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## A Good Collection of Seashells

*“Overall, you can think about the brain as both soup and spark, depending on what you measure and where—much the same way that photons of light are both waves and particles.”*

*-Sam Kean, *The Tale of the Dueling Neurosurgeons**

It was the day that Danielle decided she needed to find Lisa that the black dog began to follow her. She wasn't quite sure if it was real; when she went to get fifty-cent coffee from the gas station it suddenly walked in with her and no one yelled, no one told her dogs weren't allowed. Its breath was hot against her thigh and occasionally it nudged the palm of her hand with its nose, asking for a pet.

She knew where Lisa lived; she'd looked her up in the phone book at the post office before the clerk behind the countertop could notice her. She hoped that her cousin had the regular, boring job she'd always intended on having and that subsequently her work schedule was regular and boring. She was twenty-three now, Lisa would be twenty-four. She wasn't totally sure that Lisa knew she had been in the same city for the last four months, but she also imagined Lisa drinking cocktails and dinner parties and knew her path probably did not cross down into the slums below Davidson Street. Danielle had arrived in the heat of the summer via a trucker who bought her a grilled cheese sandwich and a strong black coffee before dropping her off. Now it was getting cold, and Danielle realized that if she couldn't work up the courage to face Lisa, the winter would force her to. But she had realized it was more the blow to her pride she didn't want to take. Danielle had sworn to never talk to her family again, to leave and never look back, the way they did in the

movies. And then came the homelessness, the harsh, outdoor winters and useless job hunts and fear and loneliness and now, after six years, Danielle had finally realized she needed help and she hoped that Lisa, with all her sensibility and ease and comfort, would be able to provide it. So Danielle decided that morning that she would, somehow, make her way to her cousin.

She considered calling Lisa's apartment or work, but found each time she came to a phone booth that her knees gave out. She considered breaking in as well, but realized that she didn't know how high up the apartment was, she just had the building location. Finally, she decided that the best method was going to have to be simply showing up and waiting on the stoop and (hopefully, if Lisa was forgiving) have a place to sleep that night.

And within an hour the black dog started following her.

She figured Clark would know what to do about the dog. Clark lived in a soon-to-be condemned building in a room with high ceilings and windows and proclaimed himself the wizard of 56<sup>th</sup> street. Danielle only half believed him. He had a messy flap of dirty hair hanging in his eyes and he could have been as young as she was or as old as eighty. He always smelled like cigarettes and weed and it seemed like he never slept—she had once knocked on his door in the early, early hours of the morning and he had greeted her with a smile and told her he was glad, because he had been roasting hot dogs and he was afraid he wouldn't be able to eat them all himself. He was intensely homosexual. He had maybe a total of six teeth in his entire head.

When Danielle arrived she had been lucky enough to discover Clark right away, although the way he put it he had sussed her out using a crystal ball. "I always know when I have a new baby," he said. If anyone would know if the black dog was real or not, it would be Clark.

She knocked on his door three times. "You always have such good timing!" he said, flinging the door open. "I'm making lasagna!" It was around eleven o'clock in the morning. The apartment smelled like tomatoes.

"I think I'm going to find Lisa," she said. "I know where she is."

He didn't seem at all fazed, instead nodding his head sagely and turning on the oven light to see the food. "Which one is Lisa?"

"My cousin."

“On which side?”

“Mom’s.”

Clark let out a semi-delighted noise. Danielle shrugged out of her coat. “I think you should, girl. Maybe Lisa’s got witch in her, too.” He always lingered on the last few syllables of each sentence.

Danielle leaned against the counter, but the black dog was standing between her and the island countertop and she nearly tripped over him. “No, she’s boring. And I’m not a witch?”

Clark rolled his eyes and waved his hand at her. He hadn’t said anything about the black dog, had not registered its presence at all. Danielle traced the outline of the tiles with her thumbnail and allowed herself to feel hungry. Hunger had been a dull constant over the six years since she’d left home, although her mother (and Lisa) would probably say that she had run away. There had been some melodrama when she had left; before she’d gotten out of the state she’d seen her mother on the televisions of the shithole cafes she tried to steal food from. It was always on silent, and she never heard what was said.

“Ah-ha!” Clark whipped the lasagna out of the oven with the flourish of a matador in front of a bull. “It’s *beautiful*,” he said.

