


We Cultivate the Fog

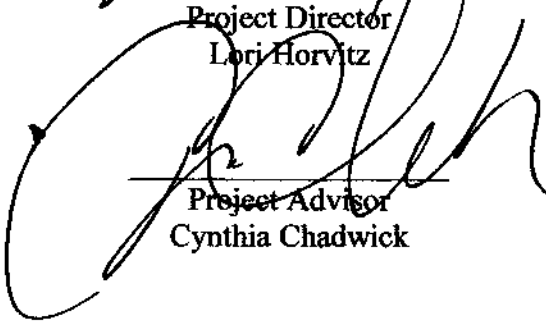
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We Cultivate the Fog

The following chapters constitute the first section of a three-part novella. The work as a whole focuses on a young woman (Poppy) and her turbulent inner journey, following the death of her family until the day of their funeral. Poppy's relationship with her brother, while still close, had been gradually eroding beneath their mother's burgeoning drug problem, and the abrupt ending of this relationship leads her into a dark self-inventory of blame, guilt, and unhappiness. She realizes that these visions of her brother are keeping her from acknowledging reality; when faced with a double funeral, she is forced to accept only one truth. Trauma and illness come together to complicate her experience, producing persistent hallucinations which deny her brother's death. Throughout the work, her delirious symptoms (distorted perceptions of time, emotional lability, and fluctuating degrees of consciousness) work as a surrealist contrast alongside passages of clarity, to create an unusual and distinctive perspective on loss. The novella examines how the protagonist comes to accept her mother's faults and shortcomings, emerging from this bizarre experience with a realization of how cycles of denial and alienation have shaped not only her own character, but also the characters of those she knows and loves.

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We Cultivate the Fog

1

I clutched my knees to my chest, pressed my cheek against the cool floor, and just breathed. The smell of disinfectant, the familiar scent of harsh cleanliness, seared through my sinuses. Jason's voice broke the silence; I hadn't even realized he was home.

"Shit. You scared me, Poppy. Why are you laying on the kitchen floor like some crazy woman?" He leaned over me, backlit by the soft yellow light seeping through the curtains over the kitchen window. His disheveled hair shone golden against the morning sunshine, glowing like a painted-on halo as he squatted and extended a hand.

I knew better than to trust in the wholesomeness of this angelic vision. My brother was the sort of kid who would laugh as he let you go so you fell back on your ass.

"I—I honestly don't remember," I said. With a shrug, I rose to my feet on my own. "I'm just exhausted I guess."

"So you're laying on the floor... and you're not sure why. Like a crazy woman,"

he said.

A smile flashed across his lips. I almost missed it. But then he threw his arms around me, and squeezed until I was short of breath. He'd gotten even taller since last winter. My face pressed against his sternum, I guessed he must have been well over six feet now. And his shirt smelled like a swamp.

"Okay, I missed you too!" I squeaked.

He released me before my ribs cracked. "I didn't expect you home already," he said. "I was still looking for your phone number at your new apartment. Did Gramma call you yet? Where's your car?"

"I caught a ride with Anya. And I just got off the phone with Gramma, actually," I said. "She told me that she saw a story about the accident on the news. I can't believe you didn't call me sooner."

"I meant to, I promise. I was gonna do it last night as soon as I found out, y'know. About Mom. But I wasn't sure how to tell you. Or whether you'd even care," he said. He looked away, running one finger along the polished granite counter.

"Of course I care," I said, trying to hide the disappointment in my voice. "I've been avoiding Mom. Not you. But somebody has to take care of this place, and make sure you go to school and stuff, now that Mom's...gone."

Saying it hurt a little, deep in the pit of my stomach—it made it truer, somehow. Mom was dead, and the last time I'd seen her, I'd made her cry; I'd called her irresponsible after watching her down her meds with vodka. It might have been true, but after I'd said it I wished, as she bawled over the Christmas ham, that I could take it back.

Now I wasn't so sure: she'd left me, of all people, to take care of Jason. Didn't she realize how badly she'd screwed *me* up with her never-ending parade of threats and self-pity? How was I supposed to raise a sixteen year old kid, when the only example I had was her apathetic, absentee brand of parenting?

I looked around the house, comforted for just a moment by its familiar, sparkling cleanliness. From the careful pyramid of fresh fruit in a bowl on the counter, to the color coordinated spice jars aligned in ascending rows, Mom's house still reflected a tasteful, well-ordered life. But one only had to look at her neatly-filed ranks of assorted sedatives, antidepressants, and sleeping pills populating the bathroom counter to understand the insincerity of that façade.

"I'm glad you're here. I've missed you," Jason said.

"I've missed you too. But I haven't missed this place."

Jason gave me a nod which said he understood, more than it said he agreed.

