of hubris, but most referred to them as well-meaning. The rest learned to keep their traps shut. Over time, the couples owned and employed a large percentage of Wilda Point. The town boomed when the business partners boomed. And vice versa. It was a match made in heaven, as were the couples. They vacationed together. They dined together. They danced together. They played charades, bridge, and tennis together. But never golf. The couples celebrated when Steve was born and again two years later with the arrival of Irene. The mothers snapped photos with their Kodak Brownie Flash cameras as little Steve held tiny Irene and exclaimed, "They love each other already!" Then wound the film and snapped again. Neither mother noticed that Steve looked miserable and afraid. On the other hand, Irene simply looked like a potato, the way most new babies look away from their mother's gaze.

There was never a cross word spoken between the business partners nor the husbands and their wives. The couples swore never to let anything ruin their business, marriages, or friendship. They didn't agree on everything, but they found clever ways to work through such issues. So often, they read stories in the paper or heard gossip at conferences and meetings in Boston, New

York City, and LA about sour business deals, leading to men fighting and even murder. Leaving their families behind to clean up the mess. Irene's mother pointed out, "They never say what happens to the wives and children unless they too were killed."

When the partners disagreed, the wives set up a meeting in one of the living rooms. Strong highballs were prepared, finger foods and desserts from the latest magazine were laid out, and a record spun on the hi-fi. Who said business had to be uncivilized? The one with the idea presented while the other three munched and drank. Next, the one with the concern shared his thoughts. Then it was time for the women, who had been given all the research to review beforehand, to tear it to shreds. They made a real party out of the evening and sometimes the morning. The women were not required to agree with their husbands. In fact, the husbands often found the wives even sexier under their crushing verbal blows. The women took great pride in this game, as much as bridge or tennis. They were known to be a force at both. Once all avenues were traveled, either both men agreed, or the idea was squashed. Either way, Steve's father made a file of his meticulous notes and the research, then stored them in a cabinet in the office. There's never a need to drag out an issue once exhausted. Nights filled with passion often followed these heated meetings.

One sunny late spring morning when Steve was four, his father was at the kitchen table reading one of his many newspapers with his coffee and his trusty scissors for clipping articles. A headline caught his eye about a company in California that he greatly admired, which had closed and laid off thousands of workers across the state. This news concerned him as he believed the owner was careful and shrewd. He put down the paper when his wife topped off his coffee and placed a bowl of oatmeal with a pinch of brown sugar in front of him. He watched her move gracefully about the kitchen feeding Steve, making a shopping list, pulling his shirts

together, which she had already treated with hairspray on his perpetual ink stains and marked with safety pins, for the cleaners, and preparing for the hundreds of other items that filled her day. He thought about the big venture that ruined his colleague, and he realized his beautiful wife was the one who stopped them from following that path. She had argued the hardest against investing in the same endeavor that sunk his friend. He remembered how aroused he was by her furrowed brow and the flush to her cheeks. It had matched the rose pinned to her heaving chest. She never did find the last button he popped from her dress. He'd assumed the best thing that came out of that night was the conception of their son. But also, it turned out, his brilliant wife had saved them and thus the town from disaster. As she leaned to clear the dishes, he pulled her onto his lap and breathed in her scent of soap, powder, and rose water.

“Have I told you how much I love you? And how lucky I am to have you?”

She slapped him on the shoulder and giggled, “Should I be worried?”

“Never. Never be worried. Just keep being you.” And he kissed her.

He didn't have any meetings that day and felt zippy, so he walked to work hatless, letting the spring sun touch his face and smiling at everyone he passed. People nodded in return. He was known for being the subdued partner but not unfriendly. When he arrived at his office, he settled in as the secretary brought him coffee, a stack of documents to review, and his messages. He loved the office. It was in an old, refurbished cannery with huge windows that overlooked the harbor on one side and Main Street on the other. The energy of Wilda Point charged through those windows. It was electric. He and his partner grew up in the town and returned after college to see if they could help the community thrive while so many other towns faded away under the crash of the stock market and the suffocation of the depression. They wanted the best for their

neighbors. And it was all paying off. But how close were they to losing everything like his friend in California?

He flipped through the mail, but the question nagged him—how many times had their wives saved them over the years? His partner was out due to a death in his wife’s family, and he decided to send the secretary to the printers for letterhead and whatever else she needed—telling her to take her time. He wanted to remove his jacket and tie, spread out on the floor, and not be disturbed. He sorted through the files of ideas, making piles of the ones they used, rejected, and never even got off the ground. The collections made him feel safe. He took fastidious notes at their meetings, the pros, the cons, and the solutions to hurdles before they had even arisen. He added updates by matching follow-up articles to the ventures. He liked to stay on top of things. People always took note of his fingers and cuffs splotched by pen ink and blackened by running across newspapers. Scouring through the ledgers and files, he made three lists. He loved lists. In one, he tracked money they made from ventures their wives endorsed. In the second, he followed the success of deals they didn’t take. Third, he tracked the losses and the reasons for their failures. He discovered that the causes of failure were the same concerns brought up by their wives.

“Son of a gun,” he whispered as he sat back against the desk, then leaned forward and triple-checked his calculations. “Fairer sex, my ass.” The wives read everything the husbands brought them, the same plans, ideas, and research, and listened over dinners, breakfast, and walks along the water. They were the sounding boards for each partner’s worries and excitement. They soothed and cooed when needed and pushed and prodded as required. They cheered and weren’t afraid to insist that an apology or a thank you be sent when the time was right. But they also spent their days shopping, volunteering, and talking to the people who lived in the

community. They had gained a reputation for listening and taking action. They heard firsthand the issues, concerns, and complaints of the community. The wives appeared safer and more approachable than the husbands.

The secretary knocked on the door, “Sir, I have your lunch.”

“Come in, come in,” he called from the floor. She opened the door but stopped at the sight of him with no jacket or tie, sitting on the floor among piles of paper. Paper clips littered about the carpet. It was the kind of behavior she expected of the partner, not him.

“Hurry, hurry. Just put the lunch to the side. I want you to double-check my figures.” He used the edge of the desk to push himself up from the floor, placed the notebook on his partner’s desk, and indicated for her to sit down. She hesitated because her place was alone in the front room to receive visitors and deliveries, handle the phone and correspondence, schedule meetings, pay bills, and whatever else was needed. *Freeing up the men to work.* After she reviewed the numbers, she let him know they were correct. Steve’s father clapped his hands and whooped. She handed him the ledger and jumped up from the chair. “Anything else, sir?”

“No, no, thank you. You may return to your desk now.” He looked out over the harbor and bounced on his toes. The wives had saved them over \$450,000, an unfathomable sum, in losses and multiple bankruptcies. What he viewed as frivolous activities and endless errands that filled the wives’ days kept their fingers on the pulse and the partners in good graces with the town. The wives sent gifts and cards, arranged parties, visited people in the hospital, volunteered and served on committees, and made them part of the community. They knew what was best for Wilda Point.

“Could you come in here,” he shouted at the door. The secretary entered with her pencil behind her ear and her notepad on a glasses chain around her neck. He cringed and closed his

eyes every time he saw it because it looked ridiculous and unprofessional. But stopped himself this time. He kept his eyes open, and it occurred to him as he watched her prep the notebook and pencil that she did it for a reason. The partners tended to shout things out at her no matter what she was doing or where she was in the office. “Ah, yes. Could you make reservations for four at Luigi’s in Portland on Friday night at seven? You know the table we like. Also, our usual suite at the Cheshire for the weekend. See if there are any shows or gallery openings, anything you think the wives would enjoy. And someone to watch the children. I want the ladies to have the weekend off. Also, the biggest bouquets Fiddlehead’s can make sent to both wives today. Roses, you know how much they love roses.”

“Sir, the funeral is today.”

“Right, thank you. Tomorrow then. It will be a nice way for her to return home. But have one sent to my wife today.” He punctuated the sentence with his smudged finger dabbing the desk.

“Anything else?”

He looked over at the lunch he hadn’t touched but knew she would have ensured was just how he liked. The tidy books shelves and the plants along the windows, he had to admit, seemed idiotic when she brought them in, but he had grown to relish the bright green leaves and occasional blossoms, especially on a gray winter day. Stacks of unopened mail and unpaid bills no longer cramped the office. The phones no longer interrupted the flow. People seemed to enjoy her and even brought her little gifts when they visited, loaves of bread, scarves, books, and even trinkets from their travels. He was never late or forgot meetings or appointments. She reminded him to wash the ink smudges from his hands and even his cheek. Their company ran smoother because of her. “How long have you worked here?”

The secretary shifted from foot to foot, “Five years.”

“Oh, that long?” He ran his fingers through his dark brown hair. In reviewing their records, over the past five years, their profits had rapidly increased due to reduced waste, he now realized, due greatly to her efficiency. “When was the last time we gave you a raise?”

Her eyes dropped to the floor, “I’ve never received a raise, sir.”

“Never?”

She tucked her hands behind her back. He knew he wasn’t as good with people as his partner and didn’t want to screw this up. Today was the day for remedy. “That must be corrected. You’re an important member of this office, and we shouldn’t forget that. “He made notes on a piece of paper to leave on his partner’s desk. “You will receive a ten percent raise, which will include three years of back pay, and my wife has told me that you’ve always wanted to go to New York City, so for your next vacation, we will send you all expenses paid, including a show on Broadway. Everyone should go to Broadway. Bring your mother with you. I know you lost your father last year, so she should go too.” He finished writing and had her review the note to ensure he had included everything. She nodded twice, her brows furrowed and lips pressed between her teeth. “Wonderful. This will go into effect immediately. You do a good job and should know we appreciate it.”

“Thank you, sir.” She put out her hand. He shook it. Afraid to say anything else, he turned away from her and looked out the window. Releasing the air from his lungs and dropping his head when he heard the door close.

That weekend over dinner at Luigi’s, Steve’s father tapped his wedding ring against his champagne glass. “I’m not known for my speeches. I’m never as smooth and charming as the

rest of you. But I have something important to say. It has come to my attention that we would have failed long ago without our brilliant, better halves.”

“Here, here,” Irene’s father cheered. “To our sexy, supportive wives.”

“No, I mean, yes, but no. What I’m saying is without them, we wouldn’t be in business,” he reached inside his jacket pocket, pulled out the paper with his calculations, and passed it around.

