

THE RESPONSIBLE PARTY

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# ABSTRACT

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The *Responsible Party* is a novella about three siblings navigating childhood and ongoing trauma induced by their physically and emotionally abusive father. The story is told in the first person, with the narrative voice alternating from chapter to chapter between the three adult siblings. After the suicides of their grandmother and aunt, Yasemin, Sena, and Aydin become estranged from their father. When the eldest sibling receives a phone call regarding the disappearance of their father from his home in Bodrum, Turkey, the novel goes back and forth, from past to present, relaying the events leading up to his disappearance. The novel tells a story about family, tragedy, and loss, but at the core of the story is the theme of this dissertation: coping with childhood trauma and depression.

The introduction focuses on recognizing childhood trauma in writing. Specifically, novels by Junot Diaz and Roxanne Gay are analyzed for evidence of depression as a result of childhood trauma. The analysis is conducted by examining the pieces for cognitive distortions. Cognitive distortions are biased perspectives — irrational thoughts and beliefs — that are unknowingly reinforced over time. There are seven cognitive distortions most frequently associated with severe depression and suicide:

Arbitrary Inference, Selective Abstraction, Overgeneralization, Magnification, Minimization, Personalization, and Dichotomous Thinking. These are used to prove that the residual effects of childhood trauma bleed through the writing of childhood trauma survivors. Samples of both fiction and nonfiction pieces are reviewed, to further conclude that there are greater occurrences of cognitive distortions in the nonfiction work.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my sister and brother who, like me, come from a great long line of depressed sons-of-bitches.

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My last thanks is to my mom. I thank her for everything. She is the fairy queen of all my fairytales. Her patience, kindness, and unfailing ability to always see the best in all of us is something I cherish. She is the best mom in the entire world.

## INTRODUCTION

### **WRITING THE WRONGS: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DEPRESSED WRITING AND COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS**

There are castles and talking animals in my stories — always witches, good and bad, and sometimes monsters. There is evil, but good always triumphs, if not completely, at least enough not to end the story in tragedy. Seldom do I write about anything too personal. Even the journals and diaries I've kept since childhood were filled with exclamation points dotted in hearts, rainbows, and glittery pens describing boys I'd had crushes on, trips with friends to the mall, and travel stories. The trauma was deep, and locked down with maximum security. There were times it attempted escape, but the well-trained staff inside me found it fast, and returned it to its dungeon. The things that happened to me were in the past, and I was done with them. I led a happy, productive life — the possibility I was suffering from any sort of depression never once occurred to me. I wouldn't let it.

I began my doctoral studies taking literature and writing courses, and took a few courses that wound up having a great impact on the inception of the novella, *The Responsible Party*. The first course was "Writing to Heal." In this course, I began to experiment with writing about my personal experiences — not the fantasies I'd always had the natural inclination to cultivate, but the pain and trauma I had experienced in my childhood. While this was an emotionally difficult exercise, it was my first experimentation with exposing myself in an authentic manner. I'd wondered if writing this way would provide me a therapeutic release, or cause me additional, undue pain in my recollections.

The next semester, I took two courses: a memoir-writing workshop, and a literature course that introduced me to the work of Junot Diaz. I began writing a piece about the family gathering that led to my estrangement from my father. Nearly simultaneously, I began to read Diaz's *This is How You Lose Her* in my literature course.

Diaz was born in 1968 in the Dominican Republic. He and his family moved to the United States when he was six years old, settling in Parlin, New Jersey. When he arrived in the States, neither he nor his four siblings spoke English. Diaz credits his love of books in helping him learn the language and guiding him toward his eventual career. He did his bachelor's degree at Rutgers University and received a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from Cornell University. In 1996, he published *Drown*, a collection of short stories. Twelve years later he published his first novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which won the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. In 2012, Diaz published his third book, another collection of short stories titled *This is How You Lose Her*.

*This is How You Lose Her* was mesmerizing to me. The language was so raw and authentic. Diaz wrote in a manner that spoke directly to me: "Her father, who used to treat me like his hijo, calls me an asshole on the phone, sounds like he's strangling himself with the cord. You no deserve I speak to you in Spanish, he says" (*This is How You Lose Her* 4). Diaz references his Dominican ancestry frequently, inserting Spanish words and phrases into the writing. This is something I could directly relate to, coming from a multi-national family myself. I identified a few characteristics as being particularly appealing to me in his writing: the personalization his use of first-person narrative invoked; the unpretentious language with which he wrote; and the dark, but often humorous observations made by the narrator. Shortly after I read his novels, Diaz

published an essay called “The Silence: The Legacy of Childhood Trauma” in *The New Yorker*. While his prior works had all been fiction, “The Silence” is a personal essay describing his childhood trauma: the sexual molestation he experienced as an eight-year old by a close family member. I started thinking about the possibility that people who experience childhood trauma may relate to one another, even if their particular situation differed. Moreover, that there was something about the writing that attracted people suffering depression from trauma.

I began writing “There’s Nothing Like a Family Get-Together” in my memoir-writing workshop. Inspired by *This is How You Lose Her*, I decided to take a stab at writing in a similar style. My memoir piece was written in the first person, using present tense. I wrote using my own voice — authentic, unpretentious, and perforated with dark, dry humor.