It was burnt at the edges and watery in the middle, but Danielle ate a piece and it tasted like heaven. She did not mention the black dog, but she thought she saw Clark look at it and away very suddenly. But he could have just been glancing around the room.

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In some house in a field outside of the city a cannibal had been arrested. His girlfriend hadn’t gone to work for a week. They found her in a bathtub. He’d been using her skull as a cereal bowl, scooping out her brains, scraped her eyeballs out of their sockets. They found him in a hall closet clutching a handful of her teeth and sobbing. He was insane. He didn’t know where he was or who he was. Lisa was watching the story play out in the break room, eating a Cup O’Noodles. Big winter thunderstorms were beginning to roll through. The rain was cold and biting. She took off her heels and placed her feet near the heater to get them to warm up—she hadn’t been expecting rainfall and it had soaked through her shoes and her pantyhose and her toes had been painfully cold all morning. The newscaster was a blonde. Her hair didn’t move as she

turned her head back and forth, mediating between a psychologist and a representative from the police force.

“Can you believe this?” someone said. Lisa raised her eyebrows, only half-interested. She worked as the assistant to a literary agent and had received a last-minute assignment of four manuscripts and was now editing the last, marking lines through with a purple pen. She had to travel soon, too, to a conference and then later to visit a friend and she needed to get her ticket. She *just* didn’t care about cannibals.

“There’s more of those now, too,” someone else responded, a few moments later. There was a news report of another attack by stray dogs, packs of them like cartoon wolves wandering the streets and ripping through ankles and shins. Lisa raised her eyebrows again and officially decided that the author had not used the word “cornucopia” correctly.

And it was sentence structure she was thinking about when she exited the metro after work, in the early evening, and alighted onto the sidewalk. She had been chewing on the function of a semi-colon.

She did not see God. She normally managed to side-step him whenever she came upon him—he had a bad habit of standing extremely close and loudly grunting “Gimme a dollah!” to anyone that stepped into his path. He had been named God as a joke—Mark had been the one to point him out as the two of them ducked into a coffee shop. “Holy shit,” Mark had said. “It’s that guy again. It’s like he’s God or something, he’s fucking everywhere.” And he was, and normally at the worst Lisa would only have to endure a moment or two of him before he lost interest, but today was different, God was different.

He was stumbling around the entrance of the metro growling something at the passengers that came up to the top step. It was when he got close that Lisa realized he was saying “Good morning!” and he was grunt-shouting it, peeling his lips back so that all of the pointed teeth he owned were displayed, like a silverback gorilla. Made uncomfortable, people sped up their pace, averted their eyes. But Lisa walked full-on into him, distracted as she was, and he pushed her away and she snapped back into the present. She was opened her mouth to say something, but then saw him and suddenly she was very deeply afraid. She was not normally scared by any homeless in the city, however odd they might be. There was one woman that stood at the bottom of the stairs in the metro and called out to her each time she passed, a long and mournful sound that didn’t really sound like words so much as it did like song. She was missing an eye. Another was a

burn victim who wandered up and down the subway cars, trying to get passengers' attention by displaying his hands, both of which were missing all fingers.

But it was his eyes. He had done something during the night, taken something, and the irises were thin, watery lines around his dilated pupils. But the whites of his eyes were bright, neon-colored fuchsia and they were leaking water and his papery skin was folded around them—not wrinkled into laugh-lines, but folded, as if his eyes had been stuck into a paper doll. Lisa knew suddenly that these were not human eyes, these were predator eyes, these were the eyes that always hung disembodied in a black, blank space in horror movies.

Without thinking, she stuck out her hand, her arm at full length, barring him. And God stopped, blinked, and turned away. Lisa felt herself shaking, but it was as if she was not connected with her hand, with her body, as if it was happening a world away.

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Lisa's grandmother had written a series of letters and there were few things Lisa really knew about her grandmother the summer before she turned nineteen but she knew, in the way that she knew her alphabet and religion, an ingrained knowledge, that *these letters were not to be touched*. When her mother finally suggested that they look through them, Lisa experienced a reverent, muted shock, the kind experienced by the communion recipients who watched the priest change a thin white wafer to heart-flesh.

