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Somewhere Warm: A Collection of Short Stories

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Somewhere Warm

Christy Ammons

A Collection of Short Stories

(This collection is unfinished)

Somewhere Warm

I guess I'll have to buy a cheap camper and go somewhere warm. Once the bank forecloses my house in about a year, I will have no other option than to travel. I can't stay with my siblings, since they told me not to buy the house in the first place, and my parents are long gone. Maybe I can go from hotel to hotel for a while if I can afford it, or maybe from campsite to campsite, like a leftover hippie. I could sell weed and antiques for money as I make my way to somewhere better than here, maybe somewhere like Florida. I have friends in Florida. It's warm in Florida. I could have a new start in Florida. But how will I get the money for a camper if I couldn't even pay my mortgage for the last several years? I could sell more weed and smoke less, or I could start selling my furniture. Won't need that in the camper. Or I could take all the metal I've collected over the years, copper and old computer parts, to the dump and get money by the pound. I could have a big yard sale on the sidewalk outside my townhouse and get rid of all my knickknacks and my daughter's old toys. I won't be able to keep much of that stuff, anyway, so might as well make some money off it.

I think about what to do as I sit on my back porch and pack a bowl of Mary Jane. My fingers fumble as I pick up the herb to put it in the bowl. I spill some and cuss. The word homeless sticks in my head and I push it aside with my first hit. I smoke the bowl, then a cigarette, then another bowl. Now that I'm fairly toasted, I can eat something and start organizing the items for a yard sale. It's so hard to eat without being stoned. I make eggs and gluten free toast and gobble them down fast because I'm so stoned and starving. Leaving my plate in the pile of dirty dishes in the sink, I head outside for another menthol cigarette to prepare

myself for the work ahead of me. I smoke two just to be sure, and then I make my way to the attic to sort through the junk I can get rid of.

There are big dressers and heavy boxes all over the attic, so many that it's hard to walk around. I find a big plastic tub full of my daughter's teddy bears and the clothing she got for them. I find her Polly Pockets and her My Littlest Pet Shop toys, and I carry them all down to the second floor of the house, piling the boxes outside my bedroom. On the way back up the attic stairs I trip, cussing loudly as I slide down the staircase. Then, the cat runs up into the attic and I have to spend the next hour looking for her. I can't let her get locked up there. She'll die from the heat. After I find the cat, I hear the dog barking to go outside, so I go back downstairs to take him out. While I wait for the little fucker to piss, I smoke another bowl and another cigarette with a nice glass of iced tea. When we come back into the house, I take a long and well-deserved afternoon nap.

I repeat this cycle of waking up, going outside, sorting through junk, going back outside, and then taking a nap for months. I can't focus and there's no Adderall that I can find. No one my age has it, and my daughter is still away at college for a little while longer. I think about how she is attending a prestigious school with her father's money, and I snort. I tell my friends that her tuition is what has bankrupted me for the third time in my life. When my daughter asks me about losing the house, I tell her that I spent all my money on lawyers during the custody battle with her father. I never paid my lawyers. They still call sometimes, wondering if the money will ever appear.

After selling some junk and working a few odd jobs for people around town, I finally have a bit of spare cash to use on a camper. I will finally be able to get out of this shit hole. My

daughter is back from college for the summer, and since I have no money for gas, I ask her to drive me around to look at different pop-up models. When I was young, my family had a pop-up camper, and we would road trip down to the beach, all twelve of us kids and my two parents. The adults got to sleep in the camper, which was operated with a crank. You'd wind the crank around and around, and slowly the top of the camper would begin to separate from the bottom, until the tent between the two was completely stretched out. My daughter picks me up in her little car and we drive an hour to look at a camper that I saw advertised online for only \$850. When we arrive at the lot, my daughter, Phoebe, says that she wants to stay in the car. She's always been sort of shy.

"C'mon, Pheebs," I beg her. "Please come with me. Won't it be fun to see where I might be living?"

Phoebe makes a weird face and says, "Okay," before stepping out of the car.

A tall man with a long red beard and overalls shows us to the pop-up section of the lot, and Phoebe drags her feet in the gravel as we walk. The first camper he shows us is not the one I asked about, but it is much nicer. The crank is easy to maneuver, and the vinyl of the tent is in great shape.

"How much is this one?" I ask.

"Thirteen-hundred," he replies.

"That's way out of my price range. Do you have anything for less?"

"This is the cheapest of the nice ones, but I have an old thing from the 80s for eight-fifty," he says as he scratches his beard.

"Let me see that one."

The man leads us to a closed camper and asks if I want to buy it. I tell him that I'll need to see the inside first, and he groans. He calls out for help, and for twenty-something minutes the man with the beard and a young boy set up the camper. Inside, there are rat feces, leaves, dirt, and stones scattered across the floor, but the thing has good bones. The cushions of the seats look new, but the crank is harder to operate.

"What do you think, Pheeb?" I ask her with my hands on my hips.

"It's filthy," she says.

"Well, I can fix that part."

"Then it's nice, I guess."

"Do you think I should buy it?"

"I don't know. It's up to you. If you like it, then yeah."

I direct my attention to the man with the red beard and tell him that I'll take this one. He groans again and says he'll need half of the money upfront. I pull out a wad of cash and count out \$425.

"I'll come back with my van next week to pick it up," I tell him, smiling from ear to ear.

The camper sits in my yard, untouched, for a month before I begin to clean it. I ask Phoebe to help me, but she's busy working all the time. Too busy to help her almost homeless mother. I fiddle with the crank of the camper for a long time before it gives and begins to move. Once I have the camper level and the top popped up, I take a broom to the floor inside, sweeping all the dirt and rat shit into the overgrown grass of my backyard. After sweeping, I go inside and take a long nap until dinner time. Now that I have a mobile home, I can go anywhere. I dream about Florida and swimming in the warm water on the beach. Images of my little brother and I

playing in the sand as children on an east coast beach come back to me. I will not be homeless, but I won't be a conventional homeowner, and that's fine. I have my camper and my dog and the whole country to explore. I have a whole year to get my shit together. What could possibly go wrong?

Shit Weed Don't Sell

A year has almost flown by, and my house still looks completely lived in. It is early in June, and I get a letter from the bank declaring that my house will be repossessed on August 12th. I panic. How the fuck am I supposed to find a place for everything to go in the next two months? I'll need help, but Phoebe is living upstate for most of the summer interning for a publishing house. All of my friends bailed a while ago, and my family doesn't even invite me to Christmas anymore, so I doubt they would help me now. The only sibling out of my eleven brothers and sisters that I still see on a regular basis is my younger brother, Grant, who has Down syndrome. He is riddled with cancer. Breast cancer. Bone cancer. Brain cancer. They let me see him because he asks for me, and he will be gone soon, too. The last time I saw him he told me that he knew he was dying. I hyperventilate. What will I do? What will I do? What can I do? Fuck.

My phone rings and Phoebe says she's home for the weekend and asks if she can visit. I tell her yes, but only if she can bring food, or money, since I'm fresh out of both. All I have is pot and dog food, which I feed to the cat and the dog. Phoebe comes over with a rotisserie chicken and some potatoes that we can bake. I turn on the oven and as we wait for it to preheat, we smoke cigarettes on the back porch. I offer Phoebe a bowl, but she isn't interested. The summer bugs harass our skin, but the smoke from the cigarettes helps to keep them away. We sit in silence for a moment as Phoebe takes long drags and exhales them slowly.

"When do you go back to New York?" I ask her "It's nice that you came home."

"I have to go back in the morning, but then I only have a few weeks left until I'm done."

"That's cool," I say. "Is there any chance you could do me a favor?"

“Depends on what it is,” she replies, holding in the smoke from the last drag of her cigarette.

“Can you give me \$40? I need to get more cleaning supplies for the camper. I want to deep clean it so that it’s like brand new. I want to make it homey, since it is my new home. Oh, and I need food for the cat, but I’ve been having trouble selling this batch of weed. It’s not very strong, and my customers don’t really like it. I should have known it would be shit because it was so cheap.”

“I don’t have \$40,” my daughter says, looking at the ground.

“C’mon I know you have at least \$40. I know your dad gives you spending money.”

“I just don’t have it on me.”

“Well, could you give it to me tomorrow before you leave?”

“Kathryn,” Phoebe sighs. “I’m not giving you any more money.”

“Excuse me? You know I fucking hate it when you call me by my first name. It’s really disrespectful.”

“Sorry, I just. I can’t give you any more money. You never pay me back when you borrow it, and when I just give it to you, you never end up spending it on what it’s intended for. If you need money so badly, why don’t you try getting a job? If you had a job all this time, maybe you could have saved your house somehow.”

The oven beeps.

“You know I’m too sick,” I gasp.

Sometimes I want to smack Phoebe upside the head. I am too sick to get a job. She knows this. I have serious digestive issues and will shit myself if I eat gluten, onions, garlic, peppers,

most vegetables, or anything my stomach decides is too harsh that day. I can't get a job. It's too physically taxing.

"I'm sorry," she says, stamping out her cigarette in the ashtray. She goes inside to put the potatoes in the oven.

We eat our dinner in silence and then Phoebe leaves, but not before giving the dog her leftover chicken.

As I stand outside ready for my morning smoke, I think about Phoebe saying I should get a job, and I puke into the grass of my backyard. I wipe my mouth, smoke a quick cigarette, and begin to prepare for a yard sale. There are boxes scattered around the house, but I decide to just start unloading stuff onto tables on the sidewalk in front of my front porch. I set up tables with a canopy overhead in case it rains. I put out old jewelry and my mother's china and small furniture. I put out toys and stuffed animals and clothing. People stop by as they walk down the street, but few buy anything. At the end of the day, I have to drag it all back inside. I tear down my yard sale, and then the next day I put it back up. People come and go, but most of the stuff stays.

When Phoebe comes back from her internship, she helps me move old dressers out of the house. They are heavy and we struggle to get them down the stairs. We have to remove doors and railings in order to get them to fit through the narrow hallways. When we finish, she says she has to leave to go do something with her dad. I'm furious. She always puts me on the back burner for him, but I'm the one who deserves her help right now. I thank her for her help with annoyance in my voice.

Over the next month, I barely sleep or eat. I just pack and clean and organize and move shit out of my home. Some friends help, and I enlist strangers on the street to help with promises of cash that I don't have. One of them is drunk and keeps tripping and dropping things. He breaks Phoebe's senior picture, the one where her long black hair is draped over her shoulders as she stands under a strong tree, and I ask him to leave.