Irene’s father ran his finger down the list twice, his wife leaning over his shoulder, running the calculation in her head. After a few moments, he let out a whistle, “Are these numbers accurate?” He looked at his wife for confirmation. She nodded, her lips parted ever so slightly, words sitting on the edge of her silent tongue.

“Yes, they are. I want to acknowledge that our secretary is a large part of our success. Hence the raise and the vacation.” He leaned in and whispered, “I left a note on your desk. We’re fortunate to have her.” Raising his champagne glass. “And you, our lovely dears, are our vital connection to the town’s concerns. You push us to make the smartest decisions and not run foolheartedly into the latest ideas just because they sound keen. Also, you make us part of the community. We wouldn’t be anything without you.” Steve’s father cleared his throat and took a deep breath. His wife touched his arm and pulled him into the booth beside her. Then ran her hand up his thigh.

“Well, I’ll be. All this, and you’re the most beautiful women in the world. Oh! And have given us the most delightful babies.” The couples raised their glasses of sparkling beverages and clinked them together, then greedily gulped down their contents. Irene’s father signaled for more, then ran his tongue under his wife’s pearl necklace and used his teeth to pull off her clip-on

earring. There was a reason they always reserved the darkened corner booth in the restaurant, with only candlelight and the discretion of the servers to betray their revelry.

“Oh, wait,” Steve’s father kissed the tip of his wife’s nose and turned to the group.

“Speaking of that. I want to make a proposal, and I’d like your thoughts,” Steve’s father emptied his champagne. “The children should take over the business. Both of them.”

“They’re just babies, dear,” Steve’s mother placed a hand on his forearm.

“Yes, yes, of course. I mean, when they’re adults. Wouldn’t you love to see Steve at my desk and Irene at yours?” The couples exchanged looks. There weren’t many women sitting at desks like that, but they hoped it would be the future, and the couples liked nothing more than to look to the future.

Irene’s mother touched the corner of her napkin to her eyes. She knew how hard it was to be taken seriously. She felt lucky to have a husband who listened to and included her. She fashioned herself after the role Margaret Chase Smith’s role provided for her husband Clyde in the House of Representatives, though she secretly hoped Margret would run herself one day. But she had no idea how much of an impact those meetings had been. In her heart, she always wanted to sit at her husband’s desk and have a secretary and talk business all day. She was in college when she met her husband and loved his ideas. They would take long walks, discussing their classes and concerns over the world’s economic state. She had a chance to move to Boston and be a secretary after graduation but married and moved to Wilda Point instead. She loved her life but sometimes wondered if the job in Boston might have led to something more. “I would do anything to make that happen for Irene. I want her to have the world.” She and Steve’s mother held hands and sniffed their rose corsages—a future with a woman behind the desk. The couples plotted and planned over the weekend on how to guide their children into these roles. The wives

had already hatched a secret plan for the children to marry but didn't inform their husbands. They would do as much together as possible to ensure the children loved each other and the business.

Nothing was off limits if it enriched Steve and Irene—music, sports, art, dance, math, science, and chess. The parents delighted in this. But when the parents weren't looking, Steve would pull Irene's blonde curls, and Irene would kick Steve's shin with her saddle shoes. They knew their parents wouldn't do anything if they complained. The parents were too busy enjoying each other's company and praising themselves for their fantastic work. Even though Irene was two years younger, she often attended classes and events with Steve. Over time, her skills surpassed his, prompting Steve's father to announce, "Women are the future of this country."

Irene jumped grades in school, leaving her friends behind and eventually landing in Steve's fifth-grade class. When she walked into the classroom and was directed to take a seat, Steve rolled his eyes and made faces at his friends, who laughed. Irene slid into the chair, relieved no empty spots were near him. The parents were thrilled to have their children in the same grade. Even more time together. Steve and Irene only wished for more apart.

The children were invited to the idea parties starting in eighth grade and were expected to review the research and speak their minds. When Steve shared his thoughts, the adults poked holes in his arguments but encouraged him to keep trying. "It's important to fail, son, and try again. That's how you learn." Then Irene would stand before the group and argue with the adults—often stumping them into silence. She offered solutions they hadn't considered and cited materials the fathers hadn't provided. They were unaware of the reputation the precocious girl with the curls was gaining at the Vincent College library and for following the faculty around with her insightful and insistent questions. The fathers would shake her hand and rub her head

when she won the conversation. “See, son, that’s what hard work does.” Irene would stick her tongue out at Steve when the parents were busy congratulating each other.

“Why are you always cheering on Irene?” Steve asked over dinner one night when he was fifteen. “You’re my father. You should cheer for me.”

His father had a grim expression. Not understanding how his own child couldn’t grasp the greater vision. “Son, life will always be easier for you because you’re a boy. Life will, therefore, always be tougher for Irene. But women are the future. Why, look at Margaret Chase Smith. She’s our Senator now. I want both you and Irene to take over the business one day, and she needs more support than you.” He reached his hand over and pulled his wife from her chair to his lap. “Ask your mother. The world is much crueller and less encouraging of women.”

His wife put her arm around his neck and ran her other hand down his face, “It’s true, Steve. She needs all of us to lift her up. And someday, she’ll appreciate the support.” The mother and father kissed. Steve groaned and dropped his head onto the table until he heard his parents giggle and run upstairs.

As college approached, Steve and Irene applied to various big-name schools in cities out of state. Steve was accepted everywhere he applied. His grades were decent, he was involved with several activities, he aced his interviews, and the deans even followed up with phone calls letting him know what a pleasure it had been speaking with him. Meanwhile, Irene found rejections in the mailbox. She went to her room and cried.

Her father knocked on her door and let himself in, “Hey, peanut, can your old man join you?” He sat beside her and ran a hand over her back as she sobbed. He’d never seen his daughter break down before.

“I don’t understand. I have better grades. I have better letters of recommendation. I’m involved with more activities than him. But Steve got in everywhere he applied. What did I do wrong?”

Her father picked up the letters from her desk. He saw words like “quota,” “women’s college,” “too young,” and “apply again later” and shook his head. “I’m so sorry, peanut.” He knew how hard she worked and what she was capable of.

After yet another rejection, Irene went to Vincent’s library a few afternoons later, where she felt most comfortable and tried to focus on her work. Instead, she rested her head in her hand and stared out the window. One of her favorite professors sat across from her. “Irene?”

“Yes, ma’am,” she mumbled.

“What’s going on?”

Irene wiped her tears, “Every college rejected me. I’m not good enough.”

The old professor watched the fifteen-year-old, who worked harder than any student she’d ever had. She knew the pressure on the girl to take over the large family business. She leaned back and crossed her arms. “Listen, you didn’t do anything wrong. You scare them, that’s all. And you better get used to it.”

She raised an eyebrow at the older woman and shook her head.

“You’re a smart girl, and I think you know that. Trust me, I understand.” She sat straighter. “I was the first female professor this school ever hired. Now there are two others. It’s not where it should be, but... Well, anyway, I’m at this small institution because the others wouldn’t touch me. I didn’t even have the right to vote when I started teaching. I wasn’t legally a person. But Vincent saw past that and gave me a chance. I stayed because I grew to love it.”

Irene nodded slowly.

“Did you apply here?” The professor strummed her fingers on the table.

“No, I wanted to go to Boston or New York City.”

“Ah, I see. And you do understand why they might hesitate to take responsibility for a fifteen-year-old girl in the big city?”

“I guess.”

“Come with me.” She led Irene to the dean’s office. The professor explained the situation. Suggesting the dean ask the girl questions and speak with the librarians and most of the other teachers on campus, and they could all tell him about Irene.

The dean sat back for a bit, running his hand over his beard, looking at the girl who had obviously been crying. She looked like a child compared to the other students walking around campus. Irene was the same age as his daughter, and they had been in class together when they were little. Of course, he had heard about the wonder girl. His daughter thought of Irene as a hero but was afraid to speak with her because she didn’t think Irene would befriend her. He asked Irene questions to get to know this sad young lady and if she was indeed ready for college. Not just because she was graduating but genuinely prepared. He thought about his daughter and how unprepared he would be to send his fifteen-year-old away. Listening to Irene, he understood why his daughter was so taken.

“Submit your application by the end of the week. I see no hindrance to us accepting you. Plus, you can live at home. That should alleviate some trepidation. Those other school’s loss is our gain.” Irene stood and shook his hand. “One more thing. You and your parents will come to my home for dinner on Sunday evening. My daughter would love to meet you.”

Irene attended Vincent and worked at her father’s office. She graduated with honors and some cash in her pocket. Steve went away and rarely came home. He traveled with friends and

took internships on his breaks for large companies whose owners were associates of the fathers. But after graduation, he walked in and sat behind his brand-new desk. Irene was livid. With his grown-up strut, cocky easy laugh, anecdotes of how other companies conducted business, and excitement to share his many adventures with anyone who walked through the door. In return, Steve felt he was always in Irene's shadow because she knew all the systems, the projects, and the deals. All the clients were coming to see her for business and him for stories. He felt out of place in the office he'd spent so much time in as a child.

The parents praised themselves for their brilliant foresight and for embracing the future. But Steve and Irene loathed the sight of each other. When their parents weren't around, they argued and called each other names. Steve voted no when Irene presented her ideas, even if he couldn't find a flaw. Irene always found a flaw when Steve presented a vision and voted no. The parents began to worry.

Years went by, and it got worse. The fathers wanted to retire and take their wives on trips around the world, eat new foods, dance to new music, and make love in places where they didn't speak the language. But they feared leaving it in the hands of their children. They stepped back to half-time to see if it would work itself out. Irene assured them nothing terrible would happen. Steve simply shrugged. The secretary's eyes grew wide at their announcement, her fingers attempting to wring the clamminess from her palms.

One night, while Steve and Irene were alone in the office working on a fast-approaching deadline, they started yelling at each other over something so minor that neither could remember what started the argument in the first place. Steve kicked a wastebasket. Irene pushed papers and his favorite mug off his desk. Irene yelled about how much harder it had been for her, and Steve barely had to lift a finger. Steve yelled about how even his own parents favored her over him.

She said he didn't deserve to work there—he was spoiled and made no effort. Steve, in return, called her a pathetic, whiny child. Irene took her coat and left.

