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## Left

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## Left

Fix yourself on this: the way her hair parts is a straight arrow. Kneeling, she smiles and pulls stubs of grass from the ground, scattering it under the shade of a willow tree. She feels his attention, the cut of her hair falling over her face; she stays face down at her work.

And they talk and change subjects and sit against the thick tree in the afternoon. At one time Alison jumps up, to run to the house for cans of Orange Slice. They wipe wet hands on shorts legs; the bottoms of their shorts are cool and damp from the ground. Outside of the tree's protection the heat floats and shakes the air; they stay out of the killing sun, the August before their last high school year.

"This grass is so dry," Alison says because it's hurt her hands to keep pulling at something so harsh. "I haven't mowed in three weeks. It's just not growing." She scans the expanse of front yard that welcomes to her house, now the "Breeze Inn," some oasis in West Virginia for white water rafters and rich Virginians on long weekends.

She tells Jon it's about time for him to head out, quiet without apologizing; he's stretching and surprised and says, "It's four o'clock already?"

It feels like four o'clock because she's watched the long hours pass on her watch and so she nods. "Ten 'til." They stand up and pound off their shorts and look towards the garage where he's parked his bike. They start for the garage but are caught at the perimeter of the tree's shade, reluctant to shove out into the hot hot world again.

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She lets the screen door fall flat against the frame and quickly rounds the rail for the stairs, but a voice from the basement scratches up for her to stop. "Ally? That you?"—as if it could be anyone else.

"Yeah," the annoyed tone of voice asking, "Did you expect something from me?" She continues up the steps, just trying to make it up, then to the right, past the bathroom and right again to duck her head under the sloped ceiling of her room, shut the door and turn the lock.

Anyways a locked door can't even be a defiance when its release is a skeleton key your father keeps in his pocket. A locked door. It's a fucking symbol, she thinks at the door.

"Ally?" Again, what? "Come down here a sec. I wanna talk to you before the guests get here." So unlock the door and go down, to the basement. She pulls at the knob, tests the lock, looks back to the unmade bed with its Kermit the Frog sheets she's had since second grade. Not because they can't afford new ones, and they've got plenty others—wedding gifts, flannel sheets bought for some frozen winter that blew right by, linen sets that'd been embroidered when everyone wanted embroidered sheets. Sheets ironed and then left to sit and make permanent creases while Kermit the Frog turned soft and pale from so many washes. But the door has to be unlocked and things have to be done. People'll be here any minute.

The house is dark but light from the open basement door pulls up to Alison, she

slows her steps. The headache-smell says he's painting, always painting, an easel made from the old music stand she'd used when she would practice the trombone in fifth grade. He hums something slow and operatic, it stretches through like the light to reach her because she's standing outside of the door and won't go in.

"Come on in—I'm just finishing up on something."

"That's OK, I'll wait outside." And because she should offer a reason, "I can't stand the smell of that paint." Her arms are folded against the damp must of their basement. She doesn't need to see them to know that his large and many paintings lean against every concrete wall, more and more every day. She turns to stare somewhere dark, away from his light and sound and smell and eyes.

But he wants to be in her eyes, so he leaves his seat and crosses to the doorway. Wipes his hands on dirty jeans, old ones marked with paint, working pants. He's happy, sweating, the prickly white beginnings of a beard showing his age, tiredness. "Won't you please just come and see this one? She's looking so beautiful and I've put her in that blue dress with the beads, you know..."

But Alison doesn't need to see this painting, there's been so many others just like it, stacks and stacks cluttering the basement walls. The same thin blonde hair, smiling face, head thrown back in a laugh. Healthy sun lighting up her mom's young features: her father's perfect, painted replicas of old photos, captured before the tired eyes and lines of the mother Alison knew.

"Dad," she speaks sharply, interrupts him for the business at hand. "Come on, it's after four. What do you need me to do right now?"

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That night they serve grilled herb chicken and rosemary potatoes; a pretty good wine, large salads, coffee after dinner. One table orders dessert, chocolate-apple cheesecake, the rest Alison saves to give Jon the next day. To show she really was thinking of him. She contents from table to table, four groups totaling eleven guests. Three tables are couples and the fourth is a rowdy crowd of boys, college age, spilling wine down their throats and laughing louder with every bottle. They'll never leave so she can clean up, they'll stay late and drink and flirt with her and her dad will look out every so often from the kitchen window, lights off to hint. And waiting and watching and they'll never leave, just never, so things can get on and finally she can go to bed.

