I was sitting at the top of the white staircase attempting to hide behind the railing bars. My mom told me she would be back in twenty minutes and that I should get more pillows from the hall closet while I waited in my room, but my young curiosity overcame me. My grey, hand-me-down, pajama pants tucked under my heels as I crouched on the top step. The large, red door opened into the front hall as the three familiar silhouettes emerged from the front porch. My mom closed her soaking umbrella and turned on the small chandelier that hung in the middle of the entrance illuminating the two familiar faces. It was hard to get a good view without revealing myself from behind the bars. The two girls sat down on the antique rug, that used to belong to our great grandmother, and clumsily pulled off their rain boots and coats as my mom’s sharp glance met mine through the cracks. I stood up quickly, trying not to trip on my loose pant legs and ran back to my room down the hall.

I slid under the flowered covers, pretending to be asleep when my bedroom door opened. The light from the hallway contrasted with the darkness from my room and illuminated the three silhouettes crowded in the doorway.

“Stella,” my mom whispered as I looked up from under the covers, “Lane and Janie are going to sleep over at our house tonight.” She turned on the overhead light revealing the two young girls in their matching, damp pajamas. My mom closed the door to the hallway as we all squeezed into the double bed. My Aunt Sally only let us have sleepovers on special occasions. But never on school nights.
We could hear my mom arguing on the phone in the hallway. Her tone changed from stern to soft. “Yes, the girls are okay... alright... okay... call me tomorrow... I love you” she hung up the phone. Lane and Janie told me that their dad peed in his work pants in the hallway again. They joked about how he needed diapers more than their younger brother Fletcher who was already asleep in his crib. We laughed for a while before my mom shut off the hallway lights, leaving us snuggled in complete darkness. Janie started to panic and climbed out of the bed onto the cream-colored carpet. She slid across the carpet and searched through her small, red sleepover bag for her nightlight.

“Janie doesn’t like the dark because she’s scared. You’re a bigger baby than dad is, and he pees his pants” Lane teased her like the older sister she was.

“Shut up! I am not!” Janie whined back as she pulled out her transparent blue, butterfly nightlight. It was outlined with silver and white gems that reflected the light in every angle. She plugged it into the outlet near the bed and the mechanical wings started to whir as they flapped slowly. The light moved with every pulse from the wings, causing the blue light to move around the walls. The dreamy shadows on the faded, pink walls were entrancing and comforting. The hypnotizing shades of clouded blue distracted any thoughts that raced through our young minds.

The sharp ring of the doorbell woke us up the next morning followed by the slamming front door. “Girls!” my Uncle Chris’ deep voice bellowed from the foyer as my mom made her way up the staircase. “Hey girls, your dad’s here to pick you up. Grab your stuff and head downstairs.” Lane and Janie jumped out of bed and ran down the winding, white staircase. He squatted at the base of the stairs with his long arms wide open. They launched themselves into his arms. I stood at the top of the staircase as he held them each in one arm. His brown curls were freshly showered. His black, back-up work pants were perfectly pressed. His white button-down newly steamed and cuffed just below the elbow.

He squatted as he lowered the girls back down onto the ground, kissing the tops of their matted, curly brown hair. “I’m sorry about last night,” he whispered into their ears, “but how about we go get some pancakes before I drop you guys off at school, huh?” he swung their bags over his broad shoulders and held the girls’ hands as he turned towards the door. “Can you guys say, ‘thank you’ to Aunt Ruth?” they thanked my mom as they walked through the door. He turned over his shoulder, “Thanks Ruth. I promise it won’t happen again.” She nodded as they started down the front walk. My mom closed the front door behind them. She turned around, her bright blue eyes meeting mine as I squatted behind the bars on the top of the white staircase.

A few months later we drove up the winding, gravel driveway to our grandparents’ house for Christmas. My parents in the front seat. Felix, Lily, and I in the back. The two corgis in the middle row. The large, grey farm house rested on the top of a hill surrounded by a small forest near the back of the house and giant open cow fields in the front. It had a white wrap-around porch with wooden rocking chairs and metal porch swings resting on the wood boards.
My grandma always loved Christmas. She set up the bargain Christmas tree that my grandpa always waited to buy two days before Christmas Eve in their living room that smelled of soot and nutmeg. The bottom of the tree was decorated with a porcelain nativity scene. All of the painted details on the small figures were slowly fading away after years of young hands smudging and jostling them.

We ran around playing with miscellaneous blocks and wooden cars as the parents sat around the fireplace. Uncle Chris sat with the rest of the adults around the fireplace. He slowly raised the small metal flask to the rim of his eggnog-filled mug. “Are you sure you want that?” my Aunt Sally said as she grabbed his hand. He looked her sternly in the eyes and jerked his hand away, “I’m fucking fine” he whispered, “It’s the holiday spirit!” he shouted as he filled his mug to the brim. She moved her hands back around the chipped handle of her green ceramic mug.

The kids’ room was on the third-floor of the house. The grey walls were lined with five twin beds and the old wooden crib. Everyone knew which bed ours was based on the different colored blankets folded at the base of the dark wooden frames. Blue, green, purple, orange, pink, and yellow. The six of us filled the beds in the large room, as our parents were scattered throughout the three levels in the house. The slight whirring from the blue light in the corner of the room drowned out the crashing bottles and muted yelling coming from the room across the hall. The blue light reflected across the angled, grey ceilings, encapsulating the room in the familiar, faded blue haze.

He slammed the door behind him as his heavy footsteps stumbled across the hallway. The yelling turned into soft mumbling as he opened our bedroom door. His limp silhouette stood in the doorway as the blue light flashed gently over his body, striking the half-full, transparent brown bottle that rested in his loose hand on his right side. The inseam of his khaki pants was getting darker with every sip from the near empty bottle. His babbling made him sound like a child.

I looked up from the covers and gazed across the room to meet Janie’s large hazel eyes. The blue light drifted over her face as her eyes shifted to the corner of the room and stared at the mechanical wings. She slowly pulled back her purple covers and lowered her right foot to the ground. He raised the tip of the bottle to his pursed lips and took a swig as his eyelids drooped over his dark brown eyes. She slid under the bed frame and laid on her stomach. Her red, reindeer nightgown collected dust from floor boards as she started to slide towards the corner of the room. He saw her pulling herself across the floor towards the blue light. His grip tightened around the neck of the bottle as he pulled it over his shoulder. I muffled my screaming as the bottle hurled across the room and shattered the nightlight next to her hand. His silhouette, now pitch black, stood firmly in the doorway.

“Turn that damn light off and go to bed” he muttered as he turned and marched across the hallway. Janie didn’t move until the sound of his footsteps was only an echo. Her chest moved up and down slowly as she slid back to her bed. She crawled back under the covers, holding the shattered blue wings and loose gems in her cut hand close to her chest.