The letters were always kept in a blue box in the hall closet. Her mother stretched onto the balls of her feet to reach the box, hooking the forefinger of her right hand through the slotted hand-hold and pulling it down. Lisa watched. Her mother walked the box to the kitchen table, slid the lid off, and began to sift through them. They were all brown and yellow, thin as the pages of a Bible and covered in a neat, clean hand. They were each folded carefully into their envelopes; only a few floated along the bottom of the box unsealed. Lisa lifted one out and balanced it along her fingertips. They were the only remaining things kept of her grandmother, aside from a single photograph. Lisa only knew that she had been reed-thin and quiet. And she was dark, as black as the *National Geographic* photos of African tribes, skin that seemed to be a folded piece of the blank spaces between stars. And her name was Annie.

Annie had been a nurse at an inner city hospital called St. Medard's. St. Medard's was known to be equivalent to an insane asylum; homeless black schizophrenics, Latinos with split personalities, poor white women with piles of children, all found their way to St. Medard's, and to Annie. And Annie began to write letters, with her patients, with her colleagues, about the streets and its scores of poor and tired, and these letters now lived in a box.

Because, as quietly as she could, Annie had left—a fish slipping below the surface of the water. No note, no reason. She was not murdered, she was only gone. But Lisa knew that it was the silence that was the hardest—the fact that Annie had looked at her two daughters and her husband and had somehow deemed them unworthy or too much time. That she would have looked at her children and dropped them off at school and simply driven off, making a left turn and not a right, out onto the road. Knowing Lisa's grandfather would have to pick up their kids, that the three of them would limp home and take down all the photos, save one, of Annie. And now there was forgetting. Lisa watched her mother's face as she spoke and skimmed through the box and it was unreadable.

She told Danielle about it that evening, biking over from her house. They were lying on the bed listening to music coming from a tinny blue boombox, a leftover from their childhood.

"I've always wondered why she jumped ship," Danielle said. "Jeanine doesn't talk about it, either." Danielle had recently started calling her mother by her name. Danielle had developed a certain harshness, she seemed suddenly jaded and older than she was, no longer interested in finding life romantic or kind. She only seemed to see harsh, sharp corners everywhere she went. Lisa chalked it up to teenage moodiness. Lisa had never been the brooding sort; she thought herself much more mature. And so she considered Danielle with a little touch of pity and said, "Maybe it all just got too sad. But I still don't know why *leaving* was the answer."

Danielle rolled onto her side. "Maybe at a certain point leaving is the only option." Lisa pursed her lips. Exactly three months later, Jeanine would call, frantically, wondering if they had seen Danielle at all, if they knew where she was, and everyone would collectively realize that Danielle had run away, but in the moment Lisa was only annoyed that Danielle would give such a melodramatic, cliché response.

“Nothing’s ever so bad, Danielle,” she said. Danielle said nothing, just left the room. A few moments later Lisa heard water running and Danielle splashing hot water on her face.

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Danielle heard about the cannibal over a radio broadcast on the bus. She’d spent a dollar on the bus fare and was feeling it like a wound in her brain. She just needed to get past 76<sup>th</sup> and she would be there. She imagined seeing Lisa, wondering if she would have cut her hair. She imagined her mother and aunt hearing that she had resurfaced. For the first few days after she had run she imagined what her parents were doing and it had sustained her—she returned to it now. She liked to imagine her mother and father’s growing panic as the weeks stretched on, and then the months. She liked to imagine the cores of their bodies becoming slowly hollow.

After they left Clark’s the black dog began whining. It was becoming more insistent, more annoying. It kept tugging at her clothes with its mouth, biting her fingertips. She wanted absolutely nothing more than for it to go away, but she had a vague sensation that it was trying to help her. “Do you really want food?” she asked it and it perked its ears. It wasn’t a scary dog, and it had soft brown eyes and a little bit of white around its mouth and ears. She had been steadfast in her attempts to ignore it and make it go away, but she supposed that it was, after all, a living creature and since it was a dog it could probably eat human food. She had maybe twenty dollars on her. She considered begging for chump change but decided that it would be easier just to pay, just this once. She’d already had a free meal.

So she stopped at the nearest convenience store and, on finding nothing interesting, eventually settled for a few strings of jerky and a pack of gummy worms. The dog ate the jerky in three big gulps and wagged its tail at her. A woman walking into the store looked at her strangely and Danielle again had the feeling that no one else could see the dog but her, that maybe she was just dropping food onto the ground.