I went to the couch and sat down. No plastic covering crinkled beneath me, a notable absence of this familiar marker of Mom's obsession. The more I looked around, however, the more I noticed other little things out of place, things that were off somehow. Like the kitchen floor. It smelled freshly mopped, bleach-like, but little crumbs stuck to my face where I'd pressed it against the floor. Or Jason's absolutely filthy shorts, which looked as though they had last been washed in a mud puddle. Dirty streaks dashed across the denim, collected in the folds and crevices of the fabric like strange brown tiger stripes on a blue field. A twinge of pain flared in my jaw, where my wisdom teeth used to be. Holding my breath, I waited for it to pass.

Jason must have noticed me staring at his clothes, because he flushed slightly, and defended himself. “Mom doesn’t—wasn’t, I mean—doing my laundry anymore.” He thrust his hands deep inside his pockets.

“So you’ve been washing them outside, with the hose and dirt instead of soap?” I joked.

He didn’t laugh, and instead averted his eyes; I felt a little guilty when he turned away from me.

“I’m kidding, Jay. The fuck do I care?”

“They got washed in the river, actually,” he said, walking toward his bedroom door.

“What?” I called over my shoulder.

He didn’t answer.

“What did you say?”

Still nothing.

“When did you get so sensitive about cleanliness?” I went to his closed door. “I’m sorry,” I said, as I turned the doorknob.

His room, as always, looked like the aftermath of a hurricane. Mountainous piles of empty soda cans, dirty laundry, and at least half a dozen pizza boxes (a conservative estimate, as there were probably more I couldn’t see buried beneath the top layer of garbage) filled the floor, leaving no clear path to the bed. The stained, dull gray mattress was bare, no sheet or blanket, just a pillow hanging off one side. And Jason wasn’t in here.

Confused, I turned around and called his name. Somehow, while my back was turned, the mess had crept out of Jason's room. The realization made me panicky. Heart thumping, sweat pouring panic.

I screamed Jason's name one more time, my eyes roving over the dirty dishes piled high on the coffee table. This incautious straining caused a popping sensation in my jaw, and a warm, metallic sensation spread over my tongue. I must have burst a stitch, where the holes in my soft gums had just been sewn back together. The bad taste and subsequent pain only heightened my incipient sense of dread.

Jason couldn't be here. He'd been in the car with Mom last night. I knew that. My grandmother had said so on the phone. But another part of me fought that idea, insisting that he must have walked outside or something, insisting that what I'd just felt, and heard, and smelled, was more real. I could still feel the pressure of his arms wrapped around me, but the sensation was starting to fade the longer I looked at this unfamiliar, filthy house.

I tried to remember the smell of his shirt. But what kept flooding back was how I'd gotten home yesterday. I'd gotten a ride from my ex; hers was the only number I could remember in the anesthetic stupor after they'd cut out my wisdom teeth. I closed my eyes, and remembered that I'd forgotten to get my antibiotics out of her bag. They might have helped with the fever I now swam through. I let myself sink back into yesterday, trying to make sense out of all this.

Wake up.

I dove deeper, away from the sound.

“Wake up,” Anya said again. She tapped on my knee.

The car was stopped. Why? I opened my eyes. It was pouring, and I wasn't home yet. A few cars idled in front of us, red and blue lights strobing like lightning up ahead. I turned to the driver, my ex-girlfriend, who gripped the steering wheel like she was afraid it might fall off.

I tried to ask where we were, but couldn't feel my face below my cheekbones. What came out of my mouth was not a question, but a mess of wet syllables. They'd given me plenty of Novocain, at least.

“I think that's your mom's car,” Anya said, her eyes never leaving the road ahead.

“Where?” I said, my eyes hardly even open.

“In the river,” she whispered.

I craned my neck, but couldn't see much through the fogged and rain-bleary windshield. My glasses were probably somewhere in my purse; the nurses had insisted I

take my contacts out before they put me under anesthesia. The other cars were turning around, I could tell that much from the blur of taillights.

“We need to talk to the police up there, Poppy,” she said. With that, Anya threw the door open on her side. By the time she got to me, both she and the car seat were drenched. Raindrops ran off the tip of her nose onto my cheek.

I giggled. I wanted to tell her that I could totally see her nipples, but my mushy mouth just flexed uselessly.

“On the count of three. Up.” There was urgency in her voice; she wrapped her arms around my torso, grunting as she hoisted me from the seat.

I wobbled along, with her help, after a few hesitant steps. Her fingers were digging into my arm, though, and it hurt. My shoes filled with muddy water and squelched as she dragged me toward the bridge ahead.

I tried to recall why we had broken up, and I couldn't. Not that it mattered now.