I workshopped “There’s Nothing Like a Family Get-Together” several times. There was always a strong response to the raw, uncensored language. I found inserting humor made it easier for me to tell my story; shielding me from the shame my childhood trauma usually conjured. When I took a writing workshop designed to produce three chapters of a novel, I decided to expand “There’s Nothing Like a Family Get-Together.” While the novella I began in this workshop, *The Responsible Party*, is a work of fiction, the memoir “There’s Nothing Like a Family Get-Together” rests within.

I continued to work on the novella through various courses and independent studies, and as I did, I began reading the work of Roxanne Gay. Initially, it was her essays and social media presence that captured my attention. She had a strong, feminist voice that resonated powerfully with me. Born in 1974 to Haitian immigrants, Gay spent

the beginning of her childhood in Omaha, Nebraska. She went to boarding school in New Hampshire when she was twelve, and after high school started college at Yale University. Gay left college to travel across the country to Arizona with an older man, eventually arriving back in Nebraska to finish her undergraduate degree at the University of Nebraska. She went on to receive an MA in Creative Writing from the University of Nebraska, and later a PhD in Rhetoric and Technical Communication from Michigan Technological University. Gay's work often rendered dramatic, sexually violent stories. Her essays and short stories were published in a variety of different periodicals, and in 2011, her collection of short stories, *Ayiti*, debuted. Many novels would follow, but in 2017, she published her memoir *Hunger*, revealing her personal childhood trauma. At the age of twelve, she was raped by a group of boys and held this secret from friends and family for seven years. *Hunger* exposed both the story of the rape and the corresponding emotional and psychological struggles with her body.

I read *Ayiti* and was enchanted by the various voices of the Haitian characters. These stories were tragedies, and she wrote in a way that evoked an incredibly emotional response in me: "I stroked my mother's hair gently, waited for her breathing to slow, her back rising into my chest with a melancholy cadence. We mourned until morning" (*Ayiti* 102). The language she uses illustrates exactly what was happening: the daughter held her mother in her arms, stroking her hair to soothe her rapid breath. Gay uses unambiguous language to show us what was going on and follows it up by telling us they were mourning all night long.

After reading both Diaz's and Gay's entire catalogs, I felt a kinship with them; they wrote stories about immigrants, trauma, and grief. In Gay's memoir *Hunger*, she

writes about her own childhood trauma, and it moved me in a way I hadn't expected it to. Although my childhood trauma didn't involve sexual assault like Diaz and Gay, I related strongly to the feelings and language they used to describe it. Gay refers to herself as "splintered," declaring "a part of me was mute and would stay that way for many years....determined to fill the void" (*Hunger* 21) with food. In "The Silence," Diaz declares there aren't "enough pages in the world to describe what it did to" him; that "the whole planet could be my inkstand and it still wouldn't be enough" ("The Silence" 24). I detected similarities in the language they used to describe their own childhood trauma in their fiction: descriptive, unfiltered, often hyperbolic statements. In reanalyzing *Ayiti* and *This is How You Lose Her*, I discovered much of the same words and sentiments.

As I began to research the connection between childhood trauma and writing, I came across an essay published in the American Psychological Association: "Depressed Writing: Cognitive Distortions in the Works of Depressed and Nondepressed Poets and Writers," by Katherine M. Thomas and Marshall Duke. This essay expands on previous research exploring the connection between suicidal thoughts and cognitive distortions in the poems of Anne Sexton (Wedding 140). Thomas and Duke examine the works of depressed and nondepressed poets and writers to evaluate whether more cognitive distortions are present in the works of depressed writers.

This made a great deal of sense to me. There was something in the writing of Diaz and Gay that I related to on a deep, emotional level. The idea that the words used by these authors could be categorized as distortions synonymous with depressed individuals seemed very logical to me. It provided perhaps at least the beginning of an explanation as to why I related so well to authors who'd dealt with such serious childhood trauma, even

if the trauma was quite different than my own. Most importantly on a personal level, it meant that I related so well because I was depressed from my own childhood trauma.

Cognitive distortions were introduced by Aaron Beck in *Cognitive Therapy and the Emotional Disorders* (1976). Beck proposes that depression was a consequence of negative irrational, thoughts, describing them vividly as “internally generated fantasies” and “inappropriate or excessive reactions” (Beck 77). Beck determines that these irrational thoughts can be unconscious, and may be present in a depressed individual’s writing. Specifically, Beck identifies seven cognitive distortions, or as he describes them, “systematic errors in reasoning” (Ibid 19), that characterize depression: arbitrary inference, selective abstraction, overgeneralization, magnification, minimization, personalization, and dichotomous thinking.

Thomas and Duke’s essay summarizes several studies linking higher levels of mental disturbance and suicide rates to artists, authors, poets, and musicians (Thomas and Duke 204). Research conducted by Kay Jamison, and later ratified in “Risk Factors for Suicide in Psychiatric Outpatients: A 20-year Prospective Study” by Beck support the idea that the majority of suicidal individuals have depressive disorders. Thomas and Duke use these factors to conclude that formally undiagnosed authors who commit suicide are depressed, and compared the writing of authors who hadn’t committed or attempted suicide to be nondepressed. They then analyze samples of the works of depressed and nondepressed authors from the 17<sup>th</sup>-20th centuries for the seven cognitive distortions most frequently used by individuals with suicidal ideations to answer the important question: does the presence of psychological illness result in a different style of writing?

