

There is something Beatrice is doing in the kitchen, but it's anybody's guess. She has both hands on the counter, head turned to the side and tilted, thick black hair sprouting from a high ponytail like a severed artery. Beatrice often finds herself lost in thought in this exact location. She doesn't consciously go but is pulled as if in a dream, and then, once she assumes the position, her mind begins its agitations. Like now. She is solving. Analyzing all possible outcomes. Working out, with mathematical precision, all the permutations of A, the profusion of ways that A can lead to B, transmogrify into Z, or grow wings, fuzz open and become a hexagon filled with wax and honey.

A is Alice, Beatrice's daughter. She is down the hall in the bathroom, where she has been for the last hour putting on makeup. Not the kind typically expected of a sixteen-year-old girl. The stuff used in zombie movies and gore fests: high-end Halloween shit. Today she is perfecting gouged-out eyeballs. Which is difficult, because to get the full effect, you have to close your eyes. So she has to keep taking close-eyed selfies in the mirror and then trying to correct the mistakes she sees on the small screen. She uses liquid latex, tissues, food coloring, wax, two different shades of lip liner, and cornstarch. She is almost done. Almost to that sweet spot where she doesn't recognize herself in the mirror.

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Beatrice is a medical illustrator. She specializes in forensic reconstruction, hired by hospitals and lawyers to reconstruct the details of a specific surgery. Illustrate the various ways a body failed, how science and human error failed a body. A slipped stitch, organs stapled to other organs, sponges left in abdomens. One would think this line of work would situate her to embrace her daughter's new hobby. But perhaps it is one thing to create a computer graphic of what was supposed to be a routine appendectomy and quite another to round the corner and see your 16-year-old daughter with a rusty nail sticking out of her cheek, pus and blood bubbling down her chin.

"You can't go to school like that."

"Why not?"

"Because you look like you've been dead for a long while and a huge chunk of your cheek is missing."

Alice beams. "Other girls wear makeup to school."

"Take it off."

"But it takes forever. I'll be late. See this? It's wax. Do you know how hard that is to get off?"

"Fine. But if anybody asks, you did this without my permission."

Alice's father expired from the rupture of a cerebral aneurysm six months ago. So sudden there was nothing anyone could do. They were standing in the kitchen when he turned to Beatrice with a strange look, panic and

something maybe like smug regret, said his head hurt and then put his hands to his face and cried out. She dialed 911, but he died before they arrived, crumpled to the floor almost gracefully, like a dog exhausted after a long walk. This is not the reason Alice puts on her makeup. It isn't as simple as that. There is the body, and then there is the soul, and she likes to separate them.

At school, Alice walks through the hallways like a movie star. Kids snap pictures of her. They part. Point her out. Never has she been so popular.

In social studies third period, Mark Jacobson asks to borrow a pencil then says he likes her pus. How did she get the bubble like that?

"A secret."

"Wanna meet after school underneath the bleachers?"
"Zombies don't date."

"I wasn't talking about dating," he says. His eyes are clear and bright vampire blue.

Beatrice is working on the dimensions of a perforated small intestine when the doorbell rings. There is a young man on her doorstep and he would like to speak with her about the grace of God. She invites him in, offers him tea, then realizes she doesn't have any so heats up some old coffee in the microwave. The boy seems surprised at being invited in, and a little unprepared. He riffles through his pamphlets.

"So what do I have to do?" Beatrice asks.

"What do you mean," the boy says.

"To have grace. To get in God's good graces."

"Grace is divine help and strength that we receive through the atonement of Jesus Christ," the boy recites. "Through grace, we are saved from sin and death."

"But what exactly is it—grace?"

"Grace is an enabling power that strengthens us from day to day and helps us endure to the end."

"But if you were going to liken it to something?" She asks.

"Umm," the boy says.

"I need a good metaphor."

He thinks, opens one of his pamphlets, looks out the window. "I don't know," he says. "Pancakes?"

She tries to think of something, anything, to keep him here.

"Do you want to pray?" she asks. "Are you hungry? Do you want a cookie?"