The fathers arrived at the office the following morning to find the secretary on her hands and knees, blotting up old coffee among the papers and trash. They helped their treasured secretary up from the floor. She explained that while she loved her decades of service to the partners, she would quit if this continued. It wasn't the first time she had to clean up after the children. The partners promised Steve and Irene would clean up their mess. The fathers assured her the big blowup would get it all out of their systems, and they would move on. But after the fight, Steve and Irene would only work apart. Their words, when exchanged, were either cold or cross. They were not a team. The fathers watched the business they had grown through the depression and two great world wars slipping away. The dust of the massive loss of the cod salting industry clung hard to the state as towns were shuttering down left and right. They saw their decades of work and the town they loved so dearly choking in the wake. The townspeople saw it too.

The mother's hopes of their babies getting married had already faded away. But what hurt, even more was hearing how their children's poor behavior affected everyone. The wives were stopped in the grocery store, at the gas station, and walking down the street. The pain on their fellow townspeople's faces sat like stones in their stomachs. The fear rolling around the town shifted into anger like a storm blowing in on the tide. The wives called a meeting. They made finger foods and desserts and the strongest highballs they could concoct. They both tossed back two before the evening started. When the husbands arrived, they looked tired from dealing with the children.

“We have a plan,” Irene’s mother led the conversation. “We propose bringing in a binder.” She waved to the other room, and Steve’s mother walked in with a woman the men were unfamiliar with. She stood tall and straight. Both men tried to guess her age, anywhere from thirty to fifty. She wore a crisp black blouse. The sleeves were cuffed at her elbows with onyx buttons and embroidery at the collar so intricate it looked like jewels. Black wide-leg trousers with gold buttons up the side of her hip enhanced her long legs, and a black and white silk scarf fastened at her waist with the most dazzling brooch of rubies they had ever seen. The shirt and slacks were stitched in gold thread. The bangles on her wrist and the flats that adorned her long feet were also gold. Both men sniffed at the air that permeated the room when she entered. Irene’s father mouthed “Jasmine?” at his wife. She leaned in ever so slightly and took a whiff, then nodded. The statuesque figure snapped both weary men to full attention. “This stunning creature is Jude,” Irene’s mother bent her elbow and raised a flat hand towards the woman. “She can bind our children’s voices to stop them from shooting cross words at each other. The hope is that if they stop yelling long enough, they might find a way to get along. The floor is open for debate.”

A lively discussion followed until the early hours of the morning. Jude answered every question between chain smoking, eating cookies, and taking long swallows of whiskey. How does it work? How long would it take? What did she need? How long has she been doing it? Would it hurt? Could they get their voices back? How many had she done before? Would she keep this a secret? The parents discussed the binder versus selling the business and walking away.

Jude pulled a pack of Camels and a gold Zippo with a J etched on the side from the deep pocket of her trousers. Then lit a cigarette between her perfectly drawn crimson lips, took a long

drag, and exhaled. With a raspy voice, she replied, “You know the whole town is talking about this, right? They see what’s happening. They’re the ones paying. Whether I do this or not, you must clean up your mess. Those children are a product of you. But if it comes to selling, you’re the devil we know.” Jude stuffed another cookie into her mouth.

They offered Jude well over her usual rate to make it happen immediately.

The next night, Jude arrived with two emerald green jars, gold lids, a spool of gold wire, wire snips, and her Zippo. The children shuffled in an hour later, dreading a night of charades and brownies. They found Jude in the living room in a black cocktail-length dress, sleeves to her elbows, and a mock turtleneck. The skirt, embroidered with hot pink cherry blossoms elegantly dangling at the ends of gold stems and drifting on an imaginary breeze tangled among gold flying cranes, was spread across the front of the chair she was waiting in. A brownie on a napkin in one hand and a lit cigarette in the other. Gold bow pumps on her feet. Both children’s eyes were trained on the creature, and they didn’t notice the jars and wire on the table by her elbow.

“Oh, hello,” Irene said as she crossed the room to shake the woman’s hand. “It’s Jude, right? I’ve seen you around town. So happy to finally make your acquaintance. Will you be joining us this evening? You can be on Steve’s team. He could use all the help he can get.”

“Don’t be a terror, Irene,” Steve snapped back.

The binder raised her eyebrow, “I see.” She rested her cigarette in the ashtray, pushed herself up from the chair, and brushed crumbs from her lap. She lifted the two open jars and asked, “What’s your name?”

“Steve,” “Irene,” they answered simultaneously. Their voices rose from their throats and flew into the jars. The binder screwed the lids, wrapped the jars in wire, and warmed the bottoms with her Zippo. The spool of wire and the snips were placed in a black woven basket with gold

birds and hot pink cherry blossoms across the side. She lifted her still-lit cigarette and took a deep drag. “Don’t bother speaking. You won’t be able to. I’m giving your parents your voices for safekeeping since you two have abused them. Now, if the day comes when you can speak to each other with respect and civility, you can get them back. But if you can’t, I’m warning you, don’t touch these jars.”

Steve and Irene started to yell and wave their hands at the stranger, but nothing came out.

“For the sake of your families, your business, and the good of this town, figure this out.” She waved her cigarette at the two of them. “Did you brats know your mothers thought you would be married by now? Looking at you, I don’t know why. At the very least, keep this town from falling to ruin.” Jude threw back her whiskey and watched the two young people mouthing words and pointing at her. She took crimson lipstick from her bag and applied it without a mirror. The children reached for the jars and leaped back at the blue electric shocks that zapped their fingers. Jude chuckled at the two rubbing their hands. She used the Zippo to light another cigarette. “There are only two ways to open those jars and release your voices. One is for me to unbind it, and that’s not gonna happen as long as you two idiots keep acting like toddlers. Two,” she pointed her fingers holding her cigarette at Steve and Irene, “is for you to have genuine kindness in your hearts. If not, you’ll get a shock every time.” She took another drag of her cigarette. “Pull it together.” She slid her bag into the crook of her elbow, lifted a plate loaded with brownies, then called towards the parents hovering in the kitchen. “I’m off.”

The fathers returned to work full-time as their children adjusted to their mute world. The secretary looked at the fathers and mouthed, “Thank you” when she didn’t have to listen to the fighting anymore. She happily worked with the two now quiet children, even making them notebooks on eyeglass chains. A new rhythm and flow started around the office. Everyone

learned sign language to communicate more efficiently. The learning process slowed down their words and forced them to choose what was most important. Even people around town and business relations started to learn so they could understand. Forcing everyone to start over. There was a harmony that hadn't existed since Irene was born. The town could feel the shift and sighed with relief as the business began to thrive again. The fathers stepped back and eventually retired.

One evening, a couple of years down the line, Steve and Irene were sitting on the floor with a large project spread out in front of them. The secretary had delivered their dinner order from the deli before she left for the night. Halfway through the meal, Steve handed Irene his pickle. He never ate them but always got one to lick it in front of Irene, ensuring she wouldn't touch it. She blushed and signed thank you. On a different evening, they signed cow and fish jokes at each other from across the office, trying to make the other throw back their heads in a peal of silent laughter. A sort of friendship grew over time. Perhaps affection as they made an effort to get to know each other. Asking questions and sharing.

They made a point of spending time in the town, trying to engage the way their mothers had, staying connected to the pulse that made every decision not about their parents or themselves but about the people who depended on them. Sometimes that involved sign language if the other person understood. It often involved the notebooks around their necks in writing questions and simply listening. That was the most incredible skill the mothers had. The women were terrific listeners for the community. On Sunday mornings, Steve and Irene created a routine of going to Home Kitchen Café for breakfast and having a friendly competition with crossword puzzles. It gave them a chance to be around people but a break from working so hard to be a part of it all.

As time progressed, they apologized to each other for the past and meant it. Working late one night, Steve reached across, pushed the blond curls back from Irene's face, and kissed her. She pulled him close. It wasn't the passionate embrace the couples relished in each other. It didn't compare to the kisses Steve experienced while fumbling with some co-ed's sweater on a sofa at parties in the Village or some man's zipper in a dark smoky corner of a bar. Nor the ones Irene had enjoyed in the back of the library stacks with male classmates and the occasional professor. Both had felt the urgency of a clock counting down, knowing that after college, they were trapped in a future of their parent's planning, to no longer have a life of their own. They belonged to their parents, the business, and the town. No, the word for their kiss was not passion. Nor was it heat. It wasn't love or even like. It was comfort, like companionship, acceptance, settling, and resignation. A compromise for a life chosen for them—roles they must fulfill to keep the town alive. The kiss and what followed filled a neglected carnal need inside each of them. One they struggled to find time or words through their hands to fulfill, especially in a town where eyes were always watching. They were getting along well enough, and this was just a thing they could do to help each other out—a prudent solution.

They signed their thoughts on unbinding their voices but opted against it. Things were going much smoother, but in their hearts, neither knew if acceptance was the same as never having a genuine unkind feeling in their hearts. Their parents held the bottles, and the only way to test them was to touch them over finger foods, highballs, and desserts. Neither was sure it would work, and they didn't want to disappoint their parents and the town again. Instead, they agreed to get married. Their mothers planned a wedding where Steve and Irene felt more like guests than bride and groom. They fell into a comfortable routine that was tolerable and agreeable. And they performed their roles as husband and wife and business partners well. This

was achieved with separate bedrooms only shared when the need arose, but mostly they used the office after hours, preferring alone time at home. And by taking independent vacations, providing chances to truly scratch their deep-down itches. They never told the other where they were going nor shared details when they returned. Mostly they were content because everyone else was finally happy. The town flourished once again, as it had under their fathers. And never a cross word was spoken again.

Jude's Life Year, 2014

Standing in the doorway of her great-aunt Jude's apartment, Jessie tapped the bells that hung by the jamb and thought how odd it was that a person's unique smell could linger so long after their body was six feet under—a *ghost odor to comfort and fright*. Jude had moved through the world in a cloud of exhaled Camel Lights. Most never got past the wall of smoke, even when she didn't have a lit butt between her fingers or lips, her eyes squinting through the smoke as she stared someone or something down. If people stopped and waited a moment to let her stare soften and the smoke roll away like a fog bank, they might catch the cloying notes of jasmine oil and the astringent whiff of electric shock.

After carrying empty boxes in, Jessie's mom headed straight to the back of the apartment, and Jessie opened the windows as she had for the last nineteen years upon entering. It had been a rule, along with Jude, not to smoke indoors while Jessie was there, which was a lot because Jude watched the girl for free while the parents were at work.