The dog won't stop pacing. The empty rooms and boxes everywhere have made him anxious, and I haven't seen the cat in days. She must be hiding somewhere. It is August 11th and I pack up the last of my belongings. The neighbor lets me keep some stuff at her place because my van and my storage unit are packed to the brim. The camper is also full of stuff, but just with the essentials I will need on the road. I pick up the dog, since he's old now and has trouble with the stairs, and I take him to my van. He gets situated in the passenger's seat with some blankets and a small pillow. I go back into the house and find the cat in Phoebe's old room. Well, it was Phoebe's room until I started renting it out for spare cash. She hated sleeping on my floor because she couldn't stand my snoring. I take the cat to the neighbor who has agreed to watch her until tomorrow, and I get in the van with the dog.

I turn the key and turn the key, but the piece of shit won't start. I burst out laughing. I laugh and laugh until I can't breathe. Then, I light a cigarette and decide to sleep in my car parked outside my house for the evening.

In the morning, I am not ready to say goodbye, and the rain comes down hard, just like the tears streaming down my cheeks. I guess this is it.

Don't Spend It All at Once

When the bank man shows up, he says he has to do an inspection of the house before it can be repossessed. My daughter stands at the bottom of the front porch steps, holding the dog's leash. The dog keeps trying to make his way up the steps. He doesn't understand why we're not going inside. After all, it is pouring. Phoebe picks up the dog and marches up the steps to get out of the rain. But the poor cat, oh the poor baby, sits in a crate on the sidewalk. She cries and cries and wails and moans, but no one pays attention.

The bank man invites us into my house to make sure I got rid of all the knickknacks and memories. If the house proves to be cleaned out properly, the bank will give me \$7,000. We step into what was my office. There's a spot on the floor that is cleaner than the rest where my desk used to be. There are similar spots on the wall where I hung pictures of Phoebe when she was little and paintings from Goodwill.

"What happened to the floor?" the bank man asks, with a sound of disgust in his voice.

"I redid it," I reply.

Phoebe rolls her eyes and hugs the dog tighter.

"It looks like you just ripped up the carpet," he says.

"I did, and then I painted the wood white. Doesn't it look nice?"

"No," he says, and begins walking toward the living room.

In the living room, the white, wooden floor continues. The windows are covered in plastic to keep the cold in during the summer and the cold out during the winter. I put up the plastic years ago and never took it down. The wallpaper is a light brown. I think it used to be yellow. I remember Phoebe taking long afternoon naps on the living room couch with the dog

when they were both small. She would recline the left side of the couch, and the dog would lie right between her legs, with his head resting on her shin. I remember constantly tripping over Phoebe's shoes because she always kicked them off right in front of the old, brown recliner. The bank man says nothing about this room and goes into the kitchen.

I tell him that I installed all the countertops and painted the walls yellow, but he doesn't say anything. He just runs his finger along one of the counters, checking for dust. Phoebe suggests that we head upstairs, and the bank man says, "I was getting to that."

Phoebe does not put the dog down but continues to hug him as we walk throughout the house. We hike up the steep steps and I remember when Phoebe fell down them while sleepwalking when she was ten. I heard her stomping around upstairs as I watched TV in the living room, and I went to see what was wrong. I saw her, eyes like glass, standing at the top of the stairs. She told me she loved me and called me mommy, two things she had not said since she was in Kindergarten, or maybe even before that. That's when I realized she was asleep. She took one big step, and came crashing down, holding onto the railing as she slid down the staircase. One of the screws keeping the railing on the wall was loose, and it cut her arm as she fell. I remember her saying "Ouch." She then climbed back up the stairs and got back into bed. In the morning, she asked me what happened to her arm.

Once at the top of the stairs, we walk into my old bedroom. It looks weird without all the clothes on the floor. Everything looks weird when it's so empty like this. So empty but so full because I can't stop thinking about all those years I spent trying to fix this place. The bank man walks into my bedroom, touches the wall, and walks right back out. We go down the hall to what used to be Phoebe's room, and then it became the guest room because I had to rent it out for money. Soon after I got rid of her bedroom and the strangers started filing in, Phoebe went to

live with her dad full-time. The room still smelled the same, like lavender and dust. I remember Phoebe's loft bed and every guest that ever stayed in the room once I replaced it with two twins. The bank man does not say a word about the room but asks how to get to the attic. Phoebe points to the door across the hall. As we walk up the stairs to the attic, I remember when Phoebe was upset at me and locked me up there. I don't even remember why she was upset, but in those days, she resented me for everything I did, even breathing. I had to call her father and get him to convince her to open the door. I was up there for at least an hour.

“How long have the squirrels been living up here?” the bank man asks.

“Forever,” I say.

We make our way back down both sets of steps, and a locksmith is standing on the porch beside a few boxes. The cat can still be heard crying all the way from inside the house. The bank man instructs the locksmith to start changing the locks on the backdoor, and he tells me that if I do not remove the boxes from the porch immediately, I will not receive my \$7,000. Phoebe puts the dog down and picks up a box. She carries all of the boxes to the sidewalk and starts loading them into her little car. The rain soaks through the cardboard, and the dog tries to go back up the porch steps one last time.

“Well, I guess you pass,” the bank man sneers. “Do you have a pen I could use to sign the check?”

I just stare at him. I stare and stare and then I laugh hysterically. How would I have a pen if I don't have a house? Everything I own is boxed up or locked up. Phoebe digs through her glove box and finds a pen for the bank man.

“Don't spend it all at once,” he says as he signs the check, holding it up against the red siding of the house.

Again, I just stare at him.

Phoebe also stares, wide-eyed, and picks up the dog again. She puts him in the passenger's seat of her car and loads the cat inside her crate into the back seat. She snuggles the crate between the boxes so that it won't move around. The bank man asks me to get off the porch now that I have my check, so I walk down the broken wooden steps, slick with rain.

Phoebe tries to jumpstart my van, but it won't budge, so I ask her if she would help me run a few errands after I call my brother. I don't want to ask for his help, but I have no other choice. My older brother, Martin, is a mechanic who lives less than five minutes from what used to be my house. While my other siblings actively excluded me, Martin seemed to make an effort to be kind, though he never calls me first. He answers the phone on the first ring, saying how it's been so long since he's heard from me. We chat for a minute, and I explain the situation. He agrees to come fix my van for free, saying he'll be here in about an hour.

While we wait for Martin, Phoebe takes me to the bank to cash my check. She waits in the car, and I hurry inside to get as much money as I possibly can. There is no line, and I walk right up to the teller and hand her the check. I ask her for it in cash, since I don't have a bank account.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," she says, wincing, "but you'll have to wait a few days for the check to clear."

"How am I supposed to eat? You can't even give me part of it?"

"I'm afraid not. We have to make sure the check will clear."

"The check is from your fucking boss for taking my fucking house, you cunt!" I scream.

"Ma'am, please calm down. There is nothing I can do for you at the moment. You have to wait for the check to clear."

“This is a fucking joke. The bank takes my goddamn house, offers to give me a check if I clear it out, and then doesn’t give me the money once I’ve got the check? This is ridiculous.”

“Listen, I can give you \$200 tomorrow, and the rest of the money in two weeks,” the teller explains. “But right now, I can’t give you anything. Come back tomorrow.”

“Fucking hell, you are outrageous. What am I supposed to do until tomorrow?”

“I’m not sure ma’am.”

“Go fuck yourself with your ‘I’m not sure ma’am,’” I say, mocking her high-pitched voice. “You’re just a dumb piece of shit who can’t even try to make an exception for a poor homeless woman.”

Suddenly, a security guard is grabbing my arm and pulling me toward the exit. I call out over my shoulder to tell the woman she is a cunt one more time before I am thrown out of the bank, my middle finger high in the air. I run up to Phoebe’s car, and when I open the door, I accidentally slam it into the car beside hers. Unfortunately, a woman is sitting in that car, and opens her door, outraged.

“Did you just scratch my fucking car?” she snarls. “I’m going to have to see your insurance information.”

Phoebe sighs and gets out of the car. I sit in the passenger’s seat with the dog and cry.

“There isn’t even a mark,” Phoebe says. “Can you just give me a break?”

After some arguing the woman agrees to let it go because there really isn’t a mark.

Phoebe gets back into the car and asks about the money. I can’t breathe enough to tell her what happened. She takes me back to my van, and a few minutes later, Martin pulls up.

“Long time no see, little sister,” he says as he hugs me. “I’m sorry about your house, but we’ll get your van fixed up in no time.”

“Thanks, Martin,” I say, ashamed that I had to ask for his help in the first place.

“And oh, my goodness, Pheeb. You’ve gotten so big! When will you be done with school?”

“I have a year left,” Phoebe says, blushing.

“Well, how about that,” Martin smiles as he puts his hands on his hips. “Alright now, let’s see if we can get this thing up and running.”

Martin pops the hood of the van and shines a flashlight inside. As he fiddles around with it, I take the cat’s crate out of Phoebe’s car and put it in the van. She hands me the dog’s leash, and he stares at the steps of the house, still curious as to why we’re not going inside.

“I have to leave in a minute. What do you want to do about the boxes in my car?” Phoebe asks.

“Can you hold onto them until I find somewhere to put them? There’s no room in my van or the camper.”

“Okay,” she says. “Just for a little while.”

“I’m going to get a cheap hotel for the night,” I tell her. “We could have a sleepover if you want.”

She says, “Maybe,” and gets into her car to go.

When Martin is done with the van, he gives me a hug goodbye and tells me to stay in touch. I promise that I will, though I probably won’t. Now that my van is fixed, I can try to find some customers. I make many phone calls, and eventually I find a few people who are willing to buy my shit weed for way more than it is worth. With my animals and all my possessions in the van, I travel around from house to house, delivering pot to desperate stoners. Once I’ve made

around \$300, I am satisfied, tired, and almost out of gas, so I use my phone to find the cheapest hotel in the area.

I check into a Red Roof Inn that's right off the highway and only costs \$53 per night. They allow pets, so I bring the animals into the room with me, and the first thing the dog does is piss on the carpet. I scream and scream at him until he hides under the bed. The cat also scurries under the bed and will not come out. She must still be angry about being left in the rain. I shove the queen size bed to the left, and the animals just move with it. But I see something else on the floor. I bend down to get a closer look, and there's a pair of black, lacy panties on the floor. I gag, and then laugh some more.

I call Phoebe, but it goes straight to voicemail. I leave her a message explaining where I am, including the room number, and I ask her if she can bring food, or maybe some money. I tell her voicemail box that the bank won't give me anything until tomorrow, and that they won't give me all of it for a few weeks. I start to cry, so I hang up without saying "I love you."

Around 7:00 PM, there's a knock on my door. It's Phoebe with rice, beans, and chicken. She also brought me candy for dessert and a small bag of cat food because I've been feeding dog food to both animals. Before I can even say thank you, I'm digging into the food. Phoebe pulls a thick bone out of her bag and gives it to the old dog, who is so happy just to see her that the surprise of a bone overwhelms him. He doesn't know whether to grab the bone, kiss her hand, or jump at her legs. He does a mixture of all three before settling down to gnaw. The cat still won't come out from under the bed, even with a bowl of food at the edge for her. I eat all of the rice and beans before Phoebe mentions that they were to share.