Now the two were riding the bus up to Lisa’s neighborhood. The buildings were steadily getting cleaner, more colorful. She imagined that up here fall was a pleasant season; that winter was sweet and white and warm. She chewed on a thumbnail and listened to the radio. Just scooping out some dead girl’s brain.

“It’s crazy, is what that is,” said the bus driver to no one, really. Danielle smiled and agreed.

It was in the late afternoon and early evening that she arrived outside of Lisa's building. The street was clean, only a few tan cigarette butts gathered at the sewer grates. The sky looked like an artist had dripped paint into water. It was just bordering on the kind of biting cold that froze fingertips. The black dog seemed agitated, pacing back and forth behind her as she tried to gauge her next move. It started barking and growling, upset. Danielle turned to shush it.

And saw Lisa walking up the sidewalk, harried-looking.

Lisa slowed and stopped short when she saw who it was, a flicker of unfamiliarity and then a sudden look of raw and panicked horror.

Danielle made to snatch at the dog but it turned and butted up against her in one swift, single shoving force, knocking her down.

She cried out and saw Lisa lunge forward.

She hit her head on the sidewalk and saw a bright galaxy of stars before velvet blackness.

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It was at the lake when they were fourteen that Lisa finally declared, triumphantly, that she had lost her virginity.

Danielle had been rightfully shocked, and had demanded to know exactly what had happened, and with who, and when.

"It was a boy at camp, and it was real special," Lisa said, hugging the felt blanket to her chest. "We lit candles and drank wine and then suddenly, I mean, you just *know*, you know?"

Danielle thoughtfully tapped the side of her Diet Coke can. "Yeah, that's what everyone says. But come on, what did you do? Did you do anything like, besides just have sex? You must have, you're supposed to anyway otherwise you have to use lube and I heard that causes infections."

Lisa smirked and said, "Ew, Danielle, I would never tell *you*." Danielle laughed and hit her with a white pillow.

Lisa's heart was pounding—she was lying. She hadn't even been kissed yet and she had only a vague idea of what Danielle was talking about when she said "other stuff." She was desperately hoping that

Danielle wouldn't ask the mystery boy's name, because Lisa hadn't gotten far enough along in her story to come up with one.

Danielle stretched out to her full length and said, "Did you have to buy condoms? I thought you guys were all far out in the woods?"

"I mean, he had some," Lisa said, realizing quickly she needed to sound smart about this, she needed to give this imaginary boy an imaginary intellect—of course she would only have slept with someone who knew how, because his intelligence implied that she was now friends with people who had these kinds of experiences and who traded them amongst each other. "But I'm not even worried. Sarah told me you don't get pregnant the first time."

Danielle nodded her agreement and Lisa resented that, resented that Danielle would pretend to be a part of this club Lisa had placed herself in. It was, in fact, Danielle who forced this lie, with her constant stories about boys leaving notes in her locker, between the pages of her books, who she kissed and even, on more than one occasion, "made-out with," which all sounded both slobbery and romantic. It was a little ridiculous, really, that Danielle should be the one to experience all things first; they were both equally pretty, equally popular, equally everything. So Lisa savored her little moment of victory, because now Danielle would have to refer to *her*, and even if that meant a little extra research, she was the knowledgeable one now. Danielle leaned back, looking contemplative. Lisa turned onto her side, jealousy cooling in her stomach.

Later that day they would make Kool-aid popsicles and go swimming, and Danielle wouldn't mention Lisa's imaginary escapade again, only whispered and giggling stories on the beach about the school dance three months earlier and a boy named Derek something and how he had bit her lip and made her bleed. Their mothers would suggest the pseudo-Italian restaurant in town and their fathers would agree and all the stars would align, finally, in exactly the right order, in which Lisa blossomed sooner, faster, and longer and Danielle slipped into dank, virginal obscurity.

Because that was really the sum total of all Lisa wanted of Danielle—for her and her beauty to understand, to see how much all of Danielle's puzzle-piece parts could still not add up to Lisa's own vastness, how much she wanted Danielle to please, please, please *go away*.

But that was when they were fourteen.

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Lisa didn't see the few moments before, she had simply looked up, seen Danielle, and then it looked like Danielle's knees simply gave out, buckled together. Lisa tried to catch her cousin before her head hit the pavement, but was too late. It hit hard, with a sharp, sickening cracking sound. Danielle's eyes were wide open, they darted from side to side and up and down, they were full of animal panic, fear that lay in the instinctual base of the limbic system, and Lisa was reminded of newborn babies and how their eyes flicker around in moist confusion and how her mother told her that it meant they were seeing angels. She was too thin and her hair was greasy and limp around her face, her coat was stained and synthetic feathers were poking out of the seams. Lisa lifted her up, telling her to stay *the fuck* awake.