I barely recognized it, but we were at Pearl River, only a few miles from my mom's. A tow truck blocked both lanes of the bridge ahead, chain clanking as it spooled over the sheared-off guardrail. The diesel engine's growl competed with the din of rain and river to drown out whatever the police officer was shouting at us. Anya pulled me off the road, all the way down to the water's edge. The river churned only a few feet from the toes of my sodden sneakers.

Brown water had already swallowed most of the riverbank, and I sank into the soft mud underfoot. At some point, Anya's steadying hand fell away. A vague shape, something large, impeded the river's flow at the opposite bank, and trying to focus on it

made me dizzy. A small white something moved next to it, trapped against the larger dark something. My myopic eyes insisted that it was a chicken, wings outstretched, pressed against half-submerged car. The rear half of the car jutted from the roiling water and the chicken seemed trapped around the antenna, somehow. The dead bird's wings fluttered weakly as the current swept under him. I blinked away the stinging rain in my eyelashes.

The tow truck revved, sudden and deafening; its chain jerked the car slowly upwards. I couldn't quite seem to inhale, like someone squeezing my lungs from inside, as comprehension seeped in. Frankenstein, as my brother and I called it—half primer gray, half rusted maroon, a monstrosity of salvaged body and engine pieces—rose from the murky river, dislodging the chicken and several tree branches which had been entangled in the muffler. The tiny avian body continued downstream, swirling alongside broken tree limbs with amazing speed. Water gushed from the seams of the car, and Anya gasped. Her voice sounded far, far away.

Head spinning, my legs collapsed beneath me. I heard thunder echoing in the distance as I hit the ground.

When I opened my eyes again, rainwater burned in my nostrils and throat. It wasn't falling on me, though, and it took me a moment to understand that I was in the backseat of the police car. A faint, unpleasant odor, long-ago vomit perhaps, wafted off the upholstery. I could only catch snatches of Anya's voice, broken by soft sobs, from the front. My head was too heavy to lift off the seat.

"Miz Whitfield—Dana—her mom... Nine-two-seven Rural Route 8... I have to

work; I can't... her brother..."

It seemed a long time before the cop had anything to say.

When he spoke, his voice filled the car with a deep, warm rumble. "I reckon we'll wait til morning' for the ID. I think it might be best if you took her home and stay with her, so she ain't alone. Just for tonight." He paused, and Anya heaved a sigh.

"You think your friend's okay? She hit the ground pretty hard out there," he continued.

I tried to scream that I definitely *wasn't* okay, for someone to please tell me what the fuck was going on, but my throat was so dry. My faint croak went unheard, so I coughed. I thought my eyes might explode from the pain this caused.

The man in the front seat twisted around, his plastic rain poncho crackling. "Think she's up," he said, nodding at me.

I lifted a leaden hand and clasped my throat. I mouthed the word "water," unsure if my lips were even moving. They were numb, dead dough pasted onto my skull. It worked though; the officer passed a bottle over the seat. I cracked the cap and took a sip in maddening slow motion. Most of it dribbled down my already-soaked shirt. What I did swallow was so cold it hurt, and it made me cough again. My temples throbbed in time with my heart.

"You wanna go to the hospital, miss? The amb'lance ain't left yet." he asked me.

I wobbled my head. No. I needed to get home and sleep. Then I could wake up and this nightmare would be gone.

He turned to Anya, and said something I couldn't hear.

I must have drifted off again after that, because I didn't know how I got back in Anya's car. My forehead pressed against cold glass, I glanced out the window to discover that it was dark now, and the rain had stopped. Anya shook my shoulder, gently, like she was afraid of hurting me. I shivered and pulled the scratchy, unfamiliar blanket tighter around myself.

"We're here Poppy. You're home." She sounded so small.

We tried four different keys before finding the right one to the front door. I stumbled straight to the couch without turning on any lights. I collapsed into it, trying to kick off my shoes only to realize that I wasn't wearing any. Where had they gone? I didn't think about it long; the numbness in my face had spread to my brain. I felt like I'd forgotten something important.

Right as I sank into sleep, that thing happened where your whole body jerks and you wake for just a moment, but then everything fell dark.

I dreamt of rain, everywhere it hit me my skin burned. It made my hair fall out, and Anya made me a wig with thick, black braids.

I'd awoken to the sound of cawing crows outside: a dull pain thudded in the back of my head, my neck stiff from sleeping on the couch. I cracked one eyelid, suddenly tense, startled into being fully awake. Cross-legged in the chair across from me, Anya had been watching me sleep. I remembered her giving me a ride yesterday, but the rest of the day dissolved into a disconnected fog. Something happened; I guess Mom forgot to pick me up. But what was Anya doing here? We'd broken up months ago.

"You're creepy," I said, rolling onto my side. A sharp pain ripped through my head when I opened my mouth. "Fuck," I hissed as I sat up, pressing my fingers lightly against my jaw. "Why are you here?"