"I'm sorry. I just haven't eaten all day," I apologize.

"It's alright. I'll get something on the way home."

“You’re not going to stay over?”

“I really can’t. I have to be up early to go to the dentist,” she explains. “How did you end up getting the money to afford this room?”

“I finally sold some pot. My customers got desperate enough that they bought the shit weed. Although, I have some that’s pretty good that I saved for myself. Want to smoke?”

“I’m okay,” Phoebe says as she moves her long black hair out of her face, “but I could really use a cigarette.”

We take the dog to the back of the hotel where there is a patch of grass for him to explore, and we both take out a cancer stick, as Phoebe sometimes calls them. She takes a long, deep drag of her Marlboro and holds it in her lungs like she can’t let it go.

“So, what’s your plan?” she asks, still holding in the smoke.

“I’m going to jump from hotel to hotel for a few days, and then I’m going to set up camp somewhere with my popup.”

“Okay,” she says.

“What? Do you have a better plan?”

“No. I don’t,” she whispers as she flicks her cigarette butt to the ground. “I have to go. I’m starving. Someone ate my dinner before I even had a chance to get to it.”

“I’m really sorry about that, Pheeb. I’ll make it up to you somehow. See you tomorrow?”

“Maybe,” Phoebe answers as she bends down to pet the dog. “I’ll call you.”

She walks to her car, gets in, and pulls out of the parking lot with no hesitation. The dog and I go back inside, curl up in the bed, and fall asleep. This is the first time I’ve slept in a bed in weeks, and I don’t dream at all.

What Has Gotten into You?

My father takes me out to breakfast before going to work. We drive separately to a pancake house so that when we finish eating, he can leave for work and I can go home. We sit down in the restaurant and order two short stacks. We joke and laugh, and my fingers grow sticky with syrup. When we finish, he pays the bill, tells me he loves me, and instructs me to have a good day. I give him a hug, and we part ways. I am grateful that he is in a good mood today.

I drive, aimlessly, down backroads that are lined with trees full of green leaves. I pass corn fields with the crops so high that you can't see the mountains on the other side. That's how you know it's summer. When the corn is so high that you could be in a tunnel. It's all around you, tall and strong. The road winds past the fields and into my little town, where my mother and father both lived, but on opposite sides. Now, who knows where my mother would go? I drive to what was her house, and park on the street.

I remember when my mother tore up the carpet. I walked into her house one day, and half of the carpet was ripped to shreds, lying on the floor. The ugly wood beneath it was exposed, and I was afraid to take off my shoes. Manically, my mother paced around the house, talking of redoing everything and making the house look and feel better.

For months, the flooring remained the same. Pieces of carpet were strewn around the living room and my mother's "office," where she never seemed to do any work. Eventually, she finished ripping the carpeting from the floor, and painted the ugly wood beneath it a streaky white. She loved it. She called it vintage. Another time, my mother took all the cabinets off the

walls in the kitchen. She intended to paint them and put them back up, but for months the cabinets cluttered the kitchen floor. The cat liked to sleep inside of them.

I stand outside what was my mother's house and stare. Just two days ago, it belonged to her, and now it is owned by the bank. She lived there for almost ten years, and bragged that for the last two of those years, she lived there for free. Completely on the house. I stare at the red siding and the yellow placard with the house number on it. The greenish blue steps that lead up to the front porch have been broken for years, and I think about how in the winter they are a sheet of ice. My mother never bothered to salt them, but instead would warn me to watch my step. The dog could never get up and down those steps after he hit the ripe age of eleven. That was three years ago. Now, he won't have to worry about being carried up the steps or the fact that my mother never cut the grass in the backyard. It was a forest of weeds, and the dog, being so small, had a hard time peeing in the tall grass. I look at the neighbors' white houses and their pristine porch steps and their pretty little mailboxes, and I wonder what happened to my mother. I get in my car and leave, unable to continue remembering how things used to be in the house that was never clean, no matter how much my mother cleaned it. Oh, Kathryn. What has gotten into you?

I get in my car, no longer able to look at the house, and drive to my father's home. My father kept the house that I grew up in, a sturdy brick establishment that was an old schoolhouse. The big bell is still in the front yard, part of history, part of the town, part of my childhood. I used to crawl under the bell and ram the clapper against the side, letting out a ringing so loud that the neighbors usually complained, and I went deaf for a few minutes. My mother bought her own house, years ago, which no longer belongs to her. But when she had it, she felt like a queen. She installed a back porch made of cement and fake marble kitchen counters. She bought appliances

and paint, wooden planks and toolboxes. She wanted to fix it up and make the house a home for us. I never felt at home there, just comfortable, like a grandparent's house or maybe a friend's. My father's home, however, always felt like mine. I remember bringing friends to my father's house, and I always had a bed of my own to sleep in there. I pull into the garage of my father's house, get out of the car, and make my way up the sidewalk toward the door.

I climb the stairs to our apartment in the old schoolhouse, which is split into three units. It's weird to think that my mother and father chose this place together. I think of my mother's empty house and the For Sale sign hanging from the porch. I sit down on the blue couch in my living room and call my mother. It goes to voicemail. I leave a message asking if I can borrow the dog to take him to his favorite park, since today is his fourteenth birthday.

When my mother responds, she asks if she can tag along, and I say yes. I pick her up from some hotel off the highway, and she says she's staying there one more night. Then, she asks if I can buy her lunch or if I have any money. I tell her that I have no money for her.

"I guess I'll go hungry," she says.

I buy her lunch from Wendy's. She gets two baked potatoes with sour cream, and I get ice cream for the dog. I sing happy birthday to him as he licks the vanilla frosty out of the cup, and my mother devours her potato. Kathryn chews with her mouth open, making loud sounds. When she swallows, I can hear the gulp.

"So, when are you going to head to Florida?" I ask out of the blue.

"I don't know," she says through a mouthful.

"Well, when are you going to get a campsite. They must be cheaper than hotel rooms."

"I don't know," she repeats as she chews. Little pieces of potato fall onto her shirt. "I just need to sleep in a bed right now. And what would I do without a shower?"

“Don’t campgrounds have bathrooms with showers?”

“I guess so. I just need to be sleeping in a bed right now. My neck and back are killing me from all the packing and unloading. I’ll stay in hotels for another night or so, and then I’ll get a campsite.”

I stare at the dog, and he looks so happy, so oblivious to the chaos around him. He doesn’t know that he’s homeless. He doesn’t know it’s his birthday. He just knows that I gave him ice cream, and that it was good and cold on a hot day. My mother left the cat in the hotel room, and I feel bad that she is alone.

We drive to the park without a word, just the noise from the radio filling the air. The closer we get to the park, the more excited my dog becomes. He knows where we are going. I pull into the gravel lot, and he goes ballistic. He barks and begs and my mother yells at him to shut the fuck up. Oh, Kathryn. Be nice to the birthday boy. I take him out of the car and the old dog, Samson, runs as fast as he can toward the geese by the pond. The birds scatter, and he jumps into the pond after them, paddling his legs fast and hard. In a moment, he becomes tired, and swims back to land.

“Why the fuck would you let him get all wet like that?” my mother scolds.

“I have towels in my trunk, and he likes to swim in the water.”

“Now he needs a bath.”

“He’s needed a bath for weeks. He also needs his nails trimmed, his hair cut, and his shots, but you don’t have the money for any of that, do you?” I try not to scream, but my voice elevates. “You can’t do anything for anyone besides yourself.”

“What the fuck, Pheeb. You know I just lost everything.”

“Yeah and you have money for weed and hotel rooms, but no money to take care of the dog or to eat? That makes a lot of sense. You really have your priorities straight, huh.”

She doesn't respond but goes and sits in the car while I play with Samson in the grass, even though I don't feel like playing anymore. Once he's tuckered out, I dry him off with one of the old towels I keep in my car and put him in the backseat. My mother is playing candy crush on her phone.

“Let's go back to your hotel so I can give Samson a bath.”

“Okay.”

We drive to the hotel in silence again, with just the noise of the radio to keep me company. I look in my side mirror, and I can see the dog's head sticking out of the window in the back. His hair is blowing all around him and his mouth hangs open, his tongue flopping out the side. I smile.

I find the dog's shampoo and conditioner in one of the boxes my mother asked me to hold onto for her. Once I bring the supplies into the hotel room, fill the bath with warm water, and put the dog in the bath, he cries and whimpers. My mother admits that she has not bathed him in two months, which means it's probably been longer. I scrub his paws and his back and his stomach, and then I take a cup and pour water over him to rinse the soap from his fur. When I'm done and he's clean, he rolls around on towels that I put on the floor for him as my mother snores. Once he's dry, I put him in her bed and he curls up next to her. I quietly slip out the door. I wish Samson knew what was going on. I wish I could talk to him and believe he understood me, like I did when I was little.

When my mother wakes, she calls me, but I let it go to voicemail. She leaves me a message, asking me to come visit her later, and to bring food, saying that she is stoned and

starving. I sigh and delete the voicemail. I am sitting on the couch in my father's living room, waiting for him to get home. The television fills the space with background noise. I can't pay attention to what is happening on the tv. All I can think about is my mother and what was her house. I remember how the dog used to run up and down the hallway between the living room and my mother's office, and how when she removed the carpet, he would slide across the wood.

The locks on the front door click and I hear my father enter the house. He shouts cheerfully and announces that we're going out to eat because he doesn't feel like cooking. I put on my shoes and we get into his car, heading to our local diner for mashed potatoes and gravy. My mother used to work at the diner when I was little, and I would roll silverware in the basement while watching tv. When we pull into the parking lot, my dad asks about my mother.

"Does she have a job yet?"

"No. She's too sick."

"What kind of sickness?"

"I don't know. She says she's always tired."

"So is everybody else," he groans as he slams his car door shut.

We walk into the diner, and the smell of food wakes my stomach. Suddenly, I'm starving. I realize that I fed my mother and the dog, but not myself. The hostess seats us in a booth, and almost immediately one of the waitresses recognizes me. She runs up to our table and exclaims that I've grown so much. She still thinks of me as the little girl rolling silverware in the basement.

"And how is your mother?" the waitress, whose name I can't remember, asks.

"Oh, she's alright."

"Is she still living over on Sycamore Street? She hasn't come here in a long time."

I pause, not sure what to say. “She’s in the process of moving,” I half lie.

“Where is she moving to? Is she working anywhere?”

My cheeks start to glow red and I look at the floor. My father just stares at me, unsure of what to do. “No, she’s not working anywhere,” I say and stop at that.