In order to conduct their analysis, Thomas and Duke had to find a method to measure depressed writing in the literature. Research conducted by James Pennebaker found writers who committed suicide used more first-person words and more frequently wrote in first-person terms than writers who'd never attempted suicide. A study by Wedding analyzed the poetry of Anne Sexton, who committed suicide at the age of 45, for cognitive distortions. He concluded that the use of cognitive distortions in writing could show the author had suicidal ideations.

In order to analyze and compare the works of 20 male writers and 14 female writers, Thomas and Duke used the same seven cognitive distortions originally used by Wedding in his analysis of Sexton's poetry. The seven cognitive distortions are defined as follows:

1. Arbitrary inference is prejudicially forming conclusions without warranted, supporting evidence, or facing contrary evidence. An example of arbitrary inference is an undergraduate student telling an instructor, on the first day of class, without any evidence to support the conclusion that they think they will fail the midterm, fail the course, have to repeat the course, and not get into medical school.
2. Selective abstraction is the overemphasis on particular details in a situation while concurrently ignoring other compelling facts. Also known as the mental filter, one will focus on a single negative detail and excludes the positive details. An example of selective abstraction is one partner in a romantic relationship dwelling on a negative comment made by the other partner and viewing the relationship as deteriorating, while ignoring years of positive comments and experiences.

3. Overgeneralization is the expectation that once an event occurs, a general rule is formed and applied indiscriminately across unrelated situations; the one particular instance can be generalized into an overall pattern. An example of overgeneralization is a child concluding, after they had an unkind teacher with the last name “Smith,” that every teacher named “Smith” was mean.
4. Magnification is the distortion and exaggeration of the significance of ordinary events. An example of magnification is a musician in an orchestra missing one note and thinking the mistake ruined the entire performance.
5. Minimization is the discount or trivialization of consequential events. An example of minimization is an athlete winning a coveted award in their sport, but still believing they’re only a mediocre player.
6. Personalization is the assumption of personal responsibility for events over which the individual has little or no control. An example of personalization is an individual believing their tardiness to a social event caused the attendees to have a bad time.
7. Dichotomous thinking is the propensity to view the world in black-and-white terms; thinking everything’s all or nothing or perfect or flawed. An example of dichotomous thinking is a manager thinking an employee is perfect after one positive interaction, and on the flipside thinking an employee is terrible after one mistake.

I wanted to conduct my own analysis of the works of Junot Diaz and Roxanne Gay. I found their memoirs and fiction to be personally inspirational and intoxicating, and wanted to assess their usage of cognitive distortions in comparison to the depressed

and control groups of the Thomas/Duke study. In addition, I wanted to see if there were significant differences in the number of cognitive distortions used in the fictional pieces in comparison to the memoirs. This would help me to assess whether or not writing about the trauma was therapeutic, or if it merely encouraged more negative, irrational thoughts. Finally, I wanted to do the same analysis of my fiction and memoir piece to see with which category (depressed or nondepressed) the work aligned. The hypothesis was that both Diaz and Gay's examination for incidents of cognitive distortions would align with the depressed authors; more specifically, the memoir would find an even higher average per page occurrence of cognitive distortions; and my own work would fall into the same pattern as Diaz and Gay. There was a reason I had such a strong connection to their work, and I believed this would provide me an answer to something that had never consciously occurred to me: I had suffered from childhood trauma, and connected so strongly to the work of depressed authors because I was also depressed.

Thomas and Duke selected Anglophone novelists from the 17<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries who had known depressive illnesses, many of whom committed or attempted suicide. For each depressed novelist, a control author with no known history of depressive illness was selected, using the following criteria: same gender, same time period, same country, and similar popularity. For example, under the category of male novelists, the study used Ernest Hemingway as the depressed author, and John Steinbeck as the nondepressed author. Both lived during similar times, were popular, and acclaimed (both won Pulitzer Prizes for their work). I find there is a flaw in this logic, simply due to the fact that we can't know certainly that John Steinbeck wasn't suffering from mental illness. Particularly in the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and even today, people aren't always