"You needed someone to watch you last night. Here, take these. They're for the pain," Anya said, grabbing my hand. She placed two pills into my palm. "Need some water?"

I nodded, and she went to the kitchen to fill a glass. I stared at the smooth curve of her back and down her legs, transfixed by the three inches of soft, tanned flesh between the bottom of her shirt and the top of her shorts. The tap chugged when she turned it on,

and she let it run for a few seconds before I heard the squeaky cabinets opening and closing in rapid succession as she searched for a glass.

I was coated in a slick sweat, having slept directly beneath the window through which hot midmorning sun now poured. It was way too bright in here, I realized, because the curtains were gone. The AC must not be on either, I thought, wiping a hand across my greasy brow.

I hadn't been here since Christmas, and I barely recognized the house I'd grown up in. It was an unbelievable mess: dishes crusty with food and to-go cups filled every available surface, while the floor hid beneath a blanket of papers and wadded up clothes. The place had a dirty sock bouquet to it, a faintly sour stench. Mom must be out of town, because she'd never let it get this dirty. This reminded me more of my brother's room, the door to which, thankfully, stood closed. Surely the smell was emanating from in there, as usual. Jason better wake up soon and start cleaning before Mom came home—this was just foul.

Anya thrust a cup of water at me, sloshing some over the side onto her hand, and I swallowed both pills with one sip. The water wasn't cold, but it felt amazing trickling over my desiccated tongue and throat. I drained the glass and placed it on the coffee table, next to another filled with some mysterious black liquid and a fine layer of green fuzz growing up the sides. I looked up at Anya, who gazed intently at the same dirty glass.

“Sorry the house is such a mess,” I said, “it's not usually like this. My brother's...a slob. Mom must not have been here to clean up after him for a few days or something.”

Anya sat down beside me, pulling her feet up and tucking them underneath her body. She cleared her throat. “You, uh, don’t remember what happened yesterday.” The way her voice rose at the end, it was more a question than a statement.

I shook my head. “I remember you being pissed that I gave the nurse your phone number, when you came to pick me up—which I appreciate, by the way—but it’s all kind of a blur after that.”

She squirmed and looked away. The phone rang, and she jumped up. “I’ll get it,” she said, glancing around the wasteland of garbage. She followed the sound into the kitchen.

I rolled myself off the couch and wandered into the bathroom. Burned out light bulb, I surmised, when nothing happened upon flipping the switch. I left the door open so I wouldn’t trip over anything.

Anya’s voice carried through the house as she answered the phone. “Hello?”

The skin on my face felt a size too small: I caught a glimpse of myself as I passed the mirror. Blotchy purple-red bruises spread from my neck all the way to my eyes, which were almost swollen shut. I poked one puffy cheek, and my finger sank in to an unsettling depth.

“No, she’s fine actually—” The flushing toilet drowned Anya out.

I washed my face without soap and couldn’t find a towel, so I dried it on my shirt. As I did, my elbow knocked a pill bottle off the counter. It rattled as it fell, and the yellow cylinder rolled across the tile. It came to rest in the wedge of sunlight falling in front of the open bathroom door, and I picked it up.

Dana Whitfield. Clonazepam, 3mg. Up to 4x daily as needed for anxiety. The fill date was yesterday—how bizarre, since Mom had clearly not been home for a while. I hoped Jason wasn't refilling her scripts for himself. I'd ask him about it when I got the chance, though I wasn't sure quite how to broach the topic in a casual conversation. 'So, little brother that I obviously love and trust, how's school going, oh and by the way have you been stealing mom's meds?' No. I'd have to find some easier way to bring it up. I should remind him of that story about the time I stole a handful of Valium and almost drowned in the duck pond...

I left the bathroom and plopped down a little too hard on the couch, jarring my jaw. Fireworks tore through my head. Anya was still on the phone, but I guess she heard me whimper because she poked her head out of the kitchen and mouthed *You okay* at me. Though I nodded, I wasn't sure it was true. Pressing my hands against the side of my face helped, but didn't make the throbbing pain go away.

"Mm-hmm... yes, I understand but—no, I *have* to go to work today—well can't you send a cab or something?" She sighed. "I guess I'll have to, then. We'll be there shortly." The phone beeped. She'd hung up without even saying goodbye.

"Who was it?" I called out.

"Officer Brown," she said, walking back into the living room with her arms crossed over her chest.

Why didn't I know that name? I looked up at her and shook my head; I'd drawn a total blank.

"The cop from last night," she said, waiting, I guess for some glimmer of

recognition in my face. Her voice trembled, like she was on the verge of tears. “Are you really gonna make me tell you everything that happened after the dentist yesterday?” She made an odd gulping sound.

An image flashed through my mind, a car rising from water. I dreamed that, though, it was part of that nightmare I’d had about the burning rain...