The undernotes of the apartment, lavender, clove, beeswax, rosemary, and lemon, drifted around on the briny ocean breeze. The deeply embedded fragrances could be missed for the layer of smoke that permeated the carpet fibers, the paint on the walls, and even the grain of the furniture. Jessie learned to do a right proper cleaning, beeswax polishing, and tung oiling from her great-aunt, who even showed her how to clean using stuff from the cabinets. Jessie always thought it was funny to watch the tough old bird suck down cancer stick after cancer stick, then mix white vinegar, fresh rosemary, water, and lemon peels for spray cleaners, or cut lemons in

half and sprinkle them with baking soda to scrub her surfaces because they were more *earth-friendly*.

Another of Jessie's chores was emptying and stuffing clove seeds into cleaned-out sea urchin shells to keep the mice and ants away. They'd spend afternoons on the August full moon gathering the creatures while walking along the craggy salt-stained rocks during the extra low, low tide. They'd scrub the shells with old toothbrushes and let them bleach in the sun. Once filled with clove seeds, Jessie stuffed the opening on the bottom, where the urchin's mouth had once been, with soft molding wax she warmed in her palm and shaped between her finger. Jessie grabbed an empty box, went to all the spots where the sea urchins were tucked, and gathered them up.

Next, she took the spray bottles stashed in corners—the ones filled with water, witch hazel, and lavender oil. When she was young, Jessie rode out to a farm a town over with Jude to pick up small, dark brown jars of tinctures and oils. Jude would return empty ones in exchange for filled. Jessie would run around the fields full of sun-drunk plants. Her hands brushed the tiny purple flowers and silvery green leaves, releasing their fragrance that stuck to her fingers, which she sniffed later on the car ride home. Jessie frequented the barn during her Grange and 4-H days to learn about growing, harvesting, drying, and preserving plants that, to Jessie, smelled of heaven. Whenever she arrived at the apartment, after ringing the bells by the door and opening the windows, Jude would inspect Jessie's mood. If the girl seemed cranky or sullen, Jude had her ring the bells a second time *with feeling* and use the spray bottles to spritz the corners, around the room, over her bag, and herself. Jude would tell her it was *to chase away the stinky clouds*. Jessie only knew that she was usually giggling by the time she was done. Jessie walked to the door and took the bells.

She opened the kitchen cabinets, pulled out anything she could use at her house: tins, jars, and bags filled with teas, spices, herbs, and dried flowers, and reverently placed them into a box. A small item wrapped in a piece of paper and tied with gold thread was next to the tin of Irish Breakfast, Jude's favorite tea. Jessie pulled the end of the thread and unrolled the paper. Inside, it read, "Jessie, set the world on fire. Much love, Jude." *Did she do this every night, just in case? Or did she know she was going to die?*

It was the only object Jessie cared about. The gold Zippo with a J etched on the side. Flick, whirl, pop, hiss, snap. The lighter was the sound of Jude. Jessie caught the lid on her leg, ran the wheel against the weave of her jeans and watched the flame flicker, then snapped the lid closed. She missed the hiss from the lick of flame touching the end of an unlit cigarette. She clutched the lighter in her hands, feeling the warmth left by the fire. She closed her eyes, whispered how much she missed her great-aunt, and promised to take proper care of the Zippo "just like you taught me."

Jessie threw open the breadbox snatching all the cartons of cigarettes and bags of wintergreen mints. Forever, her great-aunt would taste of wintergreen and tobacco-coated fingers when she placed a sugary white disk on Jessie's tongue. A reward for doing something well in school or for some achievement she'd made, or simply for the delight of the girl herself. Her great-aunt was brusque and gruff to some and a straight shooter to others. Either way, Jessie adored her. She could hear Jude's raspy smoke-coated voice telling her not to cry. She opened one of the bags and shoved three of the mints in her mouth. The sting of her saliva releasing the minty oil made her eyes water. "See, it's just the mints," she replied.

After filling a couple of boxes, she placed them on the table and shouted, “Ma, my boxes are on the table,” Jessie threw her head back and looked at the ceiling waiting for an answer.

“Ma! Did you hear me?”

“Stop yelling like I never taught you better. Come here and say what you want to say.”

Jessie rolled her eyes and shuffled through the apartment. Her fingers brushed Jude’s things where Jude had placed them. They’d never again be just so. She looked in the room Jude used as an office, library, and craft space. Jessie didn’t see her mom, but she eyed Jude’s special cabinet that had always been off-limits. She loved the almost black with caramel streaks of the wenge grain. The cabinet had always seemed to have a pulse. She wondered what would happen to it. *Probably should go to Grandma.* She reached her fingers towards the twisted pulls of its punched tin front but stopped and continued to the bedroom. Her mother was sitting cross-legged on the floor between the bed and the radiator that pumped out so much heat that Jude slept with the windows open in February, when it could reach minus twenty, and didn’t worry about her pipes freezing.

“I put my boxes on the table. Just wanted you to know,” Jessie almost whispered at seeing her mom look so sad and small. Jude never had any children and helped Jessie’s parents in any way she could. And treated Jessie as her own. Jessie’s grandma and mom never saw eye to eye on things. Jessie sought solace with Jude when the arguing got bad. She made the girl ring the bells extra hard, spray herself and the room down, placed a mint on her tongue, then launched into some fantastical tale about her life. Jessie asked her grandma if Jude’s stories were true. She shook her head, “Supposed so. She was the glamorous one,” her grandma would sigh. As amazing as the stories were, Jessie knew there was so much more her great-aunt didn’t say. Jude could keep a secret.

“Jude’s jars,” Jessie whispered as she slumped beside her mom. A handmade runner lined the radiator cover. Gold thread stitched on a white cloth covered in black, green, and blue knotwork patterns. The stitching was beautiful and intricate. Jessie made it for a contest when she was fourteen. She’d pulled ideas from little things Jude had around her apartment. The looks on the judge’s faces had been mixed compared to the more boring blocks and straight lines of the other entries, but no one could argue with the craftsmanship. Jessie gave the runner and the blue ribbon to Jude, who displayed it where it’d be seen first thing every morning and topped it with plants on old cake stands and jars. The jars were large and all different shapes. Some looked like they could be used to make sun tea, and others to hold cookies. But all were wrapped in gold wire with burn marks on the bottom. Jude called them her life. There were nine and a half. “Was she really in her nineties?”

Her mom nodded, “Ah-yup. Ninety-four. She’s fourteen years older than your grandma. She left home when your grandma was three.”

“Fourteen years? That can’t be right. She always seemed so much younger than Grandma.”

“Don’t let her catch you sayin’ that. I don’t think your grandma had the easiest time coming up in Jude’s shadow.”

“I think that’s the kindest thing you’ve ever said about Grandma.”

“If you’d let me finish, I’d have said it’s why she’s so bitter and takes it out on the people around her.”

“There it is.” Jessie smiled and nudged her mom.

“Do me a favor,” her mom touched the cuff of her sleeve to her eyes and dabbed her nose. “See if you can touch the jars.”

“Why?”

“Can’t.”

“Cause it feels naughty and wrong?” Jessie smirked and wiggled her eyebrows. As much as Jessie helped her great-aunt with chores, furniture repairs, craft projects, and whatever else Jude needed, there were forbidden things in Jude’s home, like the cabinet and the jars. Even when watering and deadheading the plants, she wasn’t to touch or drip water on the jars.

“No, I mean, I can’t pick them up. They keep shocking me.” Her mom reached out, and a blue spark flew from the gold wire to her outstretched finger, followed by the scent of lightning.

“Holy shit!”

“Language,” her mom scolded as she rubbed her fingers.

“Whatever, Ma, that deserved some profanity. You’ve probably got static electricity from this cheap ass carpet. Touch the radiator first to discharge the shock, then the jar.”

Her mom touched the cover, then reached for the jars. An even larger streak of blue sizzled and arched for her finger. “Son of a bitch.”

“Language, Ma.” Jessie chuckled at her mom’s scowl. “Aw, I’m sorry. Are you okay?”

“Try it if you think it’s so funny. It hurt wicked bad.” Her mom stuck her zapped fingers in her mouth.

Jessie reached out a hand, her face and body tense, her eyes closed until her fingers touched the jar, “Ha!”

“Figures, she made it so only you could touch them,” her mom mumbled, pushed herself up, stepped over Jessie, and left the room. The sound of the roll-top desk opening and the shuffle of papers floated in. Jessie got up from the floor and looked at the frumpled bed where Jude went to sleep and never woke up. She kissed her fingertips and touched them to the indent on the

pillow left by Jude's head, then made the bed the way Jude showed her. *Tight enough to bounce a quarter*. Jude would've hated people being in the room with the bed unmade. Jessie knew it was dumb since everything was being removed, but she didn't care. Once the bed was made, she pulled a top sheet from the hope chest and opened it over the hand-tatted bed cover. Turning each jar on its side, she found dried-up yellowed tape with faded numbers ranging from zero to nine adhered to the bottoms.

Jessie selected number three, figuring it was Jude's twenties. She poured the contents out on the sheet: a barrette, little booklets with handwritten men's names, one silk stocking, two broaches, six diamond rings, four tangled necklaces, hotel matchbooks, some with names and room numbers, steamy love notes that made Jessie want to get home to Weston, stubs from movies and the theater, train tickets, plane tickets, luggage tickets, a bracelet with a bobble that opened to reveal a small mirror and a puff of old face powder, rolls of money both American and foreign with bits of ribbon tied around them, wedding invitations, crumbling dried flowers, baby announcements, three buttons, a broken high heel, feathers, coins, stones, swatches of material, postcards, a large animal tooth, shells, small bones, trinkets Jessie couldn't identify but put in a pile to look up online, tokens from lovers, evidence of adventures, proof of a big, exciting life.

"Hey, Ma, ya gotta see this."

"If you want to talk to me, come here."

Jessie went to her mom and touched the roll-top desk. She could feel the toll the winter heat, sunlight from the window, and salty air had taken on the wood. It was time for a good oil rub. "Come see what I found."

"I'm a little busy here. You have no idea how much paperwork comes with death."

"C'mon, it's not going anywhere."

Her mom threw her hands up, “Fine.”

They both sat on their knees and looked at the jar’s spilled contents. Her mom smiled at some and tilted her head at others. “It’s all so Jude.”