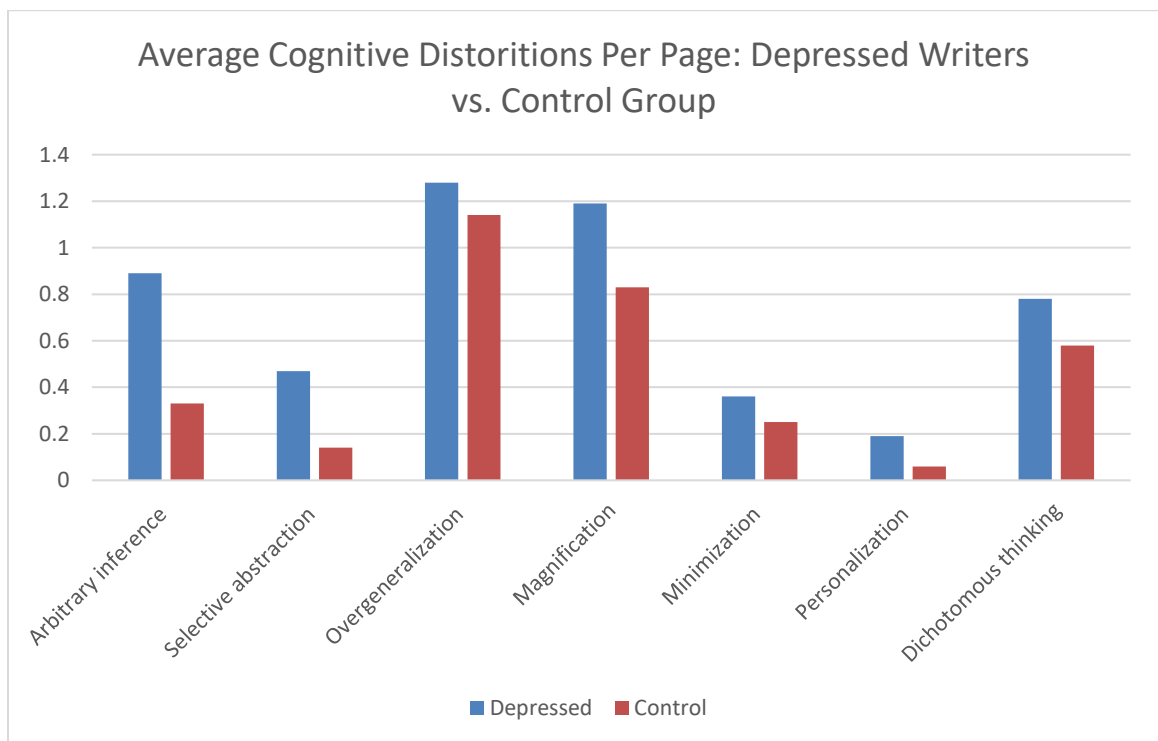
open about their diagnosed depression. Thomas and Duke note that the nondepressed authors selected had “no known history of any depressive order” (Thomas and Duke 206), adding that “biographies of potential authors were read...to verify no known history of depression” (Thomas and Duke 206) existed. Although they seem to make an effort to validate the control group’s lack of depression, it’s impossible not to think there couldn’t be authors on the control list that simply never exposed their depressive tendencies.

Thomas and Duke randomly selected samples from each group’s body of work, and analyzed the excerpts for cognitive distortions. They examined 6-10 nonconsecutive pages for each author, and tallied the cognitive distortions found within the pages. These pages were selected randomly by obtaining lists of each writer’s complete works through Emory University’s library catalog, then using a random number generator to randomly select two works. They used the random number generator again to randomly select pages in each work to analyze. The total cognitive distortions found on each page were then divided by the total number of pages in the sample to come up with the average number of cognitive distortion per page. For example, if Hemingway’s sample was 10 pages and 12 cognitive distortions were found, his average cognitive distortions per page was  $12/10$ , or 1.2.

The results of the study, as depicted graphically below (e.g. see fig. 1–5), were conclusive to the theories of both Wedding and Thomas & Duke: more cognitive distortions are present in works of depressed writers versus nondepressed writers. In fact, depressed writers evinced cognitive distortions nearly 50% more than the control group.

<b>Cognitive Distortion</b>	<i>Average Per Page</i>	
	<b>Depressed</b>	<b>Control</b>
Arbitrary inference	0.89	0.33
Selective abstraction	0.47	0.14
Overgeneralization	1.28	1.14
Magnification	1.19	0.83
Minimization	0.36	0.25
Personalization	0.19	0.06
Dichotomous thinking	0.78	0.58

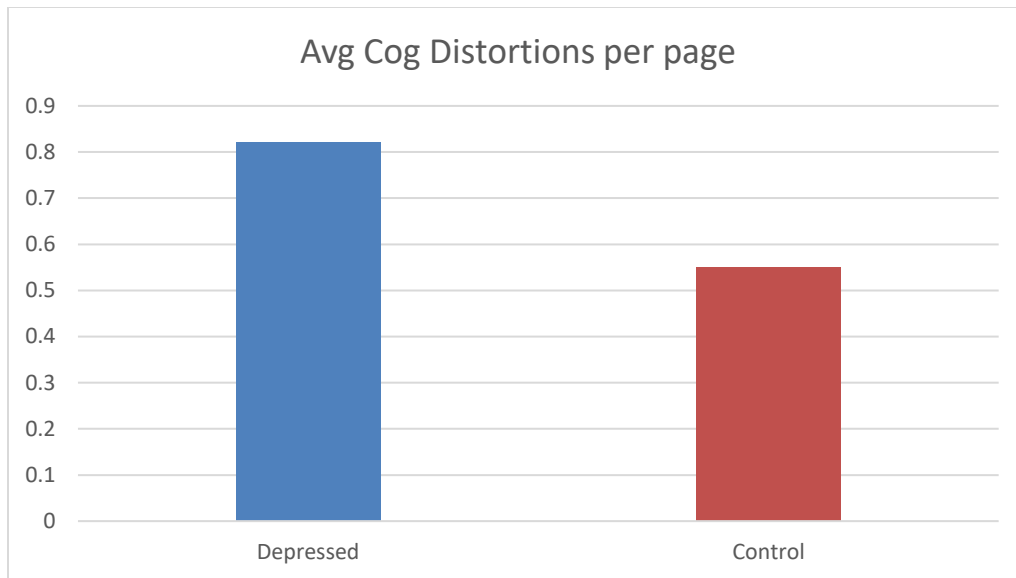
(Fig. 1)



(Fig. 2)

	<b>Depressed</b>	<b>Control</b>
<b>Avg Cog Distortions per page</b>	0.82	0.55

(Fig. 3)



(Fig. 4)

	Depressed	Control	TIMES GREATER	PERCENTAGE GREATER
Avg Cog Distortions per page	0.82	0.55	0.49	49.09%

(Fig. 5)

By examining the average use of each cognitive distortion individually, selective abstraction (the depressed writer is 2.36 times more likely to use this), personalization (2.17 times more likely), and arbitrary inference (1.7 times) were used by depressed writers much more often than in the control group (e.g. see fig. 6). Both selective abstraction and arbitrary inference result in making inconclusive and uninformed decisions, which can be vital in compelling storytelling. If the characters in the stories did everything right, there may not be an interesting story to tell or lesson to be learned. Likewise, personalization leads to captivating situations; as analyzed by Beck: “The inevitable egocentricity of man has intrigued writers and philosophers for ages...the egocentric interpretations become unusually compelling...” (91).