The waitress picks up on my awkwardness and goes back to her section, saying that it is nice to see me over her shoulder as she walks away. My father tells me that I did a good job and then asks what I want to eat.

“You can have whatever you want,” he says.

Suddenly, I am not very hungry anymore. I order chicken and mashed potatoes and push the food around the plate with my fork. My father reminds me that my mother did this to herself, and that it’s not my responsibility. I think of all my mother’s projects that she never finished and imagine what the house could have looked like if she did.

“Eat your food,” my dad says.

I take a few bites and declare that I’m not hungry, just worried.

“It’s silly to worry about what is completely out of your control,” he says. “Try to relax. She’ll find a place to go. This isn’t the first time she’s been on the down and out. When I met her, she was sleeping on an air mattress in her best friend’s basement.”

“I just want to make sure that she’s alright. And what will happen to the animals? The dog is getting so old, dad. He needs a comfy place to rest. And if my mother really is so sick, how is she going to make any money or set up her campsite or take care of anything, let alone herself?”

“That’s not your responsibility. Do you want dessert?”

“I could eat a piece of pie,” I mumble.

I get peanut butter pie and he gets apple. I listen to him talk about work while I pick at my piece of pie.

When we leave the restaurant, the waitress asks us to come back soon, and I promise I will, even though I'll probably avoid the diner for a long time.

I call my mother back when I get home, and tell her that I can't visit tonight, though I don't have a good excuse. She explodes.

"You say I'm the one that never thinks of anyone else, but you can't even come spend time with your homeless mother. You'd rather sit in your comfy house and watch tv. You never do anything to help me, and I'm fucking sick of it. You can spend all the time in the world with your father because he buys you things, but the second I want to see you, you're too busy fucking around. Well, I've had it. Have a nice fucking night," she screams before hanging up the phone.

"Well, fuck you too," I murmur to myself.

I know everything she said is incorrect, but I can't help feeling guilty. I try to help her, but nothing is ever good enough. I lie awake in bed for half the night thinking of Samson and the kitty and what will happen to them and my mother.

Bye, Bye, Kitty Kitty

The ground is muddy and slippery, and the dog gets his paws all dirty when I put him in the grass to piss. We've been driving around for hours as it rained and rained, but once it stops, I stumble upon a campground in the depths of Pennsylvania. It only costs \$17 per night.

I tie the dog's leash to a tree and begin to set up my pop-up camper. I have to work fast so I can finish before sundown, but I'm having trouble with the crank. I pull hard, and eventually it begins to move. The dog is sniffing around the ground, looking for something of interest, and I wish Phoebe was here to play with him. He could use a friend right now. So could I.

Once the camper is set up, I make a fire in the pit. It glows red and keeps me warm as the air grows colder with the setting sun. I hold the dog on my lap, and he falls asleep. I remember when he was just a young puppy, and Phoebe was just a young girl. They always fell asleep curled up next to each other. Pheeb's was so excited about the new puppy and spent all her time with him. But that didn't stop her from choosing to live with her father, that son of a bitch.

It's still early, so I call Phoebe and invite her to come stay the night. It would be fun, like when we went tent camping when she was little. She says that she has to be up early in the morning but would stop by for a little bit. When Phoebe arrives, she runs up to me and picks up the dog. She squeezes him tightly and kisses the top of his head, and he licks her cheek.

"Hey, Pheeb's," I say, standing up to her to give her a hug.

"Hey. So, how did you find this place?"

"I was just driving around. Nothing better to do."

"Okay. I was wondering because it's kind of far from town."

"Yeah. I wanted to get away for a minute. I can go anywhere now."

“Where do you think you want to go?”

“I don’t know. I’m still thinking about Florida. I have friends I can visit in Florida.”

“Who?”

“You don’t know them.”

“Okay.” Phoebe sits down in a chair by the fire, still holding the old dog. “Where’s the cat?” she asks.

“She’s in the camper, but tomorrow I’m taking her to this nice farm where she can run around outside. My great aunt agreed to take her.”

Phoebe frowns, and then fakes a smile. “I’m glad she’ll have somewhere nice to go. What are you going to do about Samson? He’s so old now.”

“He is going to be my travel companion. Unless you can take him?”

“My dad would never allow a dog in the house. I can’t take him, but I wish I could.”

“That’s okay. Samson can travel around with me. He loves car rides.”

Phoebe looks like she’s going to cry, but she just puts on a smile and keeps petting Samson. I sit down in the chair beside her and we watch the fire. Eventually, Phoebe says she has a surprise, and pulls a bag of marshmallows from her purse. She also has chocolate and gluten free graham crackers, and we make sticky smores. The dog goes nuts, trying to eat a marshmallow that’s already halfway in Phoebe’s mouth. She laughs, drops the marshmallow, and Samson snatches it before it can fall to the ground. He chews it loudly, smacking his lips together. Phoebe can’t stop laughing, and I just sit there, wondering what I’m going to do without her. Her long black hair drapes down over her shoulders and her bright blue eyes shine like nothing I’ve ever seen before. Soon, she has to leave, and the dog and I go into the camper to sleep.

I lie awake and wonder what I'm going to do when it starts to get colder. I could leave for Florida, but I don't want to leave Phoebe quite yet. My friend from town offered me a strange set up in a warehouse if I were to help her get rid of some of the junk in it. If I take her up on the offer, I would have a place nearby with walls and my own bathroom. I don't know if the warehouse has heat, but it has to be warmer than a camper. Samson snores in his sleep and it brings me out of my thoughts for a moment. I scratch his head behind his ear and his foot twitches a little. Eventually, I doze off and don't wake up until the sun is shining bright.

In the morning, I start a fire and make eggs over it. They taste smoky and I kind of like them better than non-smoky eggs. After I eat, I smoke a few bowls and a few cigarettes. In two days, I can go back to the bank and get all of my money. Once I get it, I'm buying more pot to sell and to smoke, a few cartons of pyramid silver 100 cigarettes, and some groceries. I plan to load my cooler with snacks and drinks so that I can stop asking Phoebe for food. It's really a shame that I have to do that. But I know her father gives her money, so at least it's not like she will go without. I wash the pan that I used to make the eggs in a creek near my campground, and then I load the cat and the dog into my van to take the kitty to her new home.

When we get to the farm, I walk up to the front door of the house on the edge of the property. It looks old but taken care of. I ring the doorbell and can hear it echoing through the house. When my great aunt opens the door, she smiles.

“Well, hello, Kathryn. It's nice to see you. It has been so many years. How are you doing?”

“Oh, I'm alright. I'm just so grateful that you can take the Kitty.”

“It's no problem. I love cats. My cat, Piper, died a few months ago, so it'll be nice to have a four-legged critter around again. And what was her name? I'm sorry, but I've forgotten.”

“Phoebe named her Misty when she was a kitten, but no one ever called her that. We call her ‘Kitty Kitty,’ and that is what she responds to.”

“Isn’t that adorable. Why don’t you come inside?”

I bring the animals into the house with me. The cat runs out of the crate once I open it, and she hides under a couch in the living room.

“I’m sure she’ll warm up to me eventually,” my great aunt laughs.

“Yeah. She’s always been sort of shy.”

“So, how is your daughter?”

“She’s all grown up. She’s in college.”

“Well, I’ll be damned. Time sure does fly by.”

I feel tears at the edges of my eyes, and I hold them back. When Phoebe was in fourth grade, her classmate had a cat that got pregnant. Phoebe begged and begged for one of the kittens until I finally gave in.

“It does,” I say, gathering myself. “Her college tuition is actually what has put me in such a hard place financially,” I lie.

“That’s a shame. At least you’re helping her get a good education.”

“You’re right. And I’m sure she appreciates it.”

The cat comes out from under the couch, and then goes right back.

“She really is fat,” my great aunt says about Kitty Kitty.

“I know. She begs for food all the time.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to feed her all the time.”

“Well, how else am I supposed to get her to shut up?”

My great aunt just looks at me for a moment before saying, “Can I get you anything? Would you like a cup of tea?”

“No, it’s alright. I’m going to have to get going.”

“Alright. Well, don’t be a stranger. You can come and visit any time.”

I try to get the cat to come out from under the couch so I can pet her goodbye, but she won’t budge. When I get back in the van with Samson, I cry and I cry, remembering tiny Phoebe holding the tiny Kitty Kitty.

As I drive back to my campsite, Samson has his head hanging out the window of the passenger’s seat. His tail wags and his front two paws lean on the car door, holding him up. My phone rings, and it’s my friend who offered to let me stay in her warehouse.

“Hey, Sharon. What’s up?”

“Oh, not much,” her voice comes through the phone speaker as I twist down backroads. “I was wondering if you’re free today and want to make some money.”

“Yes, and yes,” I say. “As long as I can bring my dog. He’s really old and can’t be left alone anymore. Little annoying motherfucker is always up my ass.”

“Sure, you can bring him. I just want to go to the warehouse and organize and clean some stuff out. Think you could help me?”

“Yeah, I could help. I’ll head over right now if you text me the address.”

We say goodbye and I receive the address, changing course to head for a small city about an hour from where Phoebe lives. When I arrive, Sharon is standing outside smoking a cigarette. She waves to me, and I pull up to the curb to park. I carry Samson as Sharon leads the way into the warehouse. As soon as she opens the door, my mouth drops all the way to the floor. Piles of stuff and junk are stacked from the floor to the ceiling for as far as I can see. There are narrow

pathways that cut through the piles of miscellaneous objects. On the right, there are a bunch of empty plastic containers. Next to them are pieces of wood and cardboard. There are at least five large jars full of corks, and baskets of empty glass bottles. I take a closer look around the room, and there are some objects that look like antiques, but most of it seems to be garbage. I know I'm fucked. What the fuck did I just sign up for? Sharon has a big smile on her face and asks if I like all of her art supplies. I just nod, and her smile grows wider. She explains that while everything in this warehouse has a purpose and could be used for a multitude of art projects or other things, there is simply too much here. There is no room to move or to think, and Sharon explains that she wants to sort through different areas and remove stuff that isn't as important.

I put Samson down on a couch in the office area of the warehouse, which is also full of junk, and he snuggles up and falls asleep. Sharon and I start in the office. I pick up things that look like garbage and ask her if she can part with them. Every time she says, "no." I hold up one of the jars of corks.

"I need those," she says. "I want to make these cool cork boards."

I hold up an empty plastic jug.

"Oh, I'll need that, too. You never know when you'll need something to hold trinkets."

I hold up a broken umbrella.

"I can't get rid of that. It was my grandmother's," she says, exasperated, as if I was asking the world of her.

"Sharon," I say, trying to keep a calm tone in my voice, "what can you get rid of?"

"I don't know. I didn't think it'd be so hard."

"Why don't we start with one plastic jug. Sure, they may be good for holding trinkets, but you certainly don't need five empty ones lying around. What if you only had four?"