And suddenly Lisa felt that something was tugging at her pant leg, pulling her down onto her knee. She turned to swat at whatever it might be, but found nothing.

Danielle leaned heavily into Lisa and Lisa shuffled them both toward the door, and for not the first time ever, Lisa wished she lived in a fancy apartment building with a doorman who would help her with things like suitcases and wayward cousins. They went up the stairs, only two flights, and Lisa was able to prop Danielle along the wall. She wasn't entirely sure how conscious Danielle really was; her face and eyes were filmy. Lisa managed to get the door open, heel-toe her cousin over to the couch and finally reached into her purse, and found, with no small amount of anger, that her water bottle had opened up inside and flooded the contents. The ball-point ink in her planner was running across sheaves of receipts, wetting the edges of her folders, and had soaked her cell phone.

Danielle was on her back, Lisa didn't know if that was good or bad. She remembered someone telling her that people drowned in their own vomit that way. Without much grace, she managed to manhandle Danielle onto her side, her head lolled over and her eyes were half-lidded, heavy looking.

Lisa wiped the screen of her phone on her sleeve and pressed the power button, praying. The screen flickered on and before it could try and really be broken, she punched in the emergency number. A cheery operator got her information, his voice full of trained relaxation and confidence. Her cousin had fallen and hit her head, she said, she may be on drugs or maybe she hasn't eaten (*but she is a fucking moron*, was the thought that was omitted from her report, *so if you could please take fucking care of that*) and the operator reassured her that an ambulance was on the way. And Lisa, hating herself a little for it, found immense

comfort in his general unaffected attitude, because her heart was pounding and her fingers were shaking and she found that she had gripped Danielle's wrist in the vice of her right hand. The water on the phone, black with ink, had dripped down along her jaw line and pooled in the hollow of her throat. She was scared.

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Danielle finally came to when she felt the black dog licking her nose and mouth. She wiped at its muzzle, pushing it away, and opened her eyes, re-focusing, trying to see where she was. The apartment was lit up in yellows and beiges; the couch beneath her was green. She sniffed once, feeling her eyes start to water, as if she had been holding them open for hours. Her head was pounding. And the black dog was sniffing her elbow, its tail wagging. She had the vague feeling she was in Clark's apartment, before she saw Lisa sitting at her feet. She raised her hand in a weak salute. Lisa looked up. "Oh, Jesus Christ," she said.

"I thought I would make an entrance," Danielle said. She shoved herself into a seated position and the black dog took the opportunity to lean its jaw on her knee. She scratched its right ear.

"An ambulance is coming," Lisa said. She made no move to help Danielle up. "You need to get your head checked. You could have a concussion. You fell really hard." Her expression was a study in neutrality.

Danielle felt a quickening in her lower stomach. "Well, cancel it, I guess," she said.

"No."

"We could drive."

"No."

Danielle huffed a little and crossed her arms. "Look, I didn't know I was on your street, ok? I'm not here to bother you." Her lie was a weak one and Lisa barely paid it any attention.

"You're going, and you're probably going to get your stomach pumped because clearly whatever it is you are on nearly killed you, and then we are going to call Jeanine and you can deal with that on your own."

Danielle started shaking. Her head was pounding, she thought she could feel the pulse of each vein in her temples and she put her fists to her eyes and rocked back and forth. She felt her mouth forming words. She didn't want to see Jeanine; she didn't want to go to the hospital. As much as she hated to admit it, Lisa was right. She didn't know what cocktail of drugs was circulating through her system at the moment and she felt weak and her head *fucking hurt* and the last thing she needed was Lisa, and finally she began to really realize how bad of an idea it was to have come here. She didn't know why she wanted to talk to Lisa; the

floor was falling away from her feet and she felt herself slipping down and down and down. The black dog tried to lick her face. Somewhere out in the many parallel universes Danielle knew there was another version of herself who was not living this moment, who was not falling down amongst all the many galaxies in her head.