“Can you smell it?”

“Jasmine and cloves.”

“What is this?” Jessie handed over the booklets with men’s names.

“These, my young one, are dance cards. Gentlemen used to put their names in these to reserve dances with ladies. This string here went around her wrist as she danced.” Her mom flipped through the pages of the little books. “No surprise, all her dance cards were full.”

Jessie showed her mom the collection of rings and jewelry, “I didn’t know Jude was ever married.”

“She wasn’t. But I’ve heard your grandma say Jude was engaged plenty. I couldn’t ever tell what was real and what was spiteful gossip,” she sighed. Jessie tried to hand the rings and the money to her mom. “Oh no, those were obviously for you. I couldn’t touch a single one of those friggin’ jars. I think that means Jude wanted you to have what’s inside.”

Jessie held her hands with the rings and the money to her mom again, tears catching in her eyelashes, “I don’t want them. I want Jude.”

“Ah, damn it,” her mom threw up her hands. “You know, there’s a reason you married a guy who’d hug the whole world if he could get his giant arms around it. Jesus H, Jessie, I know we’re not the most affectionate people, but it don’t mean I don’t love you,” she wiped the tears from Jessie’s cheeks with her sleeve. “Same with that tough old bird. She loved you with all her heart. Go through every jar, take the money, and sell what you can. Put it towards your dreams. Dad and I can’t give you much, but Jude wanted you to have everything.”

Jessie put the money and rings down and reached for her mom, but she'd already pushed up from the floor and walked away. The sound of shuffling papers started again.

Jessie poured the contents out of each jar, dividing it into piles. When she was done, she counted the rings. There were twenty-nine. They ranged in gem size and type, and some were gold, white gold, platinum, she guessed, and silver. One was carved from wood. Jessie looked at her own engagement ring, the deep sparking blue of the center sapphire and the little diamonds on either side surrounded by intricate white gold filigree. It was exactly the ring Jessie would pick for herself if she thought she could dream. It was from Jude. Weston was supposed to keep it a secret, but he cracked the minute Jessie questioned him about the cost. Jessie knew her great-aunt lived on a fixed income and insisted she take it back. Jude told Jessie about the simple, pretty ring Weston had picked out. He'd asked Jude to join him when he went looking. "It would have been fine," Jude had told her. "You would have appreciated its sensibility." Jude rolled her eyes. She insisted Weston let her handle the ring, "an engagement present." She wanted Jessie to have something special. Jude had winked at Jessie and said, "T'wen't a thing. You've found the something that always eluded me."

For the first couple of years, Jessie and Weston were together in high school, and Jude looked at him like a giant anchor to be cut loose. Jessie knew this because Jude had stated it on several occasions. Eventually, Jessie asked Jude why she didn't like Weston. What did she see in him that Jessie didn't? Jude sighed and crossed her arms, "it's not that. I want you to live a great life and do extraordinary things. I want the world for you. You're so good at anything you set your heart to, and there's much more to teach you. And the world is so much bigger than this place. I don't want you to give up all that for some boy and get trapped. Too many women in this family have just given themselves to some man. Plus, he's just so goofy and messy."

Jessie watched her great-aunt. She'd never seen the woman look shaken and unconfident. She took Jude's hands, "Thank you. It means everything to me. But I love Weston, and we have a plan. You all have taught me to be a hard worker, and we're going to buy our boat and home. Then we can travel and see all those places you told me about. He doesn't want to hold me down. Yes, he's goofy, messy, and loud, but it's okay. Try and know him. Please."

Jude put her hands on Jessie's cheeks and looked her in the eye, "Okay."

After that, Jessie sat back more, not forcing herself between Jude and Weston. She let them get to know each other. Jude invited him to join in her precious time with Jessie, including him in chores, errands, and even craft time. While Jude was tall, Weston was taller and cleaned the places that usually required a step stool. He invited Jude to watch him play football, and she did. She sat in the stands under a black umbrella. She didn't cheer but gave Weston a nod when he looked up with his big lopsided smile and waved. She even attended the crowded, noisy dinners at his family's house. Where she discovered Weston was the runt of the litter. Tables were covered in serving dishes and platters, and the crowd roamed and grazed. The room was stuffed with the warmth of people's shoulders touching and so many foods that their fragrance melded into the idea of food more than a single dish. It was chaotic, and the conversations were always getting louder for people to hear each over everyone else, and they laughed and slapped each other on the back. In the center of it, Jessie always found Jude dressed more formally than the occasion called for in black dresses intricately embroidered and edged with gold thread. Her long feet were tucked into gold shoes. Her hair and make up perfect. And the scent of jasmine wafting around her, regaling all ears with tales of faraway lands.

Soon, Weston started hugging Jude, lifting her off the ground and giving the old woman's back a good crack, which always made her laugh. He did his best to absorb everything Jude said,

offering his arm as they walked, peppering her with questions. He started collecting flowers, rocks, bones, and shells he thought she'd like. He ate every bite of food Jude placed before him even though she wasn't known for her cooking. Even asking for seconds. Weston never shied away from the old woman who stood straight and tall, and many couldn't look in the eye. Over time Jessie watched Jude soften and relax around the bear of a teenager. One night after a visit, Jude put her hands on his cheeks and said, "You're a good boy." That's when Jessie knew he'd won her over.

Looking at the pile of rings, Jessie wondered if her's had been bought with cash, cannibalized from other pieces, or a relic from a sordid past. Jessie imagined such a different proposal from the one she had. Weston asked her after they snuck out of their graduation party to sit on the cliffs over the ocean. She rested her head on his shoulder with the full rising moon spilling diamonds of light across the drink. He was sweaty and dropped the box twice after digging it out of his pocket. But his wide, crooked smile and big eyes made Jessie giggle and yell, "Of course."

Perhaps for Jude, it was a former lover in a distant land who proposed outside a café, a cloth napkin under his knee to protect his pants, the hint of fresh bread on the breeze, a single violin playing nearby, a fountain, and cobblestones. She wondered about the broken hearts left in Jude's wake, how she'd found all these suitors who loved her enough to propose, and how she'd kept all the rings. Did Jude sneak out in the middle of the night as her lover dreamed of their future together? Had they been killed in some war or a duel? Jessie picked up a photo of Jude in her youth. They could have been twins, but Jude had bigger boobs and a smirk that said she'd eat you alive. Jessie wished there'd been fewer secrets. Or at least she'd asked more questions.

The jars from Jude’s seventies and eighties and the half jars from her nineties didn’t have much in the way of rings, travel memorabilia, or dance cards. Most of the contents were dedicated to Jessie, her accomplishments, and creations, mixed in with more swatches of material, some of which Jessie recognized, buttons, hair accessories, more rolls of money, dried leaves and petals, and stones. Snapshots from events, articles from the paper, pieces ripped out of programs with Jessie’s name on them, fliers, little crafts, and artwork Jessie had made, Jude’s place card from Jessie and Weston’s wedding, and one of the little bells Jude insisted were at everyone’s place setting for the reception. A small piece of paper with instructions was tied to each bell with a thin blue ribbon instructing everyone to ring it every time they wanted to wish the couple luck. Every few minutes, bells would tinkle across the attendees raining wishes upon the couple. Weston’s family rang every few minutes with extra gusto. With each round, Jude blew a kiss to Jessie.

“Hey, Ma,” Jessie shouted.

“Jessie, for the love of Mike, you know what I’m going to say.”

Jessie ran to the guest room, leaned against the doorframe, and watched her mother surrounded by papers held down by various colorful stones and crystals against the breeze coming through the window. She handed the black and white photo of Jude to her mom, “Wish I knew her better.”

“Jessie, open that cabinet over there,” her mom said without looking up from the photo.

Jessie hesitated before the dark wenge chest with doors fronts made of tin punched in interlocking circles—a whiff of beeswax and dark winter spices released through the holes. Jessie knew precisely how smooth the wood of the cabinet was. She’d cleaned the outside regularly since she was little and loved how the cloth moved like melting butter but forbidden to

open it. She hesitated at the twisted silver handles, then yanked them open. Inside were rows of old books with cracked bindings, piles of stuffed notebooks, and photo albums. There were candles, a line of salt, rocks, crystals, flowers, leaves, and things she didn't understand. And figures of women she's seen before but didn't know their names.

“Well, it shocked me every time I tried to open it. So, I guess those are yours too. I'm stuck with the bills and settling her life, and you get Jude's secrets. I'm not sure which of us wins. Oh, wait. It's you.”

“I don't know what this is.”

“This is what I told Jude never to share with you. I didn't trust or like her shenanigans. Guess it's why I couldn't touch it,” she wiggled her fingers at Jessie.

Jessie sat on the floor in front of the cabinet and stared at the weight of it. “I don't understand. What didn't you want me to know?”

Her mother turned around in the chair to face her daughter, “Jude was complicated. People paid her a lot of money to do things, to, I guess, improve their lives.”

“And that's a bad thing?”

“I don't honestly know anymore. I'm not sure what you'd call it. Witchcraft, spells, magic, conning people? But she wanted you to learn from her. She came to see you when you were born, and I don't know. She just adored you. She left a few times after that but kept coming back and finally settled for good because of you,” Her mother cleared her throat and sighed. “I think I was a bit envious because she didn't do that for me. I could've really used that growing up. It sounds awful, I know, but I told her she couldn't see you anymore if she taught you,” she waved a hand at the cabinet. “That.”

“Seriously, Ma, what the hell?”

Her mother put her hands over her face, “I know, I know. It’s why I’m locked out of the cabinet and the jars. All the money and jewelry and her books of whatever is for you. I think she wanted you to take over for her. So that, my daughter,” her mom jabbed her finger at the cabinet, “is yours. Read it in good health.”

Jessie leaned back on her elbows and stared at it. She felt her heart beating too hard and took slow breaths like Jude taught her. “I only have enough boxes left for the plants and Jude’s jars. I’ll have to come back with Weston.”

“Take your time. This place is paid up for the next three months. And think about anything else you want. Furniture, maybe? Honestly, you should get first dibs. Say no to anything you don’t want. Everything will need a good airing out on many a sunny day to get out the cigarette stench.”

“Let me think on it,” Jessie pulled the lighter out and started flicking it open and closed.

“Wondered where that ended up. You know your grandma’ll want it.”

Jessie handed the note to her mom.