“I guess that’s alright,” she says, biting her nails.

I put the empty plastic jug in a trash bag, and Sharon becomes visibly distressed. She looks like she could burst into tears at any moment.

Next, I pick up the broken umbrella again, and ask if it is the only thing Sharon has left of her grandmother. She explains that it is not, and I ask if we can get rid of it, since it is broken and rusted. She agrees but whimpers when I put the umbrella in the bag.

This process goes on for hours, with a few cigarette breaks in between. Sharon is reluctant to give up anything, but at the end of the day, she gives me \$50 and thanks me for my help, asking if I can come back next week. She says if I keep it up, she’ll let me live in the warehouse for free. I agree to come back and get on my way to go back to my campsite.

I lie in the camper with Samson and think about living in the crowded warehouse. I can’t leave Pennsylvania quite yet, and when it starts to get colder, it would be best to have walls between me and the wind. Samson starts to snore, and I scratch the top of his head.

Interrupting Jeopardy

I call my mother to ask if I can come see her and the dog, wherever they are.

“Hi, this is Kathryn. I’m not available right now. Please leave a message, and I will call you back later. Bye.”

I sigh, missing my furry friend, and I think back to when he first became a part of our family. Oh, how normal everything seemed back then, when both of my parents had homes. Now, everything is a mess. I try not to overreact, but the fact of the matter is that my mother is homeless and has no clue what she’s going to do. Her plan to go to Florida worries me, but I don’t have a better one.

I am lying in bed at my father’s house, thinking about what will happen when I have to go back to college. What will my mother do once she is all alone again? Oh, Kathryn. What are you going to do?

As I stare at my ceiling, my phone rings, and it is my mother. When I answer, she goes off, rambling about some friend of hers and a warehouse full of junk. She asks me if I will help her clean it out so she can make some money. I decline the offer, knowing that no matter how much work I do or how much effort I put in, she won’t appreciate it and will just keep asking for more. How much can I give before I am empty? She’s upset that I refuse to help her, and I politely say that I have to go and goodbye. When I tell her that I hope she has a good day, she tells me that she hopes someday I’ll grow up. We hang up, and I laugh hysterically.

When my father comes home, he has had a bad day, and immediately begins to yell at me for the plate I left in the sink. I go to wash it, but he tells me to fuck off and that he’ll do it, so I let him. I let him mumble under his breath and wash the plate. I pick up his shoes from where he

left them by the door and put them away. He accuses me of being nice because I want something, and he's right. I want him to stop being so grumpy all the time. In a few weeks, I will be leaving to go back to college, and while I am worried about my mother being able to fend for herself, I am ready to get away from both of my parents. I just can't deal with their shit for another minute or I think I will explode. My dad finishes washing the plate and says that he doesn't understand why I can't do anything for myself. I sigh. Maybe I do need to grow up.

We eat dinner while watching *Jeopardy*, and I don't pay attention to the show. I ask my dad how his day was, and he frowns. Then, he pounds a fist on the table and exclaims that I made him miss the jeopardy question. He asks me to shut up while his show is on but reminds me that I can talk during commercials. Oh, Harold. Can't you fix your attitude? Suddenly I am no longer hungry. I take my plate to the kitchen, throw my leftovers in the trash, and wash the dishes. I go right to bed even though it's not even eight o'clock yet. I dream about my dog and my college friends and drowning in a lake. When I wake up, my dad has already left for work, and I am alone. It feels good and bad at the same time.

I call my mother, and she actually picks up.

"Hey, can I come see you and Samson?"

"Only if you tag along and help me convince Sharon to throw away her shit."

"I really can't do that."

"You just don't want to do it."

"You're right. I don't want to work for free. I just want to see my dog."

"Well, if you want, you can pick Samson up and watch him for the day while I help Sharon. Although I'm disappointed that you won't help your poor mother. You never do anything for me."

“I’ll help you by taking the dog off your hands,” I sigh.

I tell her that I’ll leave right away to come pick him up, and I hang up the phone. When I’m ready, I head to my car and drive down backroads surrounded by lush vegetation. I reach my mother’s campsite, and I park next to her camper.

“Hey, Pheebs,” she calls to me as she steps out of the camper.

“Hello,” I say, and I can hear Samson whining at the sound of my voice.

“I have to get going in a few minutes. The dog’s water bowl, bags, and leash are on the table in the camper. I’ll call you when I get back so you can bring him over.”

“Okay. Thanks. So, you’re helping some friend clean out a warehouse?”

“Yeah. Sharon is a hoarder and has filled this big warehouse with all kinds of junk, but she won’t let any of it go. The last time I went, it took us several hours to get rid of one bag of stuff.”

“Jesus Christ. That sounds like a handful.”

“It is, but she’s going to let me live there for a while if I help her. Right now, we’re just clearing out enough space for me to move around. Then I’ll be able to stay close by until I’m ready to head to Florida. I don’t really have it all together yet, and I’ll need somewhere warmer than a camper when winter comes.”

“Oh,” I mumble. “Well, that’s nice of her to do that for you.”

Oh, Kathryn. Will you always be stuck in Pennsylvania? She agrees that it is nice of Sharon to let her stay in the warehouse even though there are no windows, and I head into the camper to get Samson and his things. He perks up as soon as I walk through the door and begins to wag his tail and bark. I pet him, scratching behind his ear and under his chin, and he looks to be in heaven. Once I gather his things, I pick him up and carry him to my car, where he always

sits in the passenger's seat. Samson sticks his head out of the window as I get into the car. I shout a goodbye to my mother, but she's busy and doesn't hear me.

I take Samson to his favorite park, and we have a picnic. I bring cheese, meats, and crackers for us. Samson loves cheese. He is obsessed with cheese. Any time Samson sees, smells, or senses cheese, he has to devour it. I eat, giving little pieces to Samson as I go. When we're finished with the food, we go on a short walk down the trail that runs behind the park. We don't walk for long because Samson is so old and tires easily, but he seems happy to have walked the amount that we did. I carry him the rest of the way to the car.

As we drive down windy roads, Samson takes joy in putting his head out the window and feeling the breeze in his fur. I take him to my father's house. Harold has always allowed Samson to visit in the backyard, but he is never allowed in the house. The little dog always enjoys the big backyard where the grass is always cut. I set him loose from his leash once I close the gate behind us, and Samson runs in circles like he is a puppy again. I chase him around the yard until he tires, and then I go inside to get some water for the both of us. I take a long sip of water from the bottle once I'm back outside, and then I pour the rest into Samson's bowl. He laps it all up and then we sit in the shade under the big maple tree for the rest of the afternoon.

My father returns home before my mother calls for me to bring Samson back. He is irritated because he wanted to go out to dinner but will have to wait until I can take the dog back to my mother. He mutters under his breath that it's always about me and what I want, and I hold Samson close. I offer to take the dog for a ride and pick up food to bring back to the house, but my father says it's too late and that he's just going to have oatmeal for dinner.

Samson is getting cold as the sun goes down, and I ask Harold if I could possibly bring him in the house just for a minute to warm him up.

“For the hundredth time, Phoebe, no! There are no animals allowed in the house, and there never will be. They are dirty and belong outside. I’ll get one of your old sweatshirts and you can wrap him in it. Is that alright?”

“Yeah. That’ll work.”

I wrap Samson in an old, navy blue sweatshirt, but he still shivers. I hold him close, sitting on the three little steps of our back porch.

When my mother finally calls, it is eight o’clock at night, almost twelve hours from when I picked up Samson. I drive to her campground, my stomach rumbling because I didn’t want to eat oatmeal for dinner.

When I get there, my mother goes off.

“Sharon is fucking crazy. She will not let go of a single fucking item in that entire warehouse. Phoebe, it is a whole, huge warehouse, completely full of useless junk that she thinks can make her money somehow. And she started getting snippy with me about the fact that there was still so much stuff. How am I supposed to clear stuff out if every time I pick something up, she tells me to put it back? And she keeps bringing more shit into the place!”

“I don’t know,” I say. “Are you still going to move in there?”

“Oh, I have to. What else would I do? I’m going to move in next week.”

“Wow, that’s sooner than I thought.”

“I know, but it’ll be best if I get set up before you leave again.”

“I guess so. Alright, I have to get home because Harold is angry about not being able to go out to dinner. I didn’t think I’d have Samson for so long.”

“Your father is always angry. It’s always one thing or another.”

“It’s fine.”

“It is not fine,” she says with irritation in her voice. “He treated me like shit, and now he’s treating you like shit. You need to wake up and get out of it.”

“Okay,” I reply, and head toward my car.

When I get home, I eat the rest of the oatmeal.

Wedding Day

The day that I married Kathryn was the second happiest day of my life, the first happiest being the day that I married my first wife. Or maybe it was the day my daughter was born. I married Kathryn on a cool October day, and she wore a green dress. Only virgins can wear white. I wore a tux and we drove down to the courthouse with Kathryn's mother and my best friend at the time. When we arrived at the courthouse, Kathryn was obviously nervous, but I felt sure of myself. I felt ready. I loved this woman and I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her, but she looked scared. *Maybe she's just excited*, I thought to myself. *Maybe her lunch isn't sitting well*. This was Kathryn's second marriage, too, and I figured the second time around must be better for both of us.

We walked, hand in hand, into the big municipal building, and we waited our turn to be married by the judge. Kathryn's mother and my best friend were witnesses and were overjoyed for the two of us. When she said, "I do," I was overcome with some kind of emotion that I couldn't quite put my finger on. We kissed, and our witnesses cheered.

In the house that night, Kathryn and I didn't argue like we usually did. We had dinner and watched some TV and then before bed we made love. It wasn't great, but it was good. Good enough for me. Afterwards, she fell asleep and began to snore, and I laid awake, staring at the ceiling, hoping things would stay good enough.

When Kathryn left, she waited until I was on a business trip to go. She didn't give me any inclination that she was ready to bounce, but I did know that things were going south. She packed up her things, took all my money out of our shared bank account, and took our daughter to an apartment across town. She bought Phoebe a dog, a little thing that was white and brown

with black on the tips of his ears. When I came home from my business trip, everything was gone, my wife, my daughter, my stuff, and my money. I had to start all over again, and I started by looking for Phoebe. Her mother was never very responsible, and I was worried about my little girl. Was she eating? Was she sleeping? Was she even going to school? I called the school and they said Phoebe hadn't been there for a week.

I drove, helplessly, up and down every street in our town and the towns neighboring until I saw Kathryn's car. It was parked outside a dingy house on Main Street. There were two front doors, the house being split up into separate apartments. I parked behind her car, got out, and checked the mail in the mailbox of the apartment on the left. There were letters with Kathryn's name, and I knocked on the door. Phoebe answered.