“Oh grow up, Danielle,” Lisa said. She felt her chest hollowing out and, rather startlingly, found herself mentally staring into God’s eyes again. She should call Mark. He would know what to do, with his big hands and soft way of moving about the world. She slid closer to Danielle and rubbed her hand across her back, feeling the bumps of her spine and the gaps between her rib bones, the sharp corners of her shoulder blades. Danielle was swatting at something, wiping the air beside her mouth, and Lisa felt hot tears puddle up in the corners of her eyes. She thought about the first week after Danielle disappeared, how Jeanine and Tom rolled their eyes and said she was probably at a friend’s. And then the second week, and the third. She remembered posting pink and green flyers on telephone poles and in offices and had even given testimony at a press conference while Aunt Jeanine, thin and sick-looking, clutched her arm and nodded along as if hypnotized. And she had said all of the usual things and hadn’t been entirely sure if she meant any of them, and finally, with Danielle in front of her, she realized that she had, for the last six years, deeply missed her, missed her brokenness and hardness and her odd secrets.

And that was why she didn’t know what to do. She could either call Jeanine and Tom right away, before the day ended, or she could not. She knew they would be on the next available flight, that they would be waiting to ambush Danielle, and these were the things she knew would happen.

But she could not—she couldn’t motivate herself to click her phone open and find Jeanine’s number and she felt terribly ashamed about it. Part of her did not want Jeanine and Tom to know that their months and years of worrying and waiting and wondering had been entirely in vain, and that Danielle had never been lost, only unwilling to be found. And part of her, a part deep inside, sitting next to her pelvic bones, felt that there was something that Danielle was not saying, a truth that was not shared, something awful and evil and so jagged that it had gone inside her cousin’s brain and cut it all into pieces.

“Danielle,” she said, and paused, overcome with the sensation that she was just now understanding something, found herself wiping away a tear, of all things, “why did you leave?” There it was. Danielle had

not run away, because running away meant that she was at fault. Danielle had left, because something had made her leave. Had made her turn left and not right. Back home.

The black dog leaned heavily against her side and Danielle felt the bones in her legs all turn to acid. She had a movie reel she had played in her head since her leaving, of her parents scooped out and open, folded in along themselves.

“Mom cheated,” she said, and Lisa felt an anticlimactic *whump*.

“That’s it?”

“No.” Danielle lifted her face up to Lisa’s. She was still beautiful, still dark and feline and so terribly empty. “Mom cheated because Dad started to hit her. And then she got pregnant. And when she found out she tried to hide it. But Dad found *it*. In the trash.” Danielle made a motion with her hands, like she was holding something. “And he beat her. And he kicked her stomach. He killed it. I had to help her. I held it in my hands. She and I had to bury it. And I hated them both.” Danielle’s face had remained heavy and her hands had formed a cup in which Lisa could imagine a small white soul, like a cloud, foaming over her fingertips. She shook her head, trying to picture it all, trying to see her aunt and uncle clearly in her head, and found that their faces slipped away from the mental ribbons she sent to them. She thought about her mother.

And she thought about going to a party with Danielle when they were wandering around their teenage-hood, about finding bright pills stuffed into one of Danielle’s pink socks, cast aside on the floor. She saw in her mind Danielle pull them out of her jacket pocket before they got out of the car. She saw the lights from the house pool across the lawn and she saw thin bodies packed tightly into the rooms. “Do you want one?” She saw it cupped in her cousin’s hand like a small, precious pink world. She shook her head. She saw Danielle’s eyes flick up to the house and she saw her cousin bring her hand, fast, like she was going to slap herself, up to her mouth and she saw her swallow the pill with a slick shot of whiskey. And she thought about when Danielle had crashed a car, how she and her mother had leapt up and gone to the house, how Tom had struggled into jeans. His fly was down. Jeanine was snatching keys and her purse and sunglasses even though it was two in the morning and flipping a coat around like a cape. Their eyes were bulging. Their bodies flicked from corner to corner like flies. And these things were all that she saw.

“This isn’t true,” she said. “You’re not telling the truth.” But Lisa knew, deeply and intimately, that Danielle was not lying.

Danielle looked at her and all Lisa saw was a pool of kinked fury. Danielle got up went out of Lisa’s line of sight and soon, from down the hall, she heard water running. Danielle was washing her face. Lisa touched the silence in the room. It was palpable, like felt.

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“Why do you have these?”