He looks around, gazes longingly at the front door. "Is your husband home?"

Underneath the bleachers there are empty beer cans, cigarette butts, fast food wrappers, a glut of neon plastic straws and, inexplicably, an enormous tuft of white fur stuck to the grass: an animal without a body. Mark Jacobson is kissing the side of Alice's neck. It is a little too wet for her tastes, but the sensation overall is pleasant. Their mouths kiss for a while, and then he pulls away, breathing heavily.

"Wanna go to the Scoresby house on Saturday?" he says. "Some people going. You know, because haunted." He is having some trouble making complete sentences, something that maybe he always had trouble with but she never noticed until now because he had only ever asked her the one question to borrow a pencil. "Having a séance. And beer."

Out of the corner of her eye, Alice sees the tuft move, as if perking up its ears. Mark Jacobson runs his lips over the gash on her forehead, over the bumpy part, and it is like she both feels and not feels it, the gash a part of her and not a part of her, and every part of her responds.

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The boy has accepted a cookie. Beatrice doesn't have the heart to tell him it's an edible. She's been having trouble sleeping, and pot is the only thing that seems to help, except she doesn't like smoking it. So cookies. Sometimes brownies. She gets them from a shop just over the state line in Washington. Worried that Alice might get into them, she hides the paper bag in the back of the pantry, behind stacks of untouched soup cans.

She's not entirely sure why she must keep the boy here. Maybe she wants answers from God, though she has never believed in the capital-G, her faith resides more in something like a string of energy holding the world together, a spiritual seam with which everything trembles in harmony. But maybe this is because she'd never gotten to know capital-G. Maybe this boy and his literature can provide insight into why her daughter barely speaks to her anymore, why she'd rather hole up in the bathroom painting herself a murder victim. She usually only has half a cookie, but she gives the boy a whole one.

Alice has to pass an interview in order to participate in the séance. A girl named Valerie approaches her at school the next day, leads her to the back of the science building where the cool kids smoke cigarettes, and asks her a series of questions. Do you believe in ghosts? And, Are you afraid of ghosts? And, Have you lost someone you wish to contact? Valerie has long black hair with heavy bangs cut in a pencil-straight line above her thick black eyebrows and she wears black eyeliner drawn out from the corners of her eyelids like cat eyes and Alice is impressed with her no-nonsense attitude. Alice answers yes, no, and yes. Valerie confirms her acceptance into the group, with the stipulation that she could be dismissed

if she in any way disrupted the energy in the room or failed to fully believe.

"Oh," she adds, "and don't do the makeup thing. It will confuse them."

Alice wants to object. After all, if Valerie could wear her goth goop, why couldn't Alice express herself as befitted her disposition? But she decides to keep her mouth shut on this one. Then Valerie tells Alice to come on Saturday night with at least two prepared questions.

"We might not get to all of them," Valerie says, "but above all else, a séance must have structure."

Before Alice was born, Alice's father and Beatrice were like halves of the same body. One would reach for the other, the other's arm already outstretched. They'd fall asleep after making love, limbs entangled, sweat commingling, his hand in her hair, her shoulder cupped in his armpit, then wake hungry and throbbing and slide into each other like eels. They didn't talk much but when they did, their words made love too. She was convinced they communicated telepathically. She only had to think banana, and he would peel it for her. But after Alice was born, a tectonic shift occurred. The love she felt for her daughter was blinding, conflagrant. It consumed her completely. She thought at first it was hormones, would stop once she stopped breastfeeding, but it didn't, it continued, she grew more and more indifferent to her husband's advances, to his declarations and pleadings. And then eventually, he seemed to give up, too. He worked longer hours. Developed a running habit. Their exchanges became affable and good-natured, like coworkers who respect each other but don't hang out on the weekends, their old telepathy now rooted in domestic routine. She always thought the fire would come back, that they had time to

bring it back. In the moment before he put his head in his hands and crumpled to the floor, Alice's father, in slightly slurred speech, said, "Why are you just standing there."