<b>Cognitive Distortion</b>	<i>Average Per Page</i>		<b>TIMES GREATER</b>	<b>PERCENTAGE GREATER</b>
	<b>Depressed</b>	<b>Control</b>		
Arbitrary inference	0.89	0.33	1.70	169.70%
Selective abstraction	0.47	0.14	2.36	235.71%
Overgeneralization	1.28	1.14	0.12	12.28%
Magnification	1.19	0.83	0.43	43.37%
Minimization	0.36	0.25	0.44	44.00%
Personalization	0.19	0.06	2.17	216.67%
Dichotomous thinking	0.78	0.58	0.34	34.48%

(Fig. 6)

## METHOD

In order to evaluate and categorize the work of Diaz, Gay, and my own for cognitive distortions, I used the same methods developed by Thomas and Duke. Using random.org (e.g. see fig. 7), ten pages were selected from the short stories/novel (*Drown*, *Ayiti*, and *The Responsible Party*) and the occurrence of cognitive distortions were categorized and tallied from the pages. I was also interested to discover whether or not more cognitive distortions were found in the memoir pieces as opposed to the works of fiction. The additional analysis of 10 pages from each memoir (“The Silence,” *Hunger*, and “There’s Nothing Like a Family Get-Together”) concluded my study. The seven cognitive distortions (arbitrary inference, selective abstraction, overgeneralization, magnification, minimization, personalization, and dichotomous thinking) designated by Wedding were used to complete the analysis.

<b>Titles</b>	<b>Ran Sel 1</b>	<b>Ran Sel 2</b>	<b>Ran Sel 3</b>	<b>Ran Sel 4</b>	<b>Ran Sel 5</b>	<b>Ran Sel 6</b>	<b>Ran Sel 7</b>	<b>Ran Sel 8</b>	<b>Ran Sel 9</b>	<b>Ran Sel 10</b>
<i>Ayiti</i>	138	63	146	27	57	83	101	66	148	91
<i>Drown</i>	95	147	197	206	47	114	26	186	28	55
<i>Hunger</i>	118	179	254	47	180	222	230	291	18	94
<i>The Responsible Party</i>	72	100	50	95	69	29	3	94	55	34
<i>The Silence</i>	14	10	12	13	2	15	8	11	6	5
<i>There's Nothing Like a Family Get- Together</i>	7	10	19	16	2	6	1	12	11	8

(Fig. 7)

While conducting the analysis itself was an important part of my research, I recognized there could be unconscious bias toward finding more cognitive distortions to prove my hypothesis. The line-by-line analysis for cognitive distortions requires expertise in cognitive distortions, so I used two graduate students (Raters B and C, candidates for the Doctor of Psychology at Kean University) to complete the examination of the 60 pages.

In order to prepare the writing samples for review, the ten pages selected by the random number generator were photocopied with all identifying characteristics removed — chapter titles, authors' names, and book title, for example. These pages were shuffled, as a further minimization of recognition. Finally, they were sent to each rater for text analysis.

The raters examined the texts for occurrences of the seven cognitive distortions. Each cognitive distortion found was noted, identified, and tallied for each page. The raters' results were compiled to come up with three separate scores per author: Rater A's results, Rater B's results, and Rater C's results. The results of each rater were averaged to

produce the final rates of each author's incidence of cognitive distortions per page (e.g. see fig. 8-10).

Rater A			NONE	(1) AI	(2) SA	(3) O	(4) Mag	(5) Min	(6) P	(7) DT	Tot # CDs	Sum Tot	Avg CD p/p
Author	Title	Pg. #											
Diaz	Drown	26						1	1		2		
		28 x									0		
		47					1				1		
		55								1	1		
		95 x									0		
		114				2	1				3		
		147				1	1			1	3		
		186			1	1					2		
		197						2			2		
206						1			1	15	1.5		
Diaz	The Silence	2		1			1		1		3		
		5					2			1	3		
		6		1	1						2		
		8								2	2		
		10			1		1			1	3		
		11			1		2				3		
		12					1		1	1	3		
		13					1		1		2		
		14							1	1	2		
15						1		1	1	3	26	2.6	
Totals				2	4	4	15	1	6	9			
Gay	Ayiti	27		2							2		
		57 x									0		
		63		1			1			1	3		
		66 x									0		
		83			1						1		
		91		2							2		
		101					1				1		
		138		1			1	1			3		
		146		1			1				2		
148 x									0	14	1.4		
Gay	Hunger	18							1		1		
		47		1			3				4		
		94						1			1		
		118							1		1		
		179			1	1					2		
		180			2						2		
		222 x									0		
		230			1				1		2		
		254		1		1			1		3		
291 x									0	16	1.6		
Totals				9	5	2	7	2	4	1			
Brandon	The Responsible Party	3				1		1	1		3		
		28								1	1		
		34			1		1				2		
		50			1				1		2		
		55					1			1	2		
		71		2							2		
		72 x									0		
		93					1				1		
		95					1				1		
100				1	1				2	16	1.6		
Brandon	There's Nothing Like...	1				1		1	1		3		
		2		1	1		1			1	4		
		6			1		1				2		
		7				1		1		1	3		
		8							1	1	2		
		10 x									0		
		11			1		1		1		3		
		12		1		1	1				3		
		16				1	1				2		
18			1				1	1	3	25	2.5		
Totals				4	6	6	10	3	6	6			