“Poppy, your mom was in a really bad accident last night—”

But she couldn’t have known about my dream.

“—They found your brother this morning.” She pressed her fingers against her temples. “I have to bring you to the police station. There are papers we—*you*—have to sign. And I have to get to work today, or I’m gonna get fired. So hurry up.”

I asked Anya for a cigarette. She said no. That smoking would give me dry socket, and it would only hurt more. She cried a little after that, that quietly-holding-back kind of crying you only see on actors, where one tear spills out at a time and your face doesn’t even get all squinched up. I’d always hated it when she did that before, but now I was kind of glad for her ridiculous self-control.

The pain pills were finally kicking in, I guess, because I wasn’t feeling much of anything as I searched for a pair of shoes to wear.

There was no traffic on the way into town; we passed one lone tractor headed the other way down Route 15 and nothing else. Uncomfortable silence settled over the car, no radio, no conversation, just the sound of miles rolling by beneath the tires as we passed farm after church after farm along the county road. My sweaty hair stuck, limp, against

my neck after only a few minutes with the windows up, but for some reason I didn't touch the button to roll mine down. It didn't look like it had even rained at all yesterday: the dry earth had sucked it all in, absorbing any traces of the rare midsummer downpour yesterday. But Anya's car had taken on a musty smell; earthy and damp, like a basement.

I struggled to distract myself as we drove. If I thought about it for too long, it might become real. So every time Mom or Jason crossed my mind, I looked out the window and tried to count the cows in the field. Or I thought about whether I'd remembered to leave a check for this month's rent in my landlord's mailbox. Or about the last thing I'd eaten, almost two days ago now (though I wasn't really hungry, I registered that this was quite a while ago.) Had it been a tuna salad sandwich, or pizza? Maybe it was sweet and sour pork...

In spite of my efforts, my mind kept circling back to what the car had looked like, water cascading out of the front end as it surfaced.

Dammit Anya, say something. Please.

I turned on the radio, to ease the vacuum inside the car.

She spoke, finally, just after we'd crossed the third set of train tracks. "Is it this turn, or the next one to get downtown? I can't remember."

"It's this one," I said, without looking.

We parked in front of the police station, which was also the volunteer fire station, and the town hall. Anya shifted into park, and immediately pulled her cell phone out of her pocket.

"Finally. I haven't been able to get a signal—go ahead, I'll be in in just a second. I

just have to call my boss and let her know I'll be late," Anya said. She stuck a cigarette into one corner of her mouth and started mashing buttons. She added, under her breath, "And why I missed work last night."

I glared at her, but she wouldn't make eye contact.

"Yeah, alright," I half-sighed. Why was I was so angry at her? She had no obligation to help me—I hadn't been her problem for a long time. If I hadn't needed her for a ride yesterday we probably never would have seen each other again. I shook my head, a gesture she didn't even see, and climbed out of the car. Bracing myself I suppose, I inhaled deeply and started up the long stairs leading to the entrance.

The police officer at the front desk smiled before she even looked up at me—her face went slack, almost comically, when she saw my swollen bruises. She looked exhausted and ten years older when she stopped smiling.

"Oh dear," she said. "You're the girl who called about that domestic dispute, I s'pose? Let me just find the form, sweetheart." She opened a desk drawer and started shuffling papers inside before I could even answer.

"No, ma'am," I said.

She looked up at me, one eyebrow raised. Rather than explain myself, though, I let her stare.

"Sorry. I thought you were someone else. Well then, how can I help you today Miss?" She slid the desk drawer closed.

"I'm not sure," I said. "There was an incident with my mom last night, down by Pearl River... somebody called this morning, said I needed to come here."

“Aha,” she picked up the black telephone on her desk. “Just a second.”

She pushed a series of buttons then began tapping her long red nails against the desk in a slow drum roll. “Hey, Jimmy. The Whitfield girl’s here.” Listening, I presume, to Jimmy’s response, she pursed her lips and occasionally nodded. “Alright, I’ll send her on back.” Pressing one hand over the mouthpiece she said “Right through there,” indicating a set of double doors behind her.

There were no handles on this side. Turned away from me, phone still pressed against her head, the woman couldn’t see my confusion: I was about to clear my throat to get her attention, but a loud buzz from the other side of the wall stopped me. The door on the left yawned open to reveal an elderly man wearing thick-rimmed glasses and a somber expression.

I stepped through the door.

“Patty Whitfield?” he asked, extending one hand toward me. For some reason, my first thought was of James Earl Jones. Amplified by the building’s high ceiling and hard concrete floor, the man’s sonorous voice possessed a presence of its own, one that didn’t fit the shiny, liver-spotted head to which it belonged. I remembered that voice, the sound like thunder rolling away from me when I’d fainted in the middle of yesterday’s downpour. The last thing I heard before everything went dark.