When she calls Jon later that night he's all apologies. "I'm so sorry, Al, I didn't notice it was so late this afternoon." That's okay. "I should've been paying attention, left sooner. Next time I'll be more careful." But she hadn't reminded him of the time, was just embarrassed to say anything earlier, and he should've been more careful anyways. He knew, should've known.

Her quick laugh, response to his words. Oh, that's OK. Nothing happened; "this time" was a silent addition.

"So, can I come over later?" He's been trying this almost every night lately, but it's always the same answer. No, of course not. I'm too tired. It's too late. He might hear you. Always the real reason last, thrown out like it doesn't matter, just one of many possi-

bilities. A small uncomfortable silence and then they talk for a few minutes more. Alison whispers with cold fingers wrapped around the phone, springing the cord, until her father gets on the other line and says alright Honey it's time to get off.

"No problem, Mr. Cain," Jon says, quite respectful in tone of voice. They make plans for tomorrow, whisper good nights.

Two minutes later she's under the sheets, still wearing the pair of jeans and t-shirt she'd put on after the boys had finally gone up to their room. There's a knock and then her father enters, having changed out of the white chef's uniform he wears for the guests' benefit. "You ready?" he smiles, and the lamp on her nightstand spooks his face, the dark hollows of his cheeks, the thin nose. His eyes deep caves of sag and then the darkest place, the mouth that opens to what will it do? to scream or cry or speak or just open and close and open again with no sound, gummy and toothless—this old man, her father, broken and breaking into dust like plaster struck by a hammer.

Alison's up with the flashlight in hand, clock says 12:14; they're starting late. She follows him smoothly downstairs, so practiced, the every-night of it all, their routine. Should be back in bed by one, unless he takes his time. But he's quicker than his daughter, carried by excitement, and waits on the porch. He's so happy, eyes wet in the night. He carries a big metal flashlight and is already wearing rain boots. Alison's wait by the back porch door, she pulls them on, he starts with clean, long steps toward the pond. She plugs her ears as she goes to block the screams of crickets.

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The earth is so many holes, some filled with water, others with sand or dirt, something new that wasn't always there but's still perfectly part of nature. The night in West Virginia smells like a camp fire. Like wet dirt, black air, moons, fat toads. There's a heaviness to the air that leaves your shoulders sore for carrying its weight. There's a summer that drags you down like moss to crawl and clutch and spread sideways. There's a willow tree to pull you vertical, leaning, unable to stand up on your own.

So she goes to the pond with him, cracks sticks and limbs and leaves to get there. She stands and watches, or looks away, while he throws out the petals and prays the prayers and kneels at the bank to break dirt in his hand. He caresses a large stone slab that pokes perpendicular to the ground, runs his fingers in the grooves of a name and a date carved in rough strokes, inexpert, beginning to smooth now with the erosion of his hands. He cries, turning from the stone to the pond to the moon and finally, Alison. But she's not really there.

It's been five months, one full tourist season, since her mother left and the nights began. So many nights exactly alike, the smallness of two figures in the bug world of a night in the country, what eleven guests who now lie snoring in The Breeze Inn had driven and paid to find.

But they don't want, won't take, can't and don't have to, this night, this crouching and crying around an earth's hole filled to here with water, still high despite the dry summer. He sits on his knees and rocks. She stands arms crossed over her chest and heart



pumping. The loudness threatens to escape from the heart cage, to give her away for what she really is. Not his, not a child that would pray for this kind of mother, dead to their world. But rather, to throw dry grass and pond dirt in her face, pick up toads and hurl their bodies at this woman that has not died but merely walked away from the man she married and the girl she made.

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The Breeze Inn's guest brochure describes a "sumptuously-restored eighteenth century farmhouse, providing the best mix of rustic charm and hotel amenities." It boasts of home cooking, comfortable rooms to "let," and proximity to the best white water rafting around. It's located near Fayetteville, West Virginia, where people are born and live and die without ever getting up out of their porch chairs.

The Inn is surrounded by an old "new-growth" forest; the trees impose their brocoli stalks from all directions as you raft down the New River. Its complicated rapids attract college students and other adventure-seekers. Guests always leave The Inn completely satisfied, already planning for next year's trip.

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Finally in bed, almost one-thirty, Alison pulls the sheet up to her shoulders but she's hot and kicks it back down to the bottom of the bed. She's left the light on, not yet ready for sleep; she can hear her father in the bathroom they now share. The run of water down pipes, the sudden catch of a faucet shut off, slipped steps muffling on the wood floor. The two of them cramped up in this tiny bathroom—we're being pushed out of our own house, she thinks. And then, whose fault is that? But really, whose is it?