(Fig. 8)

Rater B			NONE	(1) AI	(2) SA	(3) O	(4) Mag	(5) Min	(6) P	(7) DT	Tot # CDs	Sum Tot	Avg CD p/p
Author	Title	Pg. #											
Diaz	Drown	26						1	1		2		
		28 x									0		
		47					1				1		
		55								1	1		
		95		1							1		
		114				1	1				2		
		147				1	1			1	3		
		186			1	1					2		
		197					2				2		
		206					1				1	15	1.5
Diaz	The Silence	2		1			1	1			3		
		5					2			1	3		
		6		1	1						2		
		8								2	2		
		10			1		1			1	3		
		11			1		1				2		
		12					1		1	1	3		
		13					1		1		2		
		14							1	1	2		
		15					1		1	1	3	25	2.5
Totals				3	4	3	14	2	5	9			
Gay	Ayiti	27		2							2		
		57		1							1		
		63		1			1			1	3		
		66 x									0		
		83			1						1		
		91		2							2		
		101					1				1		
		138		1			1	1			3		
		146		1			1				2		
		148 x									0	15	1.5
Gay	Hunger	18							1		1		
		47		1			3				4		
		94						1			1		
		118							1		1		
		179			1	1					2		
		180			2						2		
		222		1							1		
		230			1				1		2		
		254		1		1			1		3		
		291 x									0	17	1.7
Totals				11	5	2	7	2	4	1			
Brandon	The Responsible Party	3				1		1	1		3		
		28								1	1		
		34			1		1				2		
		50			1				1		2		
		55					1			1	2		
		71		1							1		
		72		1							1		
		93					1				1		
		95					1				1		
		100				1					1	15	1.5
Brandon	There's Nothing Like...	1				1		1	1		3		
		2		1			1			1	3		
		6			1		1				2		
		7				1		1		1	3		
		8							1	1	2		
		10		1							1		
		11			1				1		2		
		12		1			1				2		
		16				1	1				2		
		18			1				1	1	3	23	2.3
Totals				5	5	5	8	3	6	6			

(Fig. 9)

Rater C			NONE	(1) AI	(2) SA	(3) O	(4) Mag	(5) Min	(6) P	(7) DT	Tot # CDs	Sum Tot	Avg CD p/p
Author	Title	Pg. #											
Diaz	Drown	26						1	1		2		
		28 x									0		
		47					1				1		
		55				1				1	2		
		95 x									0		
		114				2	1				3		
		147				1	1			1	3		
		186			1	1					2		
		197					2				2		
		206					1				1	16	1.6
Diaz	The Silence	2		1			1	1			3		
		5					2			1	3		
		6		1	1					1	3		
		8								2	2		
		10			1		1			1	3		
		11			1		2				3		
		12					1		1	1	3		
		13					1		1		2		
		14							1	1	2		
		15					1		1	1	3	27	2.7
Totals				2	4	5	15	2	5	10			
Gay	Ayiti	27		2							2		
		57 x									0		
		63		1			1			1	3		
		66		1							1		
		83			1						1		
		91		2							2		
		101					1				1		
		138		1			1	1			3		
		146		1			1				2		
		148 x									0	15	1.5
Gay	Hunger	18							1		1		
		47		1			3				4		
		94						1			1		
		118							1		1		
		179			1	1					2		
		180			2						2		
		222				1					1		
		230			1				1		2		
		254		1		1			1		3		
		291 x									0	17	1.7
Totals				10	5	3	7	2	4	1			
Brandon	The Responsible Party	3						1	1		2		
		28								1	1		
		34			1		1				2		
		50			1				1		2		
		55					1			1	2		
		71		2							2		
		72 x									0		
		93					1				1		
		95					1				1		
		100				1	1				2	15	1.5
Brandon	There's Nothing Like...	1				1		1	1		3		
		2		1	1		1			1	4		
		6			1						1		
		7				1		1		1	3		
		8						1	1	1	3		
		10							1		1		
		11			1		1		1		3		
		12		1		1	1				3		
		16					1				1		
		18			1				1	1	3	25	2.5
Totals				4	6	4	9	4	7	6			

(Fig 10)

## TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The occurrence of arbitrary inference is found when conclusions are made without supporting evidence. This is illustrated by Diaz, when the narrator describes his girlfriend as being “too skinny for anybody but me” (*Drown* 53). He describes her with loathing — a subordinate to any suitor besides himself based purely on the physical characteristic of her size. This can also be found when the narrator’s girlfriend describes his long eyelashes, professing that she can’t believe “...anybody hurt a man with eyelashes like this” (Ibid. 53). The conclusion that he couldn’t be emotionally harmed was formed purely on the basis of one, physical trait: his long eyelashes. Similarly, we find arbitrary inference in Gay’s *Ayiti*, when the narrator meets another character for the first time: “When we meet, I tell her I already know everything there is to know about her” (*Ayiti* 27). The conclusion, that one could know everything about another based on a first meeting is a clear example of forming an improbable deduction without sufficient evidence. A bit later, the narrator declares she “volunteer(s) at a clinic where the people think me far better than I am” (*Ayiti* 31), again, forming a bias based on insubstantial supporting evidence. In *The Responsible Party*, the narrator doesn’t receive an immediate response from his boyfriend after sending a text, and expresses concern: “He didn’t respond to me, and I was worried. I mean, this guy is a god. I don’t know what the hell he’s doing with me in the first place” (Brandon 86). Despite the many reasons his boyfriend may not have answered his text right away, the character jumps quickly to the conclusion that he should be concerned about the status of his relationship based solely on the delayed receipt of a return text. This, too, is a clear example of arbitrary inference.