"Oh, dad! I missed you! Did you know that mom got me a puppy! A real puppy, dad! I can't believe it. We named him Samson. It's funny because he's so little and the real Samson was so big and strong. How was your trip? I missed you so much!" she said as she opened the door and came out to stand on the front porch. She hugged me tight, and I started to cry.

"Listen, sweetie. That's all great, but," I choked on my tears, "but dad has been looking for you. Your mother didn't tell me where she took you, and I was very afraid. Are you okay?"

"I'm great! I missed you, but I knew you'd be back soon. I've just been playing with the puppy. And I got to miss school!"

I heard Kathryn on the phone inside the house, but I could not hear what she was saying.

"That's great, sweetie."

"I love the puppy, dad, but I still want to live in our house. Can I come back with you?"

"Well, we're going to have to talk to your mom about it."

A cop car pulled up and parked. The officer got out of the car and approached the front porch.

“Sir, you’re going to have to leave.”

“Why? I am just visiting my daughter. I wasn’t hurting anybody. Phoebe, honey, go back inside.”

She scampered back into the apartment, and I walked down the porch steps to talk to the officer.

“Sir, your former spouse called and explained that you are stalking and harassing her and her daughter. I’m going to need you to leave.”

“I have every right to be here. My wife kidnapped my daughter while I was on a business trip, and I just found her.”

“You have to leave, sir. Or I’m going to have to detain you.”

I could see Phoebe standing in the doorway, holding the puppy, and she looked like she was crying. I waved and yelled, “Don’t worry, Pheebies! Dad will come back for you! Don’t worry!”

As I got in my car to leave, Kathryn appeared in the doorway. She was laughing and gave me the middle finger. I drove away, crying.

That police officer ended up getting suspended once I got my lawyer on it. It took years for me to get Phoebe completely back in my care. At first, the judge ruled that Kathryn and I would share custody. This was a nightmare. Every time I tried to send Phoebe back to her mother, she would cry and scream and beg me not to make her go. She said her mother was always sleeping and never cooked. She said her mother had friends over at night, and that she couldn’t sleep because they were loud. She said the puppy was sick and her mother didn’t do

anything about it. I hated to make her go back there, but I had to. When Phoebe was finally around twelve years old, the judge granted me primary custody. Phoebe only had to see her mother every other weekend. When Phoebe was in high school, the judge said she could choose when she wanted to see her mother. She almost never went. Sometimes, she would go to take Samson on walks, but besides that, she rarely saw her mother. Kathryn would show up at her school events every once in a while, and she would always make a scene. She would start fights with other parents or come in half drunk. Phoebe's face always got so red when her mother walked through the door.

Then, Phoebe started to go over to Kathryn's house a little more often. She told me she felt guilty for not having a relationship with her mother. She said that her mother was pitiful, and she wanted to help. Suddenly, Phoebe was doing everything for her mother, even though her mother had never done anything for her. Phoebe was feeding her, clothing her, and comforting her. I was shocked at the role reversal and couldn't understand how the little girl who begged me to keep her from her mother was now taking care of her mother. I let Phoebe do what she felt she had to do, but I wasn't happy about it.

I kept thinking back to the day I married Kathryn, and how uneasy she looked. I should have known then that this union would be a disaster. But I got one good thing out of it— Phoebe.

It Is Well with My Soul

My sister Louanne calls me and invites me to come to a family dinner at Grant's home for disabled people. This only happens because Grant is dying. Any other time, my siblings wouldn't care if I was included or not. But Grant had cancer in his breast, which is now removed. He has cancer in his bones, which caused him to break his left arm. Recently, the doctors found a tumor in his brain. He doesn't have much time left, so my family begins to gather.

At the dinner, I sit next to Grant. His hair is all gone, his arm is in a sling, and he sits uncomfortably. But oh boy, does he still have a big appetite. Grant always loved mealtimes, especially when the siblings all got together to eat with him.

Louanne and Mary whisper to each other at the end of the table. I wonder what they're talking about, and I think it's probably me. I am not dressed very nicely, and everyone else is in their Sunday best, except for Grant. He is wearing a baggy t-shirt and sweatpants.

"It is so good to have everyone all here together," Martin says.

Everyone shakes their heads in agreement.

"It's even better that we have all this food," my brother, Edwin, jokes.

No one talks to me except for Grant. Every once in a while, Martin will look down the table and smile at me. I wish my brother Nate was still alive. He would acknowledge me.

As everyone talks and eats, Grant leans in and whispers in my ear, "I know I'm going to die." This is the second time he has said this to me. It takes everything in me not to burst into tears, but instead I turn to him and tell him that it will be okay. He assures me that he isn't scared. But I am. I am scared.

Near the end of the dinner, Grant gets tired and his caretaker helps him walk to his room. The rest of us sit in silence for a moment before Louanne finally addresses me.

“Kathryn, we’ve been starting to plan Grant’s funeral, and we think it may be best if only Edwin and Grant’s caretaker speak. We don’t want the service to get to be too long.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes,” Louanne rolls her eyes.

“But I have so many important stories to tell.”

“We all do, Kathryn, but there are just too many of us. If we all took a few minutes to speak, the service would be hours long.”

I get up to leave. I don’t have the energy to yell at her.

The week after Grant tells me he knows he is dying again, I use all that is left of my money to take him to the movies and buy him snacks. He loves going to the movies. We see something animated and light. Grant only likes animated movies.

As I sit with Samson on the couch in the warehouse, I think back to when Phoebe was little. I pull the blanket up to my chin and remember how she and Grant would argue over what to watch on TV whenever he visited. The one thing they could always agree on was SpongeBob SquarePants. Grant just called it “Bob.” I can almost hear him saying “I wanna watch Bob.”

I drift to sleep remembering little Phoebe and Grant and how they were never really good playmates, no matter how badly I wanted them to be.

The sound of my phone ringing wakes me, and I cry into the speaker. My little brother died today. He had Down syndrome and cancer and pneumonia. No one deserves that much bad

luck. His lungs filled up with fluid until he could no longer breathe, and the sweet boy left us. He was 49. I was supposed to see him this morning, but he passed around three o'clock. When my sister called me at four, I knew what the call would be before I answered the phone.

“We used to play dolls and trucks when we were little,” I tell Phoebe when she calls to give her condolences. I didn't tell her that her uncle is dead, but she saw my post on Facebook about it and reached out. She is away at school, while I am stuck in the dark depths of Pennsylvania, now completely alone.

I wanted to go see my little brother yesterday, but Sharon insisted that I help her clear out more of the warehouse. She yelled at me and said I wasn't doing what I told her I would, and that I shouldn't get to live there for free if I wasn't being helpful. So, I stayed. I stayed and she yelled, and he died without me there to hold his hand.

When Sharon hears that my baby brother is dead, she says that she is sorry, and then instructs that we get back to work. I am horrified. How could this son of a bitch ask me to work for her not even seven hours after I lost my brother? I tell her that she can go fuck herself, and I sleep on the couch in the warehouse with Samson until the sun goes down. When I wake up, Sharon is gone, but she left me a note saying that I have a week to get out.

I make scrambled eggs for the fifth meal in a row because I don't have anything else. I use a camping stove in the warehouse, and it begins to reek of propane, more than it does already from the propane heater. Last week, the outdoor heater that I've been using inside melted my trash can. When the eggs are done, I pick and pick at them, only taking one or two real bites. Samson begs for my food, so I give it to him.

When Phoebe calls to ask how I am doing, I break down, crying.

“I'm about to be homeless again.”

“You could stick with your first plan. Take the camper to somewhere warm and live like a nomad. You don’t have to stay in Pennsylvania.”

“It’s hard to leave the place where I grew up.”

“I’m sorry,” Phoebe whispers. “When is the funeral? I’m going to come home for it.”

“It’s on Saturday. I don’t have anything to wear. All of my clothes are too big because I haven’t really been eating. All I’ve eaten in the last three days are six eggs.”

“You should eat something, and I don’t have anything to wear either. All of my clothes are too small. But my dad said he’d give me money to get some clothes.”

“Do you think he would give me money to get some food?”

“Probably not.”

“Why not?”

“You’re not his daughter.”

“I was his wife.”

“Was.”

“What a bastard.”

“He’s not a bastard. It’s not his fault you’re struggling.”

“Oh, the hell it’s not. He’s the reason I had to leave. He’s the reason I lost all my money. He’s the reason that you’re a spoiled brat.”

“Woah, okay.”

“I spent all my money fighting for custody of you to keep you away from the manipulative, controlling bastard, but you side with him on everything. He has you totally wrapped around his little finger. Is that why you can’t help your poor mother?”

“I’ve tried to help you in every way I can, but you never seem to notice. And you’re lying about spending all of your money on lawyers. I know you didn’t pay them. We still get calls on the house phone asking for you.”

I hang up. I can’t handle Phoebe right now, or anyone for that matter. She is so ungrateful for everything I have done for her. She’s right, I never paid the lawyers, but that doesn’t mean I didn’t want to. That doesn’t mean it wouldn’t have ruined me. I lie back down to sleep some more because that is the only thing keeping me together.

I can’t bear to watch him being lowered into the ground. I look away as the casket drops into the hole in the dirt, but out of the corner of my eye, I can see Phoebe watching. She doesn’t cry. She doesn’t move. She just stares ahead. The sun is hiding behind the clouds, and the darkness feels appropriate.

Once the casket is in the ground, we head to the cars to go to Grant’s church where the service will be held. Only close family was invited to the gravesite, and I don’t think I am ready to see all of Grant’s friends and my extended family. Phoebe and I get into my van, and she doesn’t say a word. The entire drive is silent until I ask her if she brought any snacks. I’m starving. Phoebe pulls two granola bars from her bag, handing one to me. I eat the whole thing in two bites.

We arrive at the church, and a sea of people in black crowd the entrance. I spot my siblings, most of Phoebe’s numerous cousins, and my own aunts and uncles. I haven’t seen most of these people in years. I see Grant’s friends with disabilities and his caretakers, all huddled together in a circle.

Phoebe and I get out of the car. She's wearing a velvety black dress that comes down past her knees, long black socks, and black boots, and her long black hair is pulled up into a ponytail. I didn't have much black clothing, so I resorted to wearing a blouse and pants. I am jealous that her father dishes out money for everything she wants. We walk together to the entrance, people stopping us every few steps to say hello or give their condolences. Phoebe's shyness takes over, and she keeps her head down, eyes directed on the ground.

When we spot my sisters, Mary and Louanne, Phoebe's face grows red and I can see the anger welling up in her eyes.

"Don't say anything to them if you're not going to be nice," I whisper in her ear.

"They're not nice to you."

"That doesn't mean you shouldn't be nice."

"Whatever."

They approach us, but only address Phoebe.

"Oh, my gosh, Phoebe. You've gotten so tall! Are you still growing?" Louanne coos.