"Using candles helps to create a spiritual atmosphere," Valerie says. There is a Ouija board and a glass of water on the table. Mark Jacobson already groped her a little in the car, but Alice is way less interested in him now than in the dark candlelit room, in Valerie's serious eyebrows, in the way the floorboards creak under her feet like someone's dying breath.

There are few preliminaries. Basic introductions are made, and then they—there are five of them: Alice, Mark Jacobson, Valerie, a chubby boy with a septum piercing and green hair introduced as Shrek, and another boy who looks like James Dean with a Mohawk called James Dean—are seated around the table holding hands. Alice hides an oozing sore on the side of her neck with her hair; she mostly obeyed Valerie's request but needed something to calm her down, to ground her. It itches—she may have used too much liquid latex—but without her hands it's difficult to get at. Lifting her shoulder to her ear brings some relief. Alice holds Mark Jacobson's clammy hand with her right and James Dean's with her left. James Dean's hand is soft, cool, and dry, like one of the smooth round stones she liked to gather near the river, rubbing her thumb over them in her pocket on the walk home. They are silent a long while, eyes closed, nothing but the sound of their breath. Alice feels herself relaxing. The energy in the room unfolds, opens. For a moment she is light and outside herself, like deep kissing or floating in the ocean. Then Valerie speaks.

"I'm sorry, Mark Jacobson, but I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

Mark Jacobson is incredulous.

"You are disrupting the energy in the room," Valerie says. "Your mind is elsewhere. We need complete surrender."

"Okay," he says. "Am sorry. Try harder."

"No," Valerie says. "Goodbye."

He looks at Alice, but she looks away.

The boy is staring at his hand. He slowly opens and closes his fingers, then turns it over and inspects his palm.

"Can you imagine," he says, his words moving as if through water, "a nail straight through your palm."

Beatrice looks at her own hand. She'd only had two bites of a cookie but can already feel it, her skin carbonating, thoughts drifting, a pleasant paranoia that keeps her alert and vivid.

"Hey," he says, looking suddenly up at her, the spark of an idea glinting in his heavy-lidded eyes.

"What?"

"I like you," he says.

She is probably more pleased than she should be. "Thank you," she says.

"People are usually too busy. They don't answer the door, even though I can see they're home. I can hear them talking. Their kids laughing. Or they're smug you know, say they know all about God's grace. As if I can't possibly know about it like they do. Or sometimes they insult me."

"People are terrible."

"Yes." His expression becomes very serious. Then, just as quickly, he breaks into a goofy grin. "What was in that cookie?"

She smiles. She wonders what Alice would say if she were to come home, if she were to walk in and see her, someone who opens her front door, who invites in.

“That’s a really cool painting,” he says, pointing to the far wall.

“Oh, thanks,” she says. “I painted that in college.” She tilts her head, to see it from his perspective. It was one of her more experimental pieces, an elephant with a pig nose in a birthday hat, looking disgruntled and surrounded by small, happy rodents dancing and carousing and drinking champagne. Alice’s father hated that painting, and she only hung it after he died.

“Do you still paint?” He asks.

She shakes her head. “Mostly I do computer graphics. Sometimes I draw, if I get stuck.”

“Ooh,” the boy grunts. “Let’s draw something!”

She shrugs and fetches some drawing paper and charcoal pencils.

“What should we draw?” she asks, smoothing the paper on the coffee table.

The boy closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, opens his left eye.

“God,” he says.

The first questions are yes or no. The four of them each have a finger on the planchette. Valerie acts as medium. First Valerie asks, Is there a spirit here, which moves the planchette to YES, though it feels forced, and very slow, like one of them, or all of them, are moving it with a slight pressure, a little bit at a time.

Then Valerie asks, “Are you happy?”

The planchette moves, again a little uninspired, to NO.

After this, Valerie is silent for a moment. A breeze moves through the room. Valerie asks, “How did you die?”

And this time the planchette moves with force, quickly, from letter to letter: M-U-R-D-E-R. Alice shivers. It has dropped ten degrees in the last ten seconds. The water in the glass trembles.

“What is your name?”

No answer.

“What would you like to tell us?” This is Alice’s question. She holds her finger as light as she can without taking it off the planchette.