Selective abstraction, which is defined as the overemphasis of selected facts of a situation while concurrently ignoring others, is apparent in the examination of Diaz’s and

Gay's work. In *Drown*, Diaz's narrator introduces his father's lover by describing her ambiguity to his affection. He concludes that "she was a crazy lady" (*Drown* 186) based only on this behavior — ignoring his father's aggressiveness and her previous, abusive relationship which most certainly played a role in her initial lack of comfort in close-contact. Diaz describes the tumultuous relationship he had with what he calls "the femme-matador of my dreams" ("The Silence" 27). He idealizes this relationship, focusing on the positive facts and ignoring the negative. Gay begins a story with a woman's pilgrimage to the United States from her native Haiti with her bloody conception in a river, advancing to her life in the United States. Although the description includes seemingly joyful moments, she insists that the character is "haunted by the scent of blood...her senses are suffused with it" (*Ayiti* 83). Another vivid example of selective abstraction is seen in *Hunger*, in which Gay describes her relationships to be somewhat lacking in their quality due to her difficulty with clothing shopping: "There are no fun shopping trips to the mall. There is no sharing clothes with friends. My person can't really buy me clothes as a gift" (*Hunger* 179). In this example, she focuses on a small part of the relationships — clothes-shopping trips, clothes-sharing, and receiving clothes as gifts — while ignoring all of the other important components of friendships. The father of the narrator in *The Responsible Party* focuses only on his children's flaws and describes them as "...losers, Martin. They're not like you—they're losers" (Brandon 75).

Overgeneralization is the cognitive distortion whereby a general rule, based on isolated events, is developed and applied across many, and sometimes even all, unrelated situations. This can be found in *Drown*, when the narrator declares "most of the time I thought people, even at their worst, were pretty fucking boring" (*Drown* 114). Further

down the page, he talks about “the barrio rules, Latinos and blacks in, whites out — a place we down cats weren’t supposed to go” (Ibid.). Here again, clear generalizations are being made based on isolated thoughts. Gay describes her lack of trust in her relationships: “And even when I am with good, kind, loving people, I don’t trust that goodness, kindness, or love. I worry that sooner or later, they will make my losing weight a condition of their continued affection. That fear makes me try harder to get things right, as if I am hedging my bets” (*Hunger* 254). In this example, she appears to overgeneralize in her conviction that her weight will ultimately affect all her relationships unless she works hard to counteract this one, physical attribute. In *The Responsible Party*, the narrator describes her father as debating “any Muslim who dared wear a hijab, or kneeled to pray on the pier, on the existence of God, and the negativity religion inflicts on the ‘world according to Yildirim’” (Brandon 104). The father’s sweeping sentiment about the negativity of religion exemplifies the cognitive distortion of overgeneralization.

Magnification is the routine amplification and alteration of ordinary events to demonstrate increased significance of the event. A vivid example is seen in *Drown*, when the narrator’s friend describes his sensation after passing the Hydrox cookie factory: “Holy shit, Cut said. I’m drooling all over myself. I looked over at him but the black stubble on his chin and neck were dry” (*Drown* 47). Cut is not literally drooling, but instead using hyperbole to describe the way the smell makes him long for sweets. In “The Silence,” Diaz talks about his difficulty asking girls out as a college student. When she says no, he describes it as feeling “as though the world had finally closed the door on me” (“The Silence” 25). While rejection by a potential partner is difficult, Diaz irrationally describes it as a rejection by the world. The distortion and exaggeration of

ordinary events is exemplified in *Ayiti*, when the narrator returns to the river where her mother was born: “I had pictured the river as a wide, yawning, and bloody beast, but where we stood, the river flowed weakly. The waters did not run deep. It was just a border between two geographies” (*Ayiti* 101). The narrator in *The Responsible Party* magnifies the incident of her aunt crying in the restaurant during her aunt’s memorial by describing to the reader that all the patrons were staring at them: “If everyone in the restaurant hadn’t been looking at us a minute ago, they certainly are now. This is the best show of the year” (Brandon 52). In *Hunger*, Gay states that “reading and writing saved” (*Hunger* 47) her life, exaggerating the literal meaning of saving one’s life — preventing certain death. These examples illustrate the “crucial characteristic” (Beck 325) of maximization: maximization is not uncommon as a whole, but “the distinguishing characteristics of the depressed” writers showed a surplus of systematic error showing pro or “bias against themselves” (Ibid. 326).