"I have been the same height since I was thirteen," Phoebe replies, her eyes staring at Louanne in an almost terrifying fashion.

"You look so beautiful," Mary says. "How is college going?"

"It's fine." Phoebe pulls on my hand. "I have to go to the bathroom, but I'll see you later," She says as she walks away from my sisters.

"Pheebs, that was so rude," I scold as we walk into the empty bathroom.

"They didn't even look at you. I think that's what was rude."

Phoebe washes her hands, and we walk out into the swarms of people in the church. We find seats and stay there until the service starts.

It begins with everyone standing and singing hymns together, since Grant loved to sing at church. Phoebe has never been very religious or very keen on singing, and she mumbles along to the songs, and stops trying after the first two. When the hymns are finished, we take our seats, and a few select people get to go up and say something about my little brother.

I cry and cry until there are no tears left.

Get Out and Stay Out

I start by picking up all the trash left on the warehouse floor. When I told Kathryn that she could stay in my warehouse, I never imagined the mess it would become. I should have known it would be like this, since Kathryn herself is the definition of a mess. I paid her and housed her and even sometimes fed her, and what did she do for me? Not shit, that's what. She stayed in my warehouse, slept on my couch, let her damn dog roam around and shit on the floor because she didn't take him outside enough, and then she left without a single fucking word. I mean sure, I kicked her to the curb. I told her it was time to go, but she could have apologized. She could have thanked me. She could have, at the very least, taken a moment to clean up the messes she made. I'll admit, the warehouse wasn't in the best condition, but she did nothing to improve it. She left dirty dishes all over the place, food wrappers and cigarette butts. I even found some pot she dropped on the floor. You'd think someone with so little money would keep better track of their weed. I know I would.

I've known Kathryn since we were young. She worked at a diner that I often visited, and sometimes we would do odd jobs together, like cleaning gigs or lawn work. She always needed extra money. When she married that Harold, another customer of the diner who always sat in her section, she quit doing the odd jobs and she quit talking to me, for the most part. If I ran into her around town, she would say hello and we would catch up, but mostly Kathryn talked about herself. She talked about how Harold was a horror and how he screamed at her all the time. Yet she stayed with him for years and years, even after they had their daughter. When she finally left him, she started asking me to do odd jobs with her again, but most of the time I declined. I had a family and a job, and I was focusing on my art.

Before I kicked Kathryn to the curb and told her she had a week to get out of my warehouse, I called Harold.

“Hi, Harold. This is Sharon Beck. Do you remember me?”

“Oh, hello Sharon. Of course, I remember you. How have you been? How are the kids?”

“Well, they’re basically all grown up now. I’m doing well. How is your daughter? What’s her name again?”

“Phoebe. She’s doing well. She goes to a good school up in New York, but I’m looking forward to her coming home soon for Christmas. So, what can I do for you?”

“I actually have some questions about Kathryn.”

“Oh, god. What has she done to you?”

“Well, you see, I let her live in my warehouse for a while since she was down and out, and she has been a disaster. Our agreement was that she could live there for free if she helped me clear stuff out by having yard sales and donating things. She was supposed to have a yard sale every two weeks, but she never held a single one. Harold, the place was a mess to start, but she somehow made it even worse. I don’t know what to do. I wanted to ask you, if you think she’s vindictive. I want to kick her out but I’m afraid she’ll do something to me or my property.”

“That’s a hard question. I wouldn’t say she’s purposefully vindictive. I don’t think she’ll come after you. When she left me, she didn’t come after me, so to speak. Sure, whenever I saw her, she made sure to give me a ration of shit, but she never came after me.”

“Okay. Thank you. I hope you’re right. And by the way, please don’t tell Phoebe about this call. I don’t want her to know about her mother.”

“I promise, I will not say a word to her.”

“Thank you, Harold. I hope you have a good day.”

“You too, Sharon. Bye-bye.”

When I got off the phone, I felt relieved. I knew that I had to kick Kathryn out, and I was less afraid.

Then, her brother died. I didn't know what to do, so I asked her if we could do some work on the warehouse. I thought it might help get her mind off things, but she blew up.

“How dare you ask me to work for you when I just found out my brother died! You are such a bitch! I have worked so hard for you, fixing up this shit hole, and you can't even give me a day off when my little brother dies? You're so selfish. Fuck you!” she screamed before storming off.

I just sat on the floor and stared forward. I didn't know what to do or how to handle the situation, but I decided I still had to kick her out. I was not the one at fault, and I did not deserve to be treated this way. There was never going to be a good time to do it, so as she slept on the couch with her dog, I wrote her a letter.

Kathryn,

Over the last few months, I feel that you have taken advantage of my hospitality. You have been rude, unhelpful, and filthy. You have not held yard sales like we agreed upon, and you have made working in the warehouse very difficult. For these reasons, I have decided that you need to leave. I'll give you a week to pack up your things and find somewhere else to go.

Sharon

When she woke and saw the letter, she sent me a nasty text message, saying that I was unreasonable and ridiculous, but that she'd be happy to leave so that she wouldn't have to put up with my shit anymore. I was so relieved that she would be gone, that my husband and I celebrated by going out for drinks. I got so drunk that he had to carry me to bed when we got home because I had fallen asleep in the car.

One week later, Kathryn's belongings are gone, and I am cleaning the warehouse on my own. I don't know where she'll go, but I sure feel sorry for whoever ends up housing her.

Going South

I have to get money within the next twenty-four hours, or I will be toast. Burnt toast. I need to fill my van with gas and buy some food so that I can get on the road. I make lots of calls, and eventually one of my old friends says she will pay me to do some chores for her and babysit her boys while she goes out for the day with her husband. The more chores I get done while I'm there, the more cash I will get. I haven't seen her in years.

I drive to her house with my gas light on the entire way. The check engine light is on too, but it's not blinking, so fuck it. When I pull into her driveway, she's sitting on her porch, smoking a bowl. I join her.

We smoke and when we are done, she leaves. There is money for pizza for the boys and a list of what needs done on the counter in the kitchen. I head inside, and the boys are playing video games. They barely say hello. I look at the list.

1. Two loads of laundry: towels and sheets, then boys' clothes. Fold and put in the basket
2. Wash dishes (sorry that there are so many)
3. Vacuum living room, boys' room, hallway
4. Sweep and mop kitchen floor
5. If you have time, mow the grass in the back yard (the lawn mower is in the garage)

I know I need to complete all the chores in order to make enough money, so I get started right away. I call and order a pizza for the boys so that I don't forget, and then I get started on the laundry. While the towels and sheets are in the washer, I wash all of the dishes. The sink is full of them, but I get them all washed and put them in the drying wrack. I switch the laundry and start the next load, and then get to vacuuming. I keep up the pace, and by the time that my friend

and her husband come home, I am just finishing mowing the lawn. I am exhausted, and my stomach hurts because I haven't eaten in god knows how long.

“Wow, Kathryn. I didn't think you'd get it all done in time, but you did. And thank you for watching the boys. Did they give you much trouble?”

“No, they just played games the whole time. They were the easy part. It's hard for me to work fast like that with my sickness, but I really need the money. I hope everything is the way you wanted it.”

“Everything looks perfect, Kathryn. Thank you again.”

“It was really no problem.”

My friend hands me two crisp one hundred dollar bills. I ask if she is sure she wants to give me so much, and she assures me that I deserve it. I thank her, and head back to the warehouse to pack up the last of my belongings before I hit the road.

I wish I could say goodbye to Phoebe, but she is still at college. I load all of my stuff into the camper and my van, put Samson in the passenger's seat, and we're off. Without even saying goodbye or thank you to Sharon, I leave the warehouse. It's more crowded and more of a mess than when I moved in a few months ago. I stop at a gas station and a grocery store before getting on the highway.

“We're going south, Samson,” I say.

He wags his tail.

The first hundred miles go by easily, even with the check engine light still on. I think I just need an oil change and decide to stop in a small town. I find an auto shop, and get the cheapest oil change they have. Then, I'm back on the road. Samson is loving it so far, and when

he gets tired of sticking his head out the window, he lies down on the seat to nap. I drive all night, only stopping occasionally to pee and let Samson out. When I hit North Carolina, I find a campground at a state park and set up the camper. I need to rest for a few days, so I get comfortable. I spread out, and when everything is in order, I smoke a bowl and a cigarette down by a creek. The sound of the water trickling soothes me.

I stay at the campground for about a week, making all my meals over a fire and pissing behind the same tree that is next to my camper. I let Samson off his leash, since there is no one else around, and he wanders. He never goes very far, and always comes back when he smells me cooking. North Carolina is fairly warm, and Samson often lies in the sunshine, napping. He seems to enjoy being on the go, but I am still unsure of what I'm going to do. I start to run low on food and money again, but now I have no one nearby to help me. I turn to the internet. Craigslist has lots of posts asking for help with small jobs, and I respond to some in the area. I get a message from some guy asking if I could clean for him. I say yes, and the next day I head to a small town near the campground with Samson.

A man is standing in the driveway when I pull in.

"Hey, there," the man says as I get out of my van. "Are you Kathryn?"

"Yes, that's me."

"Well, hello. I'm Robert. And who's this?" he asks, pointing at Samson in my arms.

"This is my dog, Samson. He's very old and can't be left alone anymore. Is it alright that I brought him with me?"

"That's fine! My little girls adore dogs and would love to play with him while you clean."

"Perfect," I say, and he shows me into the house.

Robert has two daughters who are still in elementary school. They immediately take a liking to Samson, and I leave him with them as Robert shows me the house. It is filthy, to say the least. There are clothes and toys and books strewn around every room of the house. The carpets are full of dust, so much so that they are a deep brown color, but I can tell they used to be white. The counter tops are cluttered with dirty dishes and leftover food.

“I know it’s a disaster in here,” Robert apologizes, “but my wife died seven months ago, and she took care of the house. Between work and taking care of the girls on my own, I haven’t been able to keep the house tidy. I’m so grateful that you’re here to help me. I’ll pay you fifteen dollars an hour, and you can work for a few days if you need to. I know it can’t all be done today.”

“I’m so sorry to hear about your wife. I just lost my little brother two weeks ago.”

“That’s a shame.”

“But yeah, I think I can do this in two or three days, if I work for about eight hours each day and only take a few breaks.”

“That sounds perfect. I’ll let you get to it. You can start wherever you think is best.”

“Alright. Thank you.”

Robert goes to play with the girls and Samson, and I start with the kitchen. As I wash dishes, I do some math inside my head to figure out how much I can make for this cleaning job. Fifteen dollars times eight hours is one hundred and twenty dollars a day. That times two days is two hundred and forty, and times three it is three hundred and sixty. If I can take three days to get this done, I can make enough money to get me close to Georgia, at least, if not all the way to Florida.