She remembers the first night he'd come into her room, early in the season, when only one or two of the guest rooms were in use. She remembers it this way because the house felt emptier than it has in more recent months. Hollow, lonely sounds jumped off the walls and hit each other when she creaked open doors at night for a drink of water or something to eat.

There had not been much work to do that night, but Alison was more tired than she had thought—too tired to sleep. Finally she'd just resigned herself to the inevitable, the indulgence of asking herself questions she pretended away during the day. Her mom was gone, and there were no answers anywhere, no possibility. She lay completely still in bed, willing herself to stop thinking, please just stop and forget and sleep without dreams.

Then came the knock, knuckles strong against wood. Something in the suddenness of the knock that begged importance. "Go away," she asked of her father, bold behind new tears and the right to privacy she thought they gave her.

Instead he turned the knob to come in, but it was locked. Then it gave—his skeleton key—and he just let himself in. But not to hold her or share in her special type of grief. Not to ask questions that, like hers, could not be answered. "Come on, get dressed. I want to show you something." And when he saw she wasn't coming, he pulled her by one arm from

the bed, the first time he'd ever been physical with her, and the only time he would ever need to be because after that night she always made sure she was ready to go. It wasn't the roughness of his touch but the insistence of his eyes, the way they blocked out the possibility of anything but absolute compliance. Her father. And then, not.

The pond was familiar to Alison as a spot for picnics and a place to play when little friends had come to visit so many years ago—not for the moonlit grave site of her undead mother. Flowers, candles, some of the things she'd left behind, but the worst was the gray stone slab he'd put up for a "proper" burial. She didn't need to read the "Madeline L. Cain" carved with so much precision. Or the date, March 11, 1997, the day that would forever stand in Alison's mind as the day her world fell.

In his hand he carried the note her mother had left, the words that didn't say anything, though they tried, outside of the simple fact that she was gone. With a cigarette lighter he burned the note in his hand into ash, barely flinching when the singe touched his flesh. Then he scattered the pieces in the water of the pond and gave his benediction. "From now on she is dead to us."

So then the pond was nothing of her childhood and everything of the nights they tramped out there, the numbness spreading and starting earlier and earlier until it carried Alison through the day, the anticipation of their new ritual. It stuck its tree branches in her like fingers, poking through, pointing things out, until she couldn't ignore questions and she couldn't recreate the love for her mother she knew she once felt. There was nothing left for this memory, this mom, or for her father who finally she's decided is the one to blame.

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Jon opens the screen door and despite herself Alison is relieved to see him. The diversion of his interest, insistence that this time they spend the day at his house, although she hardly ever wants to and he knows this.

Jon's mom has flooded the kitchen with the smell of a pot roast. His little twin sisters come running through the entryway, pulling on Jon's legs and then hiding behind them, quickly shy in front of Alison. He shakes them off and leads Alison to the living room, where they can talk.

He sits her down like he's about to propose marriage, takes her hands in his lap. But it's not that. "Listen, Alison, I'm thinking about going up to WVU in a few weeks, maybe sit in on some classes, see the campus. My cousin's boyfriend goes there, said I could stay a couple days with him if I want." And then, the hard part, the most-practiced, staring away so as not to anticipate her reaction from her face: "You could come along too. I mean, we'd take a day off from school and just drive down there and see what we see." He speaks in a rush to get it all out.

Alison pulls her hands from Jon's grasp and leans back on the couch. She can't look at him and tries to focus instead on his sisters, fighting over a doll in the corner.

Jon sits on the edge of his seat, still leaning in to Alison; she can feel him looking for her gaze. "Get out of here," he yells at his sisters, with maybe a little too much force. They scatter, running to the kitchen to cry at their mom.

"Look, Alison, I know this is going to sound terrible but there's no other way to

say it." He pauses, trying to concentrate on thinking before he speaks. "It's just, it's been five months."

He almost can't look her in the eyes, but forces himself. He's pleading with her. But "it's been five months" and they still can't mention what "it" is. He really doesn't know everything like he thinks he does. He really can't sit here and tell her what she should or shouldn't be doing. He has no idea. And then, "We have to do things to continue with our lives."

She feels like a little kid, the steady throb of "It's not fair" drumming in her head. And how are "we" included in this? It's not his mother that left without explaining why—if there is an explanation. It's not his father that drags him out to some fake grave every night so he can stand there and watch him change the nature of his pain to something more normal. Ordinary. What a word—something that really has nothing to do with Alison's life.

"Jon, I think I'd like to be alone for a while." She's firm but quiet, not trembling or about to cry.