“It’s Poppy, actually,” I said, shaking his hand. His grip was stronger than I anticipated, and I was afraid for just a second that he might break my fingers if he squeezed any harder.

“Right, sorry. Officer Richard Brown,” he said, finally releasing me.

My hand throbbed in time with my pulse as the circulation returned to normal.

“We didn’t get a chance to acquaint ourselves last night,” he continued. “You were pretty out of it.”

“Yeah, surgery yesterday,” I said, gesturing to my deformed face. Fluorescent lights buzzed over our heads, casting cold illumination over the puce and beige hallway. I could feel the sound in my teeth, a sort of rattling sensation that drilled all the way into my sinuses, and it made me a little queasy. I shouldn’t have taken the painkillers on an empty stomach.

“So your girlfriend said,” he nodded.

“Ex-girlfriend, actually,” I said, knowing I should have stopped myself (*you know he didn’t mean ‘significant other,’ Poppy!*) but unable to do it. I waited for the inevitable change in expression.

Something invariably washed over people’s faces when they realized I was one of *those*, no matter how quickly they pushed the look away. That was just how it worked around here. I made people uncomfortable. Which is why, I supposed, I enjoyed doing it so much. He was no different; I imagined his furrowed-brow response as a physical manifestation of a quick prayer said to save my sinning ass. I could probably expect an invitation to his holy-rolling Baptist church of choice at some point in this conversation.

I continued, pretending I hadn’t noticed. “Anya only showed up because my mom didn’t, and my roommates are all out of town. Hers was the only number I could think of at the time.”

“Mm-hmm.” Obviously searching for a way out of the situation I’d just made

uncomfortable for both of us, he changed the subject. "I'm very sorry for your loss, Miss. I know how hard this must be for you. Bertha—my wife, that is, God rest her soul—passed in a car accident couple of years back. It's hard."

I nodded at him, not sure if he was lying to me to seem sympathetic.

"We need you to verify the identities of the decedents, sign some paperwork. There's some pamphlets on grieving and loss, if you'd like."

I smiled weakly, trying not to laugh at the suggestion. He'd obviously made the story up about his wife. I'm sure Bertha was sitting at home, baking cookies or something right now, completely unaware that her husband sometimes pretended she was dead to get out of talking about lesbianism. A pamphlet. Seriously? 'Gee, thanks, this little piece of paper is so helpful. I can't imagine how hard this would be without some trite little inspirational verse about pain and loss to comfort me.'

Shaking my head, I said "Can we get this over with now? I have a lot of calls to make. Family and such, y'know." Which was a complete lie, as I wouldn't even have known where to begin searching for their phone numbers.

"Of course. Viewing room's down this-a-way," he said, gesturing to an unmarked door. The viewing room turned out to be a closet with a TV on a table. The monitor flickered between three or four static views of what appeared to be long rows of filing cabinets. Though the air conditioning was running full-blast in the rest of the building, the air here was stale and hot. Sweat dampened my back and glued my shirt to my skin. The police officer put his face to his shoulder, speaking into a walkie-talkie.

"Scarborough, could you open up 2-14 and 15? I have a young lady for ID

confirmation on D. and J. Whitfield.”

A fat guy in an unbuttoned white coat crossed the screen in front of me. Officer Brown’s walkie-talkie crackled, with several seconds delay before the corresponding man on screen raised his device to his mouth. How far was this feed traveling through the air to get to this claustrophobic little room?

“Roger that, Brown.” The man on TV’s mouth kept moving after his voice had disappeared. It reminded me of a dubbed movie, where the actor’s mouth is out-of-sync with the dialogue. As it zoomed in on one of the filing-cabinet drawers, the camera unfocused for a second. A blurry hand grasped the handle, and the drawer slid out.

“Opening up 2-14,” the disembodied voice spoke over Officer Brown’s radio. On-screen, a hand reached in to fold back the white fabric draped over the drawer’s contents.

My mother’s eyes were closed, her lips dark on the black and white display.

“She’s sleeping,” I accidentally said aloud. “I mean, it looks like she’s asleep.”

A bloodless wound cut a wide swath across her forehead, but other than that she looked the same as ever. Well, not exactly. She did look like she’d lost another twenty pounds since the last time I’d seen her, not so healthy, definitely, with cheeks more sunken than I remembered.

I expected that now the tears would finally come, but there was nothing past the slow churning in my stomach. I knew I should be sad but realizing this didn’t make it happen.

Gently, a hand came to rest on my shoulder. “Can you positively identify the deceased as Ms. Dana Ellie Whitfield?” Officer Brown asked.

I nodded, though it still hadn't hit me how real this all was. A burning bile-feeling crept up my throat, and I swallowed hard. "Yes," I croaked.