I scrub the dishes before drying them and putting them away. There are probably about sixty of them, mostly cups. I throw out all the food that is sitting out, and wipe down all the counters tops, the stove top, and the kitchen table. Then, I sweep and mop the floor. The water in the mop bucket is black. By the time I'm finished with the kitchen, it has been three hours. I take Samson outside to pee and smoke a cigarette. Robert joins me. We stand on his back porch as Samson roams around the yard.

“So, what brings you to Grantham? Are you from around here?”

“No, I'm from Pennsylvania. I'm on my way to Florida, but I stopped to camp at a state park nearby. I wanted some rest and needed a break from all the driving. Plus, it's really beautiful around here.”

“Oh, yeah. There's nothing like it,” he says as he holds in a drag of smoke, just like Phoebe does. “Are you going on vacation?”

“Not exactly.”

“Are you moving?”

“You could call it that. I'm not exactly sure what I'm doing. The bank took my house, so I bought a camper and decided to go somewhere warm for the winter.”

“Oh, man. I'm sorry.”

We finish our cigarettes in silence, and then I return to cleaning.

At the end of the day, Samson and I return to our campsite. Both of us are exhausted. The girls really played Samson out. I make myself a quick dinner and go to bed before the sun goes down all the way. Samson snores loudly as I drift to sleep.

When the sun comes up, I dread going to Robert's. It's so much work, but I really need the money. I need dog food and people food and gasoline. I need bottled water and coffee and

new clothes. I have been shrinking from all the missed meals, and my pants are starting to sag, and my shirts hang off me like leaves from a tree. I get my shit together, and I pack up to go to Robert's.

It is the same as yesterday. When I pull into the driveway, he is standing there waiting. I get out of my van and he greets me.

“Good morning, Kathryn! How are you doing today?”

“I'm fine. Thanks for asking. How about yourself?”

“Oh, I'm alright. I think I'm missing my wife a little extra today.”

“What was her name?”

“Karen.”

“That's a beautiful name. I'm sure she was a wonderful woman. I'm sorry she had to go so soon. How are the girls taking it?”

“Not very well. They've been acting out a lot. Throwing temper tantrums and physically throwing things. It's sad to see them this way.”

“I can imagine. Where would you like me to start cleaning today?”

“Oh, wherever is fine as long as it all gets done by tomorrow afternoon.”

“Alright,” I say, and we walk into the house.

I vacuum all of the carpets in the living room and bedrooms twice. They are so filthy that I have to change the bag in the vacuum cleaner a few times as I go. When I turn off the vacuum, I can hear the girls giggling as they play with Samson. They really do love the little dog, and for a moment I think if he might be happier here. That would rip Phoebe's heart out, so I push the thought away. Besides, I need my travel buddy.

When I finish vacuuming, I start to dust. I cough and sneeze and gag as particles of dust fly around the room. I pick up clothes and toys as I go, putting them into baskets. By the time I'm finished with this, it is almost time to leave, so I go outside and smoke a cigarette with Robert. I can see that he is upset.

"I don't know how I'm going to go on without her," he says, tears in his eyes. "She helped me with everything. She was my everything."

"I'm so sorry," I say, looking at the ground as I exhale smoke.

"And oh my god, the girls. They are so devastated to be without their mother. They truly aren't alright."

"I can imagine. It's hard to get by without your mother, especially at that age. I lost my mother when I was pregnant with my daughter. I was so devastated, and then I realized that my daughter would never have a grandmother."

"Oh, that's so sad. I'm sorry."

"It's alright. I'm sorry for your girls. I cannot imagine losing my mother when I was their age."

We stamp out our cigarettes and head inside. I tell Robert that I've finished cleaning the house, and we walk through it together. He says it looks great and is impressed that I finished in only two days. He says he'll pay me for three anyway, and I almost cry. I hug him, and he cries onto my shoulder. I squeeze him tighter.

"You'll be alright," I tell him. "You and your girls will be alright. Time heals all wounds. I lost my mother twenty-one years ago, two weeks before my daughter was born. I still think of her, but it doesn't hurt the same way."

"Thank you," he says as he straightens himself.

Robert hands me the money. Three hundred and sixty dollars. I say goodbye to the girls and pick up Samson. As Samson and I walk to the car, the girls and Robert wave goodbye from the front porch. I don't want to leave them, but it's time to go.

When I get back to the campsite, I pack up the camper and my belongings, and we hit the road again. Samson is getting tired of being in the car so much, despite his love of sticking his head out the window. I cry as I get onto the highway, thinking of my mother and Phoebe and Grant and everyone I've lost or left behind. I lied to Robert. Time doesn't heal anything.

Give and Take

My daughter is coming home from college today, so I bake a cake and make homemade spaghetti. I wash her sheets, make her bed, and vacuum her room. She loves fresh sheets. Phoebe always works so hard at school, so when she comes home, I try to make it nice for her. She deserves something nice.

When I hear the lock on the front door click, I jump.

“Hello?” I hear her calling from the bottom of the steps.

“Well, hello! How are you doing Pheeb? How was the drive?”

“There was a lot of traffic. That’s what took me so long. And Kathryn called me.”

“What did she have to say?”

“She wanted to tell me that she’s on her way to Florida. Apparently, Sharon kicked her out. I can’t believe she’s finally gone. I miss Samson a lot, and it makes it worse not knowing when I’ll see him again. I just hope she’s taking good care of him.”

“I understand. I’m sure Samson will be alright.”

“I hope so. If she can barely feed herself, how is she going to feed a dog?”

“I don’t know but try not to think about it. Worrying won’t solve anything.”

“You’re right.”

“Are you hungry? I made spaghetti.”

“Yeah, I’m starving.”

We sit down to have dinner, and I ask Phoebe about school.

“So, how was the end of your semester?”

“It was alright. I had so much work to do, but I somehow managed to finish it all on time. I didn’t get a chance to hang out with my friends very often because we were all working, but I did get to see them one last time before I left. I had a little get together at my apartment, and a few people came over to play board games. It was nice.”

“Well, that’s great. I’m glad things seem to be working out for you.”

“Yeah. The only problem was that Kathryn would not stop calling me. She called me every day, multiple times a day, to complain about her life. I don’t know if she just needed someone to listen or if she expects me to fix it somehow.”

“You just have to ignore her.”

“I can’t.”

“But she’s never done anything for you.”

“She’s my mother. I can’t just ignore her.”

“I think you might have to. I don’t know what else you could do to get away from her.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

We eat in silence for a moment. Phoebe twirls her spaghetti around and around her fork but doesn’t bring the fork to her mouth. I tell her that I made her favorite— chocolate cake with peanut butter icing. Her eyes widen and she gives me a big smile.

“Thanks, dad. I’d love a piece.”

We eat our cake and I tell Phoebe about how life has been around here. She doesn’t say anything else about her mother, but I know she’s thinking about Kathryn because of the look in her eyes. There is this worry embedded deep in the blue of her irises that is always there when someone brings up Kathryn. She cannot seem to stop worrying about her mother, and I don’t know how to help her. I offer her another piece of cake, but she says she’s stuffed, and goes back

to her room to lie down. I clean up the dishes and wonder why she puts so much effort into Kathryn when Kathryn has done nothing but take from her.

Euthanasia

“Hello,” I mumble into the phone, still writing the essay I am working on. It is just after winter break, and my work is really starting to pick up.

“Hey, Pheeb. I need your help.”

“With what, mom?”

“I was wondering if you could send me a little money. I’m running out of gas and need to buy food for Samson. I’ve just been feeding him my leftovers.”

“I don’t know.”

“C’mon. Please? I really need it. I am almost to Florida. If I can just make it there, I can stay with my friend for a little while.”

“How much money do you need?”

“Like fifty dollars.”

“Where the fuck would I get fifty dollars?”

“From your dad.”

“He’s not just going to give me that much money without a reason. And I can’t tell him that I’m giving it to you. I have ten dollars. Do you want that to buy some dog food?”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll figure it out. Bye.”

She hangs up before I can say anything else.

When I finish my work, I get up and walk to class. My phone rings again, but this time it’s Harold.

“Hey, dad.”

“Hello, Phoebe. How are you today?”

“I’m fine. I’m just walking to class. Did you need something?”

“No, I just wanted to say hi.”

“Well, hi.”

“Okay. I know you’re busy, so I’ll let you go. Have a good day.”

“You, too. Love you. Bye.”

This is not the first time and will not be the last time that Harold calls me today. Every day, every few hours, he calls. It is like he cannot let me go, even when I’m gone. I don’t mind his calls though. I always have someone to talk to.

I get to class and take a seat in the very back of the lecture hall, and then I zone out for two hours.

When class is over around five o’clock, my friend texts me, asking if I want to hang out. I reply that I can for a little bit, but not too long because I have more work to do. We meet up outside the library and walk back to my room. I get two beers out of my fridge, and we drink slowly while listening to music. This is a nice break from my typical routine.

“So, Phoebe,” my friend, Hannah, says, “are your classes going well? It seems like you’re always working.”

“Yeah, they’re fine. I’m more worried about my dog.”

“Oh, yeah. Your mom has him, right?”

“Yeah, and I don’t really trust her to take very good care of him.”

“That’s a shame,” Hannah says, and then takes a long sip of beer.

We drink without talking for a moment, and then I ask Hannah about her classes. She goes on and on about this cute boy in her biology lecture that she just needs to fuck. I couldn’t care less, and when she finally stops talking, I tell her I have to finish an essay.

“You’re welcome to stay and do homework with me,” I tell her.

“It’s okay. I’m gonna go to the cafeteria and try to find that guy.”

“Alright. Have a good night.”

“You too,” she says over her shoulder as she walks out my door.

I sit down to work, and my mother calls me again. I send it voicemail, but she calls right back. I turn off my phone, throw it on the chair beside my bed, and bury my head in my hands.

When I open my laptop write, my mother calls me on Facebook. I answer.

“What,” I mumble.

“We need to talk.”

“About?”

“Samson.”

“What about Samson?”

“Well, you know, he’s getting really old now, and he’s not acting the way that he used to. I am having trouble caring for him, but I know if I give him up to someone else, that he would be so depressed.”

“What are you trying to say, Kathryn?”

“I’m saying that I think we should look into other options.”

“You can’t put down a healthy dog just because he’s old and you’re poor. They’re not going to let you murder your dog.”

“I don’t want to murder him. I’m just thinking about quality of life. And besides, you’re the reason I’m stuck with him. I’m sick of taking care of him. He’s like a little kid, and I’m sick of having kids.”

“Wow. I knew you were selfish, but holy shit. You can’t murder your healthy dog. Also, how am I the reason you’re stuck with him? You’re the one who bought him when I was little to convince me to live with you.”

Kathryn hangs up on me, and I sob into my pillow for exactly ten minutes before getting back to work.

To Be Continued