Y-O-U-R-M-O-T-H-E-R.

It stops.

“Your mother,” Valerie says. “Whose mother?”

No movement.

“Your mother what?”

There is a pause, and then, D-I-D-N-O-T-H-I-N-G.

“Did not hing?” Shrek asks, and is shushed.

“Did nothing,” Valerie says. “Did nothing when?” She asks.

No movement.

“Okay,” she says after another pause, “Do you know Alice’s father?” This is Alice’s second question.

Y-O-U-C-O-U-L-D-S-A-Y-T-H-A-T.

“Are you Alice’s father?” Valerie asks, and Alice looks at her. Valerie looks strange, her eyes unfocused, a flush in her cheeks. “What would you like to say to Alice?” she asks. This is clearly off-script. The planchette buzzes under her finger.

Y-O-U-R-F-A-U-L-T.

“Your fault,” Valerie repeats, *Your fault*, and there is venom in her voice, and she is looking straight at Alice with her faraway eyes, and Alice moves the planchette with her finger, quickly and forcefully, to GOODBYE.

They are both drawing on the piece of paper. At first their lines were awkward and separate, Beatrice’s resolving into careful loops and the boy’s fretful dashes. But now they are in sync, their pencils coming together and moving apart like magnets. They work in silence, the only sound the scratching of their pencils on the paper. Alice is at a

friend's house, though Beatrice doesn't remember which friend, and she doesn't remember what time she's supposed to be home, and she doesn't know what time it is now. Beatrice can't remember the last time she did this, letting the images come freeform, without censor or model, without measurement or angle. This feeling of lead on paper like skin on skin, an itch you feel along your shoulder blades, the beginnings of wings. When the phone rings, she is startled into consciousness. She looks at the boy. Wonders what it would have been like to have a boy. If her love would be different. The boy looks up, and he's so soft and beautiful. A baby deer. A delicate doll, his nose the perfect expression of what a nose should be. Why does this incite violence from deep within? Why must beauty always be accompanied by an urge to possess? They look at the drawing together.

"Wow," the boy says.

"Yeah."

"I never knew God looked like that."

"I think it's my husband," she says.

"You have a husband?"

"He died."

"For your sins?"

The outline of his face throbs under the living room lights.

"Maybe."

The phone rings, and it is like the first time either of them have heard a phone ring.

James Dean leads Alice into one of the bedrooms of the old house. He asks her to take off her shoes. A streetlight somewhere beyond the window hole provides meager light. Two pristine mattresses are stacked in the middle of the floor. Rain smacks against the floorboards. The smell of wet dust and wood rot. Everyone else has left and it's

just the two of them now. Alice's body still buzzes with adrenaline. She doesn't know what exactly happened. Was someone—Valerie?—trying to fuck with her, or was her father really there? Whatever truth the planchette had spelled out, she feels him here beside her now. His wounded expression. His hand on her shoulder so light as to be oppressive. The way he would offer to make her pancakes before he left for work, his voice a little too loud, breath shaky, as if in this one question he was doing battle with all his demons.

After the séance, she'd wanted to go home, hide under a blanket somewhere, create a bloody zippered mouth, but then James Dean had taken her hand, and immediately a force like the river had hushed her. Her feet now on the cold dusty wood. She waits for him to lead her to the mattress, to lay her down gently and take her completely. She is ready. She feels like every moment of her life has been leading to this one. Into oblivion. She imagines each shellacked point of his Mohawk tracing a path down her belly. But he doesn't lead her to the mattress. She follows him to the window, where they both stand barefoot in the slant of rain. Alice isn't sure if she's supposed to be seeing something. There is nothing but a large tree.

"I lost someone too," James Dean finally says.

So this is what they're supposed to be doing—not searching for ghosts or initiating dark rituals or losing virginities, but sharing their sorrow.

"Winston," he says. "My dog."

Alice turns to look at him, and suddenly James Dean's face is not like James Dean at all but that of a young silly boy, a dusting of acne along his jaw.

"Hit by a car two months ago. I thought I'd be able to talk to him again."