He folds his arms tight against his chest, looking for something in the carpet below him. "Alison." He pauses. "You know I love you." He drops his arms loose, palms open and facing the ceiling. "Why can't you ever just let someone help you? You think you have to do everything on your own?" He looks away, knows he's accusing. "Just go ahead and go. I'm sorry." He's breathing very quickly like he could just start crying or screaming if she doesn't leave right now.

So they walk to the door; he puts his hands on her shoulders and kisses her goodbye. His mom calls from the kitchen: "But you're not leaving already, Ally, honey? We haven't even eaten," and it's all Alison can do to keep her voice level. "Some other time, Mrs. Joseph. I have to get home now."

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"Back when Alison's mom was alive, we began turning our humble home into what you now know as 'The Breeze Inn.' It'd always been a dream of Mad and I to show outsiders how beautiful our quiet little state really is, and this seemed like the perfect way.

"And then, right before we opened for our first season of tourists, Madeline left our world." He pauses, looks away. Re-focuses. "It came as a complete surprise to everyone, and after much pain and doubt, Alison and I decided to keep her mother's dream alive.

"I have such a good little helper here. She's my angel. In these trying times I turn to the Lord, yes, and He has blessed me with the best daughter you could ever imagine."

Playing his audience, Mr. Cain wipes his eyes with the corner of a handkerchief and puts a stiff, farmer's arm around Alison. New guests have just arrived from Maryland and this is the little speech he always gives before showing them to their rooms. The hand-holding couple shifts uneasily in their wrinkled traveling clothes and pulls a little tighter, looking around for their room.



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The flashlight and the moon are enough to see by, tonight, and memory leaves her with the rest. Alison runs through the woods, the same path, free from following her father and pretending in his purpose. Maybe it's the way air rushes when you run, but it feels light and quick instead of the usual thick load. She can run faster.

Suddenly then Alison hits the clearing, almost falling out through tree trunks into the pocket of air around the pond. She stops herself, not hiding anything in her voice, whatever animal-cries and pants that seem most natural just now. And this time she does drop to her knees, but not to pray. She takes the small trowel from her pocket and digs, turning earth and disrupting things and scraping around the stone until she can pull it. Stretching, grunting, free and up and out where she tosses it, surprisingly light, to splash and sink in the water.

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He's waiting in the kitchen, she knew he would be, but it doesn't matter anymore. He sits at the table in the dark, his usual place facing the porch and the back door, and there's no reason for her to close the door softly. "You went without me?" he asks, hurt at being left behind.

She's waiting for him to beg, to cry, to plead that she should stay always with him and never leave and continue this lie, or truth. But he doesn't move or make a sound. He doesn't drop his head into his hands and moan about loss. She wants to wound him some more, because she can. "I guess I've decided to leave," she says, realizing as she says the words that this really is the conclusion she's come to. "I am sorry..." to be leaving him in the inn alone, but not really about anything else.

He sits in the stony silence, perfect posture, until his back bends and he does put his head in his hands.

Some time later there's new work to do, new paintings. While she's brushing her teeth Alison hears him drag the box of old pictures from the hall closet, childhood photos of Alison, happy at Grandma's house or in a plastic kiddie pool. He'll be up, working, until morning.

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It's late but Alison has to call Jon, even to wake up his parents, because she has to say good-bye. It's the least he deserves, after today and really every day this summer. On the third ring his mom answers, the tired and worried voice we use to answer late-night calls. Alison breathes in and just hangs up, not exhaling until the phone's back in its cradle. There's just nothing she can do about this right now. She'll call him from Virginia; and then she knows where she's going. The only other family she has; they have to take her. Just until she can think of the next step.

Alison goes up to her room and packs things, not really looking at them, and gets into bed but doesn't sleep all night.



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When you stay awake all night your eyes start to dream without you. There were the leaves and they turned early that Fall. It was huge, the melting of Summer into Fall, green into yellow, orange, red and then finally the dead leaves that fell and blew over the October grass. Got crunched down by early snows in November and December, and then the snow whipped up with the wind in January to burn your cheeks red.

She's not dreaming about her mother, or her father, or even how her life will be starting tomorrow. She's trying not to even think of it. Her eyelids twitch and drop and all she can do is pull them wide to keep them open. There's a man who has knelt at a small pond near Fayetteville, West Virginia every night since the beginning of summer. He continues; the cold of winter doesn't matter. He tends two small graves and never looks up from his busy work, eyes closed in the dark. It's always so dark. When he gets up he feels his way through the woods guided by his feet, his memory, the light like a painting.

—Lyn Tramonte '98