“I’ll just tell her we couldn’t find it. Maybe we can grab something else to keep her happy. Something I can touch without getting electrocuted.”

“There are some things from when Grandma was little that she might like,” Jessie sighed.

“Guess we’ll need a storage unit until we can afford a house.”

“Just use the garage, don’t waste the money.”

“Might be a few years yet ‘till we can buy a house and a boat.” Jessie looked at the shelves of books. “There’s too much here, and we’re just so busy right now. I don’t have time for this.” She waved a hand at the cabinet.

“Look,” her mom stared Jessie in the eye. “You kids make the parents proud. We raised you right. But sweetheart, don’t be like your father and me,” her mom looked around the room. “Jude didn’t want that for you. Maybe I made a mistake not letting her teach you more. You always regret things the minute you can’t do anything about it. But I know she wanted you to love life the way she did.”

Jessie got off the floor, closed the cabinets, and took back Jude’s note, “Ma, I don’t think anyone loved life the way Jude did.”

Crosswords Year, 2016

When Jessie first started snagging, which led to folding, ripping, and burning, Steve and Irene's Sunday morning crossword puzzles with their disgustingly perfect blue and black lettering, it was simply out of curiosity. First, she attempted to figure out the clues without looking at the filled-in answers but didn't know most. The puzzles read like a foreign language. But Jessie knew they held some secret to long-term romance, and she was determined to figure it out. The more she and Weston worked and scrimped, the larger the chasm between them grew, the tighter her throat constricted, and the more important it was to fix it. Jessie missed that feeling of urgency, pull, and tenderness she once had with Weston. She knew she needed whatever secret magic Steve, Irene, and those stupid puzzles possessed.

Jessie slumped down in her usual spot at Home Cookin' Café at her usual time for her usual Sunday morning breakfast. She lifted her phone off the table with one hand, waiting for it to read 9:32. With her other, she flicked the lid of her great-aunt Jude's gold Zippo with a big J etched on the side. The rhythm of clicking the top open and close, open and close against the tight, worn weave of the denim stretched across her thigh, felt like a kind of mediation. Tammy, the petite waitress behind the counter, waved her hand to get Jessie's attention. They stuck their tongues out at each other as they had for the past twenty years since they met in kindergarten. At 9:32 on the dot, the old sleigh bells jingled when the heavy maroon door creaked open, and in walked Steve and Irene. Jessie sat up straight, keeping her eyes on the couple who removed their Bean fleeces, so old they were embroidered with logos from two versions ago but looked as

though they'd never seen a lick of work. Jessie's eyes narrowed, and the flicking sped up. *God, I hate Steve and Irene.*

"You're gonna worry the top right off that thing," her husband sang from across the table.

"Nah, it's tough, just like Jude."

"It only has so many opens and shuts. And I think your chimney of a great-aunt gave it a good run for its money." He reached for his phone, and Jessie dropped a hand on his. He winced and pulled back, rubbing the scar that ran from his palm to a few inches past his wrist. Jessie grimaced and flopped back against the chair. *Fuck.*

"Don't worry. Fog got in it, is all." They look towards the window and the misty bank packed into the parking lot. *Thick as dragons' breath*, only the lights on the passing cars were visible.

Jessie sighed and turned back to Steve and Irene. *Always the same.* Irene pulled her red and white Cozy Corners Bookstore tote bag up on her shoulder while Steve hung their fleeces on the hooks by the door since the café wasn't big enough for coats and scarves. Heads turned at the mere feeling of Steve and Irene's arrival. Smiles pointed in their direction as the couple floated through the breakfast revelers. Nods exchanged, hands touched shoulders, kisses on a cheek here, waves over there as they made their way through the chairs and tables packed so tight there was barely room for the diminutive wait staff, the only size the owner hired, to deliver loaded plates and steaming mugs.

Jessie rolled her eyes at everyone's delight when the white-haired couple made their way to the end of the counter and climbed up on the high stools. *Doesn't bother a damned soul they never speak. Just stroll across the room like they own it. Well, suppose they do.* The couple owned at least half the town. *Maybe everyone's just kissing ass*, but they never had an unkind

word to say about Steve and Irene. Jessie was the only one she knew who didn't like them. Like she'd missed the town meeting that said to forgive them anything, she picked up her rhythm, flicking the Zippo open and close. A slight whiff of lighter fluid hit her nose. Her eyes trained on the red and white tote bag. She turned to her husband, waiting for him to look up from his game, Snapchat, or whatever meme held his attention. She cleared her throat and slammed her hand down; his light brown eyes rose in her direction.

"Don't you just think they're so rude?"

"Who this time?"

"Steve and Irene."

"Oh, good lord Jessie," he threw his hands in the air, "can't you leave that poor old couple alone? They can't talk. Haven't for like half a century. My mom told you that a million times. They're mute."

"Both of them? How can that be? I mean, they used to talk. They got awards and articles framed all over the school and library walls. For debate, speeches, that sort of thing. We've seen them. How do you just stop talkin'? You don't. They're just some fancy old coots. Thinkin' they're so much better than us."

"I don't know, shit just happens. For both our sakes, let them be," he sighed and dropped his eyes back to his phone.

Jessie bounced her foot under the table and bit at her torn-up thumbnail that tasted of stale beer, her eyes moving between the red and white tote bag and her husband, "I can't. I think they made a pact not to speak to anyone."

Weston placed his phone on the table and looked hard at Jessie, "Why? Why would they do that? They're from here. They're not from away. We're," he waved his finger around in a

circle, “their people. They don’t have a reason not to speak to us. They didn’t sit around and hatch a plan to annoy Jessie Anderson decades before you were born. You gotta accept that it has nothin’ to do with you. ‘Sides, the only reason you don’t like them is ’cause Jude didn’t like them.” He grabbed his phone and shifted his former linebacker bulk sideways in his chair.

How dare he blame Jude? Jessie glared at the man she had taken to calling the Lump inside her head. More and more, he’d grown into a barnacle stuck to a rock, at least when it came to her. They arrived at 9:20 sharp every Sunday morning. The only day each week, they got to sleep in and have breakfast together. She closed the bar, cleaned up, and didn’t get home until two most mornings. Depending on the season and who was hiring, Weston usually got up a few hours later to start his day on a boat hauling traps, lines, nets, or wherever someone was paying. They were saving hard for their own boat and house. But for now, were stuck lining some other asshole’s pocket.

They started dating at their freshman homecoming dance and married two months after graduation. Both were good students and popular. Back when she called him Weston in her head, he was a football star, and she couldn’t get enough of his broad, muscular body and even broader crooked smile. Jessie used to win all kinds of awards with the Grange and Four H—needlecrafts, art, raising mail-away chicks, pies, survival skills, and plant identification. You name it. She ribboned it. Jessie always believed in her heart that it meant something. They were destined to be somebodies. But graduate high school, and none of those things matter. Ribbons, trophies, and report cards sit in a box, becoming fodder for the fog. Seemed like their lesser achieving classmates were getting farther ahead and were happier. Everyone else was getting somewhere.

On Sunday mornings at Home Cookin’, no one was allowed to sit on the high stool at the end of the counter facing the shelves stuffed with t-shirts, mugs, magnets, and other crap for

tourists to buy. Those spots were reserved for Steve and Irene—their backs to the room. Once the older couple made their way through their adoring crowd and settled in, Tammy flipped their cups over and poured one of black coffee and, in the other, an Earl Gray tea bag, a wedge of lime, and hot water: no cream, no sugar, and one small glass of ice. Steve and Irene took their spoons, removed ice from the glass, placed it in their hot beverages, and stirred.

As the couple waited for their food to arrive, Jessie watched Irene remove two small clipboards, one blue felt tip pen, and one black ballpoint from the red and white tote bag hanging on a hook under the counter. She placed one clipboard and the black pen in front of Steve while keeping the other for herself. Back before Jessie started referring to her husband as the Lump, they played a guessing game at what could be on the clipboards. Suicide notes, bank robbery letters, shopping lists. She ran her toes up the leg of his jeans back then. His wide cheeks used to blush when the waitress came to warm up their mugs. Jessie finally gave in one day and looked over their shoulders as she made her way to the restroom, only to see the distinct black and white squares of crossword puzzles.

After Tammy filled Steve and Irene's cups and placed the small glass of ice between them, she moved to the section of the counter stuffed with baked goods. She lifted the lid of the giant sticky cinnamon buns, used a pie server to hack off a chunk of roll, plunked it on a plate, and slid it in front of a man hunched over his paper. All the while not looking at what her hands were doing but at Jessie. When Jessie lifted her head, Tammy gave a thumbs up. Jessie shot two fingers in the air and winked.

When Jessie started taking the puzzles home, it was to collect and study them, like a new plant or insect picked up on a hike or even a new crochet pattern found at a craft table—dissecting, discovering, devouring. They held a secret, but Steve and Irene weren't talking. At

first, the puzzles evoked a sense of reverence. Jessie got a book on origami from the library and taught herself to crease and fold the puzzles into cranes, frogs, and hearts. She made space on the shelf and windowsills to honor them—ready for the magic to rub off on her and Weston.

Jessie flagged down her own waitress, a tiny mousy thing Jessie knew for a fact was at the bar till close the night before making quite the spectacle of herself acting all Woo Girl and wiggling her hips. Jessie couldn't fathom how the waitress looked so pressed and chipper. Two more bags of chai and more hot water were delivered. With the strings wrapped around her finger, she bobbed the tea bags in the hot water of her chipped whitish mug like she was trying to attract a fish. The spicy brown tendrils of the tea swirled around, and a cloud of cinnamon and clove danced to her nose. She breathed deep, drinking the scent to drown her sinuses and lungs. Jessie hated the smell of booze. Her whole world either smelled of sticky sour alcohol or pungent fish or body odor. No matter how much she washed her hair, she couldn't escape it. So now, even though the Lump liked it down, her hair was always tied up with an elastic in a messy bun on top of her head as far away from her nose as she could get it.