A familiar yawning inside her chest, a balloon slowly filling with emptiness. Her fingers find the sore on her

neck but it is not enough. James Dean begins to cry, and she leads him to the mattresses.

The voice on the other end of the line is Alice's. She sounds small and far away. She says she needs a ride, needs Beatrice to pick her up from a house. Though she still feels as if she's moving through some kind of delicious fog, her fingers, still holding the drawing pencil, write down the address on a slip of paper. When Beatrice hangs up, she apologizes to the boy and ushers him out into the world with his pamphlets. It's raining and dark. Inexplicable hours have gone by. He stands on her doorstep like a shunned pet.

"Good luck," Beatrice says to him, and then hurries to her car.

Alice has never called her like this before. She's never gotten into trouble, or been hurt, or let on that she needs anything, really. Even before Alice's father died, she seemed to move through the house, through life, like a thin glittering fish. Her secrets keeping her buoyant and careful. As she drives, either incredibly slow or dangerously fast, she can't tell, through the rainy night, Beatrice imagines over and over leading her daughter into the house, putting a blanket around her shoulders, telling her everything is going to be okay. This is the recurring fantasy of her entire motherhood.

Alice is waiting on the steps of the old house. James Dean stands in the doorway behind her, dejected but maintaining a sense of chivalry. Alice runs into the shelter of the car. They drive in silence. Very slowly in silence. As if her mother is preparing her for something, giving her the time she needs to get ready for what awaits her at the house. There is so much Alice wants to tell her, about the séance and about her father, about what she knows

for sure now. But now is not the time. Beatrice parks and then opens the door for Alice, takes her by the hand and leads her into the house. The boy is no longer on the front steps. Beatrice can see him off to the right under a streetlamp, dripping with rain, soggy pamphlets clutched in his hands, but she pretends not to.

"Who is that?" Alice asks as Beatrice fumbles with the keys.

"Who? Oh, I don't know."

"He's staring. Like he knows you."

"I think he's staring at you," she says as she opens the door. "You look so pretty without all that dreadful makeup. You look different. Are you okay? Did something happen?"

Inside, she puts a blanket over Alice's shoulders, rubs her back, murmurs into her wet hair that everything is going to be all right. The doorbell rings, but neither makes a move to answer. Alice lets her mother hold her. The buzzing in her bones slows to an ache. When that has subsided, she leaves her mother's embrace and they go into the kitchen, where Beatrice begins making fried chicken from a box. Frozen drumsticks hiss in the hot oil of the pan.

Alice lies on the bathroom floor, a deep gash carved into the smooth skin of her forehead. A line of blood is drawn down the side of her nose to crust darkly at the corner of her mouth. The skin around the wound lifts away in goopy clumps. Her eyes are wide open and staring.

"The blood would not drip that way," Beatrice says. "The angle of your head means it would drip to the side, to the floor."

Alice remains mostly still but for a twitch in her right eyelid.

"What happened when Dad died?" she asks from the floor.

“You know what happened. He had a cerebral aneurism that burst. It happened very quickly.”

“Did you call 9-1-1 right away?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, did you wait a minute, or did you call as soon as you knew something was wrong?”

“I called right away.”

“I don’t remember you ever kissing, or touching each other.”

“We did.”

“He resented me.”

“What are you talking about? Your father loved you very much.”

“Not as much as you did.”

“Fathers can’t. It’s biology.”

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Alice walks in to the kitchen and stands beside Beatrice, her mouth blood-dark and zippered shut. It still pains Beatrice to look at her. Her perfect skin. Marred almost beyond recognition. She’s done the zippered mouth for weeks now, and Beatrice has to unzip her to hear her speak. Her teachers have reached out and expressed concern. They usually first express their condolences, and say they know it must be difficult after her husband’s passing, to raise a daughter amidst all that grief.

She wants to tell them it’s really not. It’s not very different from what it’s always been. All there is, finally, is the body’s illustrations. Some day there will no longer be any further permutations, all possible lines from A to B drawn, and then what? Then there will be nothing for any of them to do but fur over, ghost open and become a house filled with dust and breath. 