Lisa looked up. She had called the emergency number again; the ambulance was still on its way. Evidently there were a lot of accidents today. Lisa had allowed herself a moment of righteous and ill-informed frustration about healthcare. Danielle was holding the blue box. She was looking at her, accusing. Her hair was wet and its curl was beginning to spring up around her face again. “What’s happened to your mom?”

Lisa settled herself back into the chair where she had, at last, decided to plant. “Mom’s sick.”

“With?”

“She has cancer, Danielle. She’s very sick.”

Danielle didn’t say anything for a moment. The black dog had slept on the floor while she had run her hands under hot, burning water, splashing it along her face and neck. It didn’t seem to mind the build-up of steam and the mugginess of the bathroom. Danielle found herself wondering if her grandmother, as dark as she was, would have liked it that her descendents were the daughters of white men.

“I’m sorry.” And she was, and she felt something heavy in her heart, because she did love her aunt, and she did love her cousin. And she felt a huge canyon between herself and Lisa and she felt Annie’s shadowy presence pulsing from the box through the palm of her hand, as if she would have answers. “Do you mind if I read these?”

Lisa gave a half-hearted wave. “No.”

Danielle disappeared back into the hallway, down to Lisa’s bedroom.

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The letter was nothing particularly special. It was one of the final that she had read, the black dog curled in at her feet. But she read it and found herself crying. It was from a patient of Annie's who believed he lived on an island. Her head was pounding.

*Hello! I hope you speak English otherwise this is very awkward! I've found myself stranded. Wish I could give you my longitude and latitude but the machine's all broken now and I've not a screwdriver in sight. Anyway I hope you're doing well and since I'll be here for a while I was hoping you and I could write to each other! No worries about me receiving it—all currents lead to here. In fact, if you could go without food or water for a good long while and float on your back you, too, would wind up in this place, which I for one would enjoy greatly, as I'm sure your company is not only intellectually stimulating, but emotionally satiating as well!*

*Anyway, I'm fine. I catch all the little fish that wash up in the tide pools here and I've a good collection of seashells going. I've gotten quite a bit thinner too! No desire to go back to fast food anytime soon!*

*Currently researching the many types of dragonflies present on this island—at least 245 different species and some are even phosphorescent! At night they come out of the trees and participate in a wide and varying display of mating rituals, and all their bodies blinking and glowing make me feel as though I am watching the rising and falling of infinite stars.*

*I hope your life is as beautiful as this, my new friend, and am awaiting your response with eager anticipation. Hope to hear from you within the next few months.*

*Yours,*

And there was no name.

She felt scooped out, as if that cannibal had cracked through her sternum and swung her rib cage open, was parsing through her lungs. She remembered a distant conversation with Clark over bowls of salty, lukewarm soup. “Did you know the brain is as malleable as an avocado?” she had said.

“Good thing you're brain's just a sack of rocks.”

“Really though. Scientists just scoop it out with spoons.”

Her vision was growing blurry and the colors were starting to switch around so the sky looked green and Lisa's bedroom floor looked purple. She really, really, couldn't breathe. And the black dog was looking at her with its head cocked.

She reached down to pet it, and it was as if its fur was the night sky. Flecks of stars formed before her eyes. The dog was whining at her. Its left eye turned as milky white as the moon and she felt herself falling down into it, dipping through the dog's skull and she saw the thousand galaxies of its brain film past her. She heard Clark's voice through water, her aunt's, Lisa's. Maybe they were shouting. She plunged her arms deep into the dog's fur, and the dog reached down, licked her hand.

She heard someone singing, and the voice was deep and low. It rang and echoed and she thought that maybe it was her mother, but realized soon that it sounded too much like leaving, too much like stars.

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When the paramedics finally arrived Lisa would show them to the back hall, where she had assumed Danielle was reading or napping.

The window was open, and outside it Lisa would hear God's undeniable war cry, "Gimme a dollah!" He would have managed to come all the way over here.

Lisa would see Danielle, would feel her chest heave, and then collapse. The paramedics would spring to action, unclipping plastic tubs full of creams and electricity and knives and gauze. Mark would come, and with his big hands he would take the sheets outside, to the street, and deposit them carefully in a dumpster, like the body of a child were wrapped within. Lisa would hear herself screaming and screaming. Danielle's eyes would be open, her hand loosely holding a torn piece of paper. She would look as if, from a long distance off, she had seen a friend, and that they were calling her home.