She took up smoking Jude's leftover Camel Lights for a hot minute to smell something new or maybe a bit of comfort. The few times she put the end of a cigarette in her mouth, it tasted like stale raisins. When she struck the Zippo and touched it to the tip, it hissed to life and brought back the woman whose apartment she went to when she wasn't at school, and her parents were working, which was all the time. She spent much of her childhood at Jude's while her parents did their best to have two pennies to rub together. Jessie adored Jude and wanted to be just as independent and strong-spoken and possess the power she held over a room. Jude left the Zippo for Jessie to find after her death with a note telling the girl to "Light the world on fire." But she hadn't. Jessie still brought an old afghan made of pink, gray, and green squares to Jude's

grave, laid it down on the earth, and yammered away, seeking guidance, like when she was a kid sitting next to Jude doing whatever Jude was doing. As much as Jessie loved evoking her great-aunt, the cigarettes made Jessie cough, and it cost too much money after running through the Jude stash. So instead, Jessie made cups of double-bagged extra-strong tea to break up her overwhelming cage of stink.

Across from her, the Lump made a moaning “merowph” noise each time he shoveled a fork piled with food into his mouth. When he breathed in and out of his nose, it whistled as the air worked around the treasure trove of rock-hard snot made worse by the damp foggy morning. The more he chewed and whistled and stretched out his hand with the scar, the more the back of Jessie’s eyes burned, and her throat constricted. She dropped her fork on her plate, her fingers catching the tears before they passed her eyelashes. Rolling her eyes towards the couple whose symphony of movements was fifty years in the making. Their white hair bent over the clipboards concentrating no matter the volume of the crowd, laughter, babies crying, rounds of Happy Birthday, or hearts breaking.

Jessie sipped her tea as best she could through the tightness in her throat. Steve and Irene placed their pens under the lip of their clipboards and put them to the side as they prepared their feast. Irene slid two sunny-side-up eggs from her plate to his. Steve spread butter on each layer of blueberry pancake and used his fork and knife to lift the top two and place them on her plate. He poured warmed real maple syrup on each of the shortened stacks. She broke strips of bacon in half and set each piece so one end sat in syrup and one on the edge of the plates for a sticky-free pick-up. He shook salt and pepper on his eggs and salted hers.

Jessie couldn’t remember the last time she and the Lump shared food. She pushed her congealed orange yoke around her plate with cold potatoes impaled on the end of her fork. The

eggs reminded her of the skin that formed on the stovetop pudding Jude made as an afterschool snack. It always made Jessie gag, and the cold egg on her plate hit her in the same place at the back of her constricted throat. She considered launching her leftovers at the Lump like the pumpkin chucker at the harvest festival a few Novembers back when they were newlyweds. After staying up all night partying at the quarry, they gathered their sunken-faced jack-o'-lanterns and drove them an hour inland to launch them in the air and cheer as they smashed into the ground. After they watched their pumpkins explode, Weston lifted Jessie over his broad shoulder, and she squealed as he carried her to their truck. They made love in the back seat, not caring who saw. *Was that really seven years ago?*

Swift hands cleared the plates from Steve and Irene and topped off the hot beverages. Jessie straightened up in her chair and flicked the Zippo against her thigh because she knew they were close to finishing when Tammy delivered two small glasses of orange juice. The couple traded their puzzles, looked the others over, and made corrections. White hair bobbed and shook in response to the marks on the page. Jessie caught their profiles when they turned towards each other. Soft crinkles formed at the corners of their eyes when they smiled. Irene double-checked the caps of the pens before placing them back in her red and white tote bag. Steve set the spent puzzles on the counter to be thrown away. He always paid the bill before it arrived and, from what Tammy said, left twice the meal cost as a tip. *It's the least Steve and Irene can do for this town.*

Jessie flicked the Zippo while Steve and Irene reversed their entrance. Smiles, waves, kisses, nods, jackets, Steve raising Irene's hand to his lips, and the door hitting the bells. Jessie looked over at Tammy and pointed towards the far wall by the restrooms. The waitress grabbed the crossword puzzles and stuffed them in her apron pocket.

“I’ll be right back,” Jessie pushed back her chair.

The Lump nodded but didn’t look up from his phone.

Tammy squeezed her way around the packed cafe. She pulled the crossword puzzles from her apron and handed them to Jessie.

“Thanks, I owe you a shot.”

“You got it,” Tammy started to walk away but turned back. “Why do you keep doing this?”

“If you don’t want to do it anymore, I could find another way of getting them. No hard feelings.”

Tammy took Jessie’s hands and pressed them to her heart, and looked Jessie in the eye. The room felt both noisy and quiet all at once. “You could just talk to him.”

“No, I can’t. He’s working so hard, and his hand and everything. I mean. It’s my fault we lost all that money Jude left me. We have goals...” Jessie’s voice drifted off. She took her hands from Tammy and pulled at the neck of her t-shirt.

“Sweetie, it’s not your fault. But wouldn’t talking to him be easier? You know, then, this?”

Jessie shook her head and shoved the folded-up papers into her pocket beside the lighter. “I can’t.”

“J, they’re not that great. They’re not the bad people you think they are. They’re nice and all, but that over there and those pieces of paper, that’s not love. What they do, that a routine they perform. You don’t see it from my side. They do that for the town. We all feel a little safer when they put on their show for us. Weston loves you. I love you. Jude loved you. You know what real love is. And it’s not tidy like that. I serve them every week. They don’t love each other.

They don't even look at each other. Trust me. Just talk to him." Tammy tried to pull Jessie in for a hug, but Jessie shook her head.

She mouthed "love you" to Tammy and returned to her table.

Used to be when Jessie and Weston got home, they'd have sex, both grunting a little under the weight of their breakfasts but not caring. Then Weston would go to the sofa, turn on the Pats, the Celtics, the Bruins, or the Sox, and fall asleep. Now, he stumbled straight to the couch, turned on the tube, and started snoring. Jessie tiptoed into the spare room Weston nicknamed Lady Land. A place for her to do things she used to win awards for, like knitting, building wood crafts, drawing, or simply reading by the window. After closing the door, Jessie slid a large, pickled egg jar out from behind the ugly giant pillow with a puffin Jude embroidered. She didn't know why she kept the silly thing. But it was large enough to hide secrets.

Tightly folded origami crosswords covered the shelves, which felt like a punch in the gut whenever she entered the room. She'd tried reading, solving, and honoring the puzzles, but the void only seemed to grow. Over time Jessie started tearing the puzzles into tiny pieces, sweeping them up with her feet and leaving them in piles all over Lady Land. She took the jar from work to collect the confetti she couldn't bring herself to throw away. More months rolled by, and then one Sunday, the Lump started staring at his phone during their one breakfast together a week, and when they got home, he headed for the sofa instead of her. After a couple of months of that, she sat on the floor staring at the jar filled with shredded bits of paper with their black and white squares and neat black and blue handwriting. She grabbed the Zippo, lit the papers on fire, and said, "Love me." Puffs of lighter fluid, paper glue, and ink rose out of the pickle jar. As the fire burned to ash, it compressed, creating more space. A giggle rose from her belly, and the

constriction in her throat relaxed. She reached for an origami frog to light when Weston made noise from the other room. The TV went quiet.

“Hey, babe, whatcha doing?” Weston’s voice didn’t have the exhausted grogginess that had developed with the extra work he’d taken on cleaning boats and fixing traps. It had that husky depth that made Jessie’s heart pit and pat.

She slid the jar and the lighter behind the ugly pillow, got to her feet, and moved toward the door. She smelled her Weston under the fish, sweat, and stale beer. “Nothin’ you?” She took her hair out of the elastic and let it cascade over her shoulders. She stood before him and unzipped her hoodie, letting it fall at their feet. He pulled her up on his lap, ran his fingers through her hair, and kissed her the way he used to. His broad callous hands ran up under her shirt over her bare skin. Jessie loved how small she felt under his hands and had missed them discovering her. Like she was worth learning.

But within a few days, they cooled down again. Jessie collected more crosswords, studying the process, trying to recreate that moment, and wanting to get it right. She tried it with matches, other lighters, or off an already lit candle, and nothing. Crosswords from the free local paper, blank and filled in with her chicken scratch and nothing. Old love notes they’d passed in class or cards or cheap tchotchkes they’d given each other, and nothing happened but setting off the smoke detector and a horrible stench of melted plastic. It had to be Jude’s Zippo, Steve and Irene’s puzzles, and her words. Unfortunately, she learned Weston needed to be home as well.

One morning she was off from work and bored, and wanting him to rush home. She struck the Zippo, lit an origami crossword heart on fire, said, “Come get me,” and waited. But instead of Weston, she got a call from the ER. He was on the boat and, she figured, got distracted

by the heart fire hitting him. His wrist caught in the line and dragged him overboard into the drink. Luckily, he wasn't alone or would have drowned, but his wrist required surgery.

Medical bills and time missed while he healed drained their savings, including a chunk of what she got when Jude passed. Jessie worked double shifts and picked up hours wherever she could. Her throat tightened as Weston did his best to make meals and clean up one-handed, but she watched him struggle with being injured. He never got hurt in all his years of football and working on boats. He was her invincible teddy bear. *It's all my fault.* Even after he healed and was back to work, Jessie hesitated to burn the crosswords, even though she continued to collect them. The more she collected, the more she folded increasingly elaborate shapes, the larger the fear of burning them, and the deeper her anger grew toward Steve and Irene. *They've got it so damned easy.*

Jessie sat on the floor of Lady Land and stared at the fog outside the window. She mulled over Tammy's words about Steve and Irene not being in love but couldn't believe it. Every fiber in her wanted to look like them, so in sync, perfect, and lucky. *They have everything.* The tightening in her throat had been ratcheting for weeks, making it almost impossible for her to swallow. She needed Weston. She needed all of him. The old sofa's tired springs groaned from multiple previous owners' worth of use. The worn floor creaked under each step between the sofa and the kitchen. She pulled the elastic, shook her hair, removed her socks, and unbuttoned her flannel. Grabbing the Zippo and one of the puzzles from her pocket, she flipped the lid of the lighter against her thigh, then dragged it the other way, striking the wheel against denim, sparking the flint. She brought the flame to the crossword and lit it, letting the ashes fall into the wide mouth of the jar. "Love me."

Appendix 1:

Glass - First Published in the *Los Angeles Review* 2021

Before leaving for his tour in Vietnam, Marty's mother insisted he and his brother Glen gather a jar of sea glass from the small pebble beach in front of their home. Ava instructed her sons to count three hundred and sixty-five of the sugared jewels. The boys chatted away and kicked salty waves at each other while they searched.