"2-14, confirmed," he said into the radio. Turning to me, he asked if I needed a moment before the next ID. I didn't say anything.

"This one's going to be a little harder. The body was in the water all night. You sure you're ready?"

I accidentally pushed my tongue against one of the stitches behind my last molar, and the shock ripped down my neck. But it cleared the strange haze in my head for a second, in a surge of pain.

"Yeah," I said. I wondered what was taking Anya so long.

"Ready for 2-15," he said.

The next drawer opened, and the sheet was folded back the same way. Jason's face looked oddly like my own at the moment. Bloated and distorted, his complexion was far too dark on the monitor. The tip of his tongue bulged out from his grossly misshapen mouth, and his skin had peeled away in places, like he'd just gotten a bad sunburn. Though it hardly even looked like a human, I said yes when the officer asked if he was definitely my brother, Jason Robert Whitfield Junior. The throbbing ache in my jaw climbed to a crescendo, despite the painkillers.

Officer Brown gave me a minute to be alone with the TV after I'd signed a few forms. My family slept in a refrigerated file cabinet far away from me, dead gray pixels standing in for their faces. I was truly alone, for the first time. I should have wept.

Perched on the rusty hood of her hatchback, back leaned against the windshield, Anya sat up when she saw me coming.

“Hey, you okay?” she asked, scooting off the hood. She tossed her cigarette butt into the street. “Sorry, I kinda left you hanging. The lady at the front said viewing was for immediate family only. So I thought I’d wait out here. You wanna talk or something?”

I didn’t want to discuss how bizarre that whole experience had been, so I changed the subject to my growling stomach. I needed to eat something; the pain pills on an empty stomach were probably why I felt so dizzy and out of it. “Let’s stop for lunch on the way back,” I suggested.

“I really can’t, Poppy. If I miss another day of work, they’ll fire me. And I’ve got school, and what with exams coming up and everything...I’ll give you a ride back to the house, but I can’t stay.” She scuffed the toe of one well-worn sneaker back and forth along the asphalt as she spoke. “Your grandparents will be coming right away, though, right? I mean, they only live forty-five minutes from your Mom’s.”

“Oh. Of course. I’ll be fine, I guess. Don’t worry about me,” I said, trying to leave out as much sarcasm as possible, though not succeeding.

She took a deep breath, obviously fighting the urge to say something. "Look, do you want a ride home or not?" she said.

I flicked a piece of hair out of my eye and said, "Yeah, if you don't mind."

On the way home I asked her if she was burning up, and she stuck one hand against my forehead before pronouncing me 'a touch warm.'

"Remind me to get your antibiotics out of my bag when we get back to the house. If you have a fever, you might have an infection or something," she said.