Quite the opposite of magnification is minimization, when events of importance and consequence are trivialized by the individual. Diaz demonstrates this in *Drown*, when the narrator nonchalantly refers to his father as “old fashioned; he expected your undivided attention when you were getting your ass whupped” (*Drown* 26). The narrator later describes his girlfriend, moving from physical traits to relationship details: “She once tried to jam a pen in my thigh, but that was the night I punched her chest black-and-blue” (*Drown* 55). The abrupt and casual manner in which he transitions from ordinary descriptors to violent interaction illustrates minimization of the event. In *Ayiti*, the energetic occurrence of children being dismissed from school, becomes negative for the narrator: “A gaggle of schoolchildren nosily push their way past me, and just looking at

them makes me want to cry” (*Ayiti* 138). Gay describes dropping out of college and moving to Arizona coolly, saying that “no one who loved me knew where I was. I was thrilled” (*Hunger* 94). The diminishment of running away from everyone who loves her demonstrates the cognitive distortion of minimization. The Responsible Party begins with the narrator describing the deaths of two close relatives rather inconsequentially: “It had been a bad couple of weeks. My grandmother and aunt committed suicide—not together and not on the same side of the family” (Brandon 26). The understatement of such a tragic event epitomizes the concept of minimization.

Personalization is defined as assuming personal responsibility for situations and events over which the individual has little control. In *Drown*, the narrator describes his father’s frequently disgruntled disposition and attributes it wholly to his consistently doing “everything the way he hated” (*Drown* 27). In “The Silence,” this tendency to personalize situations is illustrated frequently. For example, Diaz writes about an encounter with a fan that lasted no more than a minute: “You thought I was going to say something, and when I didn’t you looked disappointed. But more than that you looked abandoned....we both could have used the truth, I’m thinking. It could have saved me (and maybe you) from so much” (“The Silence” 24). The idea that his quick, first time encounter made such an enormous impact on the person’s life exhibits personalization. Gay talks about her belief that if she “deprive myself, to give the appearance of conforming, of making some small effort to become thinner” (*Hunger* 230), her family’s problems will lessen. She goes on to insist “...my weight is a family problem. So, in addition to my body, I carry that burden too, knowing that my loved ones consider me their problem until I finally lose the weight” (*Ibid.*). Her continuing belief that her

family's problems collectively are due to her weight show clear patterns of personalization. In *The Responsible Party*, the narrator believes she can, and has, protected her siblings and mother from her abusive father:

Since as far back as I can remember, I've protected them: ushered four-year old Senny and one-year old Aydin into the back bedroom as he shoved my mom into a wall; jumped in front of him as he leaned forward to pinch my mother's arms; pleaded with mom to say what he wanted her to, so he'd stop hitting her; used the money I saved working at 'Cost Cutters' to buy Chinese takeout, a birthday cake, and a Coach purse from the three of us for my mother's birthday. I've made it my job to protect them, so now, my innate instincts kick in. She's sitting right across from me, and I feel like a stake's been driven into my heart" (Brandon 71).

It's obvious a child can't protect herself, no less an entire family, from an abusive adult, demonstrating the concept of personalization.

In *Drown*, the narrator is describing his loving and affectionate feelings toward his girlfriend. A few paragraphs later, after a moment of intimacy, he is "amazed at how nasty I feel, how I want to put my fist in her face" (*Drown* 55). The narrator has no middle ground feelings for her — it is either extreme warmth or disdain. The final cognitive distortion, dichotomous thinking, refers to this tendency to see situations in black-and-white terms. Another vivid example comes from "The Silence," when Diaz describes his mental state as being very content when he's with his long-term girlfriend, yet nearly intolerable the two years following their breakup: "It would've been comedic

if it hadn't been so tragic...I lost weeks, I lost months, I lost years (two)" ("The Silence" 12). The statement suggests he exhibits no feelings in between; it's bliss when he's in a relationship, or tragedy when he isn't. Gay's narrator in *Ayiti* considers her pregnant body as "the worst kind of prison, utterly unescapable" (*Ayiti* 63), and conversely marvels at its capability to create life — showing two ends of a spectrum and nothing in between. In *The Responsible Party*, the narrator describes feeling like "poised, wealthy, intellectuals that vacation in Bali and have dinner parties" (Brandon 80) when he's with his boyfriend. Contrastingly, he describes how embarrassed his family makes him feel: "I'm so ashamed—the drunken younger sister, the overweight older sister, the chubby, useless son with the bigoted father who gets into fist fights at family gatherings? It's too much" (*Ibid.*). He evaluates his feelings as either perfect or flawed, exemplifying the cognitive distortion of dichotomous thinking.

## **TEXTUAL ANALYSIS — RESULTS**

The first objective of this study is to assess Diaz and Gay's usage of cognitive distortions in comparison to the depressed and control groups of the Thomas and Duke study. The second objective is to find out if there are more cognitive distortions per page used in the fictional pieces in comparison to the memoir. The final objective is to do the same analysis of my fiction and memoir piece to see with which category (depressed or nondepressed) the work aligned. The hypothesis is that both Diaz's and Gay's examination for incidents of cognitive distortions would align with the depressed authors; the memoir work would find a higher average per/page occurrence of cognitive distortions; and my own work would follow the same pattern as Diaz and Gay. Proving

the hypothesis would assist in providing the answer to the question which that is the crux of my research: do people who are depressed connect most deeply with depressed writing?

### OBJECTIVE ONE

The results of the raters' analysis of the ten sample pages per author (Diaz and Gay) were higher than the depressed group identified by Thomas/Duke. The average rate of cognitive distortions per page for depressed authors was .82; Diaz's average rate of cognitive distortions per page was 1.53, while Gay's average was