After Marty's bus to boot camp disappeared over the horizon, Ava laid out every colorful salt-puckered shard on the kitchen table. With her fingers shaking, she sorted the collection just as her mother taught her, careful not to let her tears touch a single one. Ava counted each precious piece, whispering the prayers of love and protection she'd memorized while listening at her grandmother's knee. Ava brought even the tiniest of slivers to her lips before placing it back in the jar. One for each day until her eldest boy sat across from her at the table again. The mother wiped her eyes, placed the lid on the jar, and nestled it on a shelf next to his framed baby picture.

A year later, on the weekend in-between Marty's homecoming and Glen shipping out, the ritual is echoed. The brother's matching chestnut-colored heads, one buzz cut while the other's whips in the ocean breeze, bend forward as they comb and cull the pebble beach. Never looking at each other. None of the childish teasing or banter of the year before as they harvest three hundred and sixty-five pieces of sea glass. One for each day. Marty's trained posture drags down from the weight of his memories and concern over his younger brother's safety. The younger brother mumbles careful questions of what to expect. The one who wishes he didn't know offers short, thoughtful replies.

Once Glen's bus to boot camp disappears over the horizon, again Ava pours the collected bits of color across the kitchen table. Again, she prays. Again, careful not to let her tears touch a single one. She lifts the browns, blues, reds, whites, and greens to her lips one at a time, counting each piece. At three hundred and sixty-four, she looks around the table. Then stands and shakes out her skirt. Dropping to her hands and knees, she searches the worn wooden floorboards; her fingers scan the shadows for what her eyes cannot see.

Appendix 2:

Seeds – First Published in *Paper Teller Diorama* anthology with *Great Weather for Media* 2021

Oona sharpens her thumbnails before leaving the cabin at the edge of the wood. There's always something to procure, and she likes to be prepared.

Her grandfather, who always wore a faded and frayed Red Sox cap to cover his strawberry birthmark on the center of his balding head, had raised her after her parents died when she was four. He taught her all the tricks he knew for living with little need for money or depending on anyone else. Procuring seeds was her most cherished lesson. Her thick nails sharpened to a point makes it easy to slice off past blossoms or fruit on a vine.

“Never take so much that it hurts another person or is even noticed,” her grandfather explained as his gray eyes the color of a stormy ocean looked straight into her.

Three days a week, Oona works at the Cozy Corners Bookstore on Main Street to force herself into the world, visit with her one true friend Amy, and collect a paycheck for things like the taxes on her land or a medical bill. Other than that, her needs are minimal. On her trips to and from work, she scouts and gathers what she wants, which equates to what she needs.

When nights begin to crisp with the edge of fall, but the days stay warm with the fragrance of apples on the breeze, she gets excited to squirrel away New England Aster seeds, her favorite. An earlier procurement of lupin pods is already scattered on a drying screen awaiting dissection, but Oona wants the fuzzy aster heads before the first frost. *The Lupin can wait.* She runs out the door, jumps on her bike, and pedals into town.

On her ride, she stops just long enough to slice off aster heads and place them in her felted bag. If something else catches her eye, she snags that too, but Oona's on a mission.

“You need to know about asters, Oona,” her grandfather told her when she was little and ran to keep up with his walk. “They grew from stars that fell from the sky the night you were born. That’s why they always bloom in time for your birthday. Can’t you see the stars in their faces? Like bursts of a firework.” Oona always leans in close to see the stars.

“Aster root tea is good for a fever,” he would tell her as his wide wrinkled hands dug them up from their garden. He taught her the uses for plants, from roots to leaves, flowers, and seeds. “Burning the leaves keeps away snakes and evil spirits.” He always nodded at her skeptical look. Whenever she had nightmares of the accident that took her parents, or if Amy got homesick when she slept over at the cabin, they would burn the leaves and run around the house yelling, “You’re not welcome here,” at whatever scared them

As her grandfather lay in his bed, taking his last breaths, his once bright stormy eyes turned calm and muddy, Oona burned aster leaves and walked around the room, spreading the smoke with a wave of her hand. Half to keep the evil spirits from snatching his soul and half to shield against death himself.

Oona sits in the center of the cabin as she always does after harvesting. Surrounded by wreaths woven with dried peony and poppy seeds, grasses, and yarrow, and vases filled with locust pods, pussytoes, cattail, and Catalpa pods thrown in for texture. She spreads her trophies on a screen to let them dry, picking off any bugs or debris. Then using her thumbnail, she slices open the bellies of the dried lupine pods, scoops their innards, and listens as the black seeds plink against the glass jar.

The light in her cabin grows low as she finishes the Lupin and screws the lid tight. Oona makes her way to turn on a few lights and deposit the newly filled jar in the freezer to hibernate until spring. She fills the kettle and places it on the wood stove. Feeling restless, she stalks the

walls of the cabin, brushing her fingers along shelf after shelf bursting with jars she'd gathered from peoples recycling bins, then filled with seeds of various sizes and colors. Overstuffed gardens surround her home with plants she's grown since her grandfather let her push her tiny finger into hallowed eggshells filled with soil. Rows and rows of jars labeled with Sharpie on strips of masking tape out of habit, but she knows them all by heart.

The land her grandfather left her is vast. Even if she clear cut every tree to sell for paper, she couldn't use all the seeds on the shelves covering the walls. Her grandfather had indulged her zealous collections. A smile on his weathered face each time he added a new one. But over time, she's doubled the number of built-in shelves he'd made for her cache.

Amy has encouraged Oona to sell her seeds and seedling for years. Even offering to help since Oona's not sure where to start. *Most people cut the tops off all these plants and throw them away because they weren't pretty anymore. They didn't see the value. All those wasted seeds* as far as Oona's concerned, and she told Amy as much. But as Amy pointed out, Oona wasn't doing much more with them either.

The kettle starts to bubble. Oona pours hot water over dried mint and lemon balm from her garden. The minty lemon cloud tickles her nose as she sits in her grandfather's chair. She stares at the walls covered with jars and seeds.

Perhaps I'll talk to Amy about selling these tomorrow; she thinks as she looks from packed wall to packed wall. She leans back into the divot, her grandfather's broad back left in the leather. *Perhaps next week.*

Appendix 3:

Light – first published *Chestnut Review* Winter 2022

From the vernal to the autumnal equinox, Phoebe amasses jars filled with light, preparing for the bleak winter months ahead. She and her ancestors have gathered the beams of the natural world for as long as they can remember. Her neighbor's ancestors have long forgotten the joy in harvesting instead turning to electricity for warmth and sight.

She leaves jars open on the deck on sunny days while working in her gardens and tending her chickens, goats, and pigs. Even steeping her sun tea in a giant Mason jar filled with a mixture of black tea, herbs from her garden, and spring water for her afternoon break. Before shade touches the jars holding light, she closes their lids tight and stores them in the cabinet at the back of her root cellar.

At night, she ventures out with empty jars to a clearing in the forest behind her house. Running her fingers through the moss as she lay on her back, absorbing that evening's celestial show. The jars sit open on a flat rock nearby, collecting beams from full moons, constellations, comets, and meteor showers, which she seals before returning home and stores next to the sunlight. On lucky nights, she captures fireflies—poking holes in their lids with a hammer and nail.

As the days grow short and snow covers the leaves on the ground, she carries jars of light up from the root cellar to illuminate her house. Sunlight gives her warmth and brightness to make dinner and read a book. The stars and comets cast a calm glow throughout her small home.

Phoebe gathers the Northern Lights to celebrate the equinox. Once trapped, the reds and greens swirl both inside the jars and across her walls. If her light waxes as the winter trudges on,

she bundles as best she can and wades through the snow to collect crystallized fragments of the Aurora or moonlight.

When friends visit, she decorates tables with fireflies that dance and blink. Luciferase combining with luciferin shine wonder and delight across their cheeks and chin. She would offer to send fireflies home at the end of the evening, but friends would always tuck their hands away like little children and shake their heads. “I would just kill them,” one said.

At Imbolc, the midway point between the winter solstice and vernal equinox, Phoebe prepares for the blizzard of the century. She checks her animals, ensuring they’re safe and warm, and secures the barn against gales. Her shovel stands ready by the kitchen door for the several feet of snow predicted. She snuggles under her covers to listen to the winds scream through the bare trees. She keeps her sunlight jars by her side.

She awakes to a thunder-like crack in the middle of the night, but no flash of lightning. She winds herself more tightly in her hand-stitched quilt and falls back to sleep.

The next morning a slab of cloud continues to hang thick, shedding more flakes. Phoebe shovels her way to the animals to see that they’re safe and fed, then continues her way to the street. She sees her neighbors gathered around a downed pole.

“Is everything ok?” she calls to the group.

“Didn’t you notice there’s no power?” a neighbor yells.

“She wouldn’t. She doesn’t use electricity,” someone else spits.

Standing in her driveway with the snow piled up over her knees, she doesn’t know how to respond. Their backs turned to her, leaving her out of their misery.

“If it helps, I have some extra jars of light I could spare.” She points to the soft glow in her windows.

The crowd shifts. Their faces disclose no gratitude or need, just the sourness of disgust. A cloud grows thick over their heads as they breathe harder.

“We don’t need your witchcraft,” a sharp voice cuts through the silence of the snow.

“I’d rather freeze to death,” another grumbles.

Phoebe no longer recognizes her neighbors. She’d always shared her eggs and goat’s milk with them. A few weeks ago, she delivered lavender sachets she made from her garden during the summer for the solstice. They’d always accepted her offerings with a polite thank you. Maybe they never invited her to sit at their table, but she thought they were civil, at least.

“I’m only offering to lend you warm and light until they can fix the pole,” Phoebe mumbles. The handle of the shovel growing heavy in her hands.

The crowd returns to their cold dark homes, leaving behind Phoebe and their boot prints filling with snow.

Appendix 4:

Timeline for all stories

1702 - Fur

1887 – 1889 – Hermit Cookies

1946 –Buttons

1951 – Cross Words

1954 – Ornery Green

1955 – Lucky Stones

1966 - Glass

1969 - Lilacs

1970 – Light

1973 – Push Pins

1978 - Tears

1984– Keys

1987 - Empty

1989 – Stars

1994 - Pills

2006 – Teeth

2008 – Ghosts

2011 - Messages

2013 - Seeds

2014 – Jude’s Life

2015 - Inks and Dyes

2016 – Crosswords

2017 - Money

2018 – Witches

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