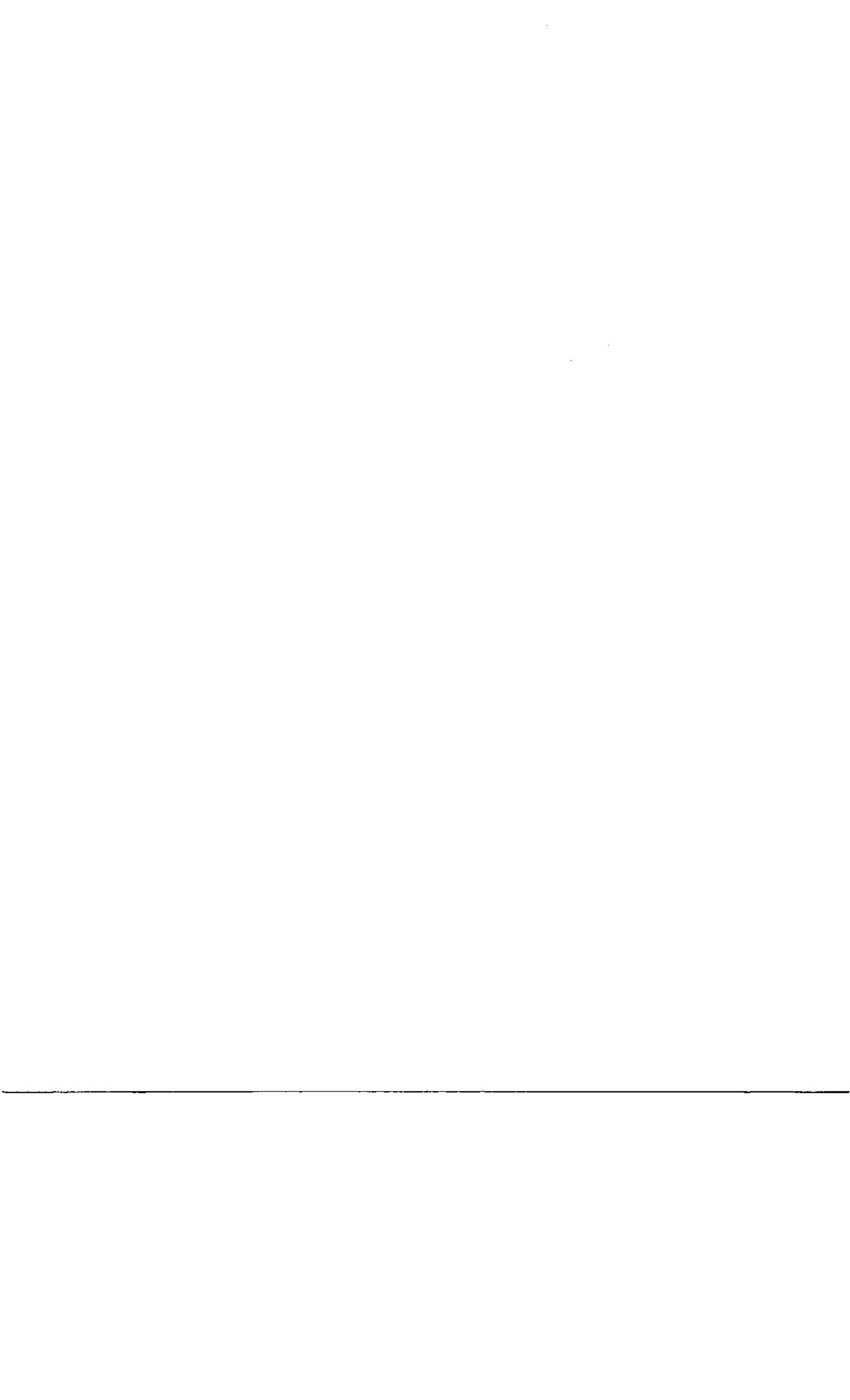
After a few seconds of awkward silence, she turned the radio back on. The Motown station blasting over the speakers did nothing for my headache. Woozy and sweating, I shifted constantly as my thighs stuck to the sun-baked vinyl seat.

She hugged me before she left, though it was one of those arms-only, body-held-awkwardly-apart kind of hugs. I stood at the top of the driveway, watching her car shrink away down the gravel road even after it vanished behind the cloudy trail of red dust. The phone rang inside, and I knew I should answer it, though I didn't want to. The answering machine would pick up eventually. But after ten rings it still hadn't.

I blinked rapidly, trying to adjust my eyes from the blinding afternoon outside. I couldn't see the phone, though I knew it was in the kitchen somewhere so I followed the sound. My hands fumbled over the counters, searching blindly for it by texture and shape. They found it, and pushed a few buttons by mistake when I picked it up.

"Hello?" Nothing. I pushed another button, my vision finally clear enough to find it. "Hello?"





It was my grandmother.

“You’re okay! Gosh Poppy, I’ve been worried sick about you. Why haven’t you been answering the phone? I’ve been calling for hours. I saw on the news this morning—your momma and Jason—I’ve been trying to get a hold of you at your place, but nobody’s answered the phone, and I’d just about gave up but I thought I’d try over here first—I was gonna get your grandfather to drive over and check on you—” She was chattering a million miles a minute.

I tried to cut her off. “I’m fine Gramma. I came home last night, ’cause I just got my wisdom teeth out—”

“I thought you sounded a little rough, sweetheart—anyhow, I just wanted you to know that we love you, and we’ll be there in two seconds if you need anything. Do you need anything?” She finally paused for a breath.

“Not really, no. I’ll be fine. But I’ve got to call the funeral director and a bunch of other people so can I call you back?” I said. Sweat trickled down the inside of my knee; it was at least ninety degrees inside.

“Sure, sure. No problem. Gosh this is just so tragic. And unexpected, y’know? I can’t imagine. She was so young... and your brother. So young.”

“Yeah, it’s hard to understand.” My stomach flopped, and I wasn’t sure if it was hunger or nausea

“You just let me know after you’ve set everything up for the... well, you know. And if you need anything just call us. Anything at all, we’ll be right there. Okay sweetie?”

“Sure, Gramma. If I need anything, I’ll be sure to call. But I gotta go now. I love you. Bye.”

She was still talking, but I hung up anyway. The phone slipped from my hand and clattered across the sticky linoleum. When I knelt to pick it up, the rush of blood to my head set off electric sparks of agony throughout my jaw. The Vicodin cushion had worn off, and every tooth felt like a live wire. I lied still for a moment, fetally curled, as I cried for the first time. Though I realized it was just a response to physical pain, it felt like the most appropriate thing I’d done all day. Despite the gritty layer of crumbs dusting the kitchen floor, I clutched my knees to my chest, pressed my fevered cheek against the cool floor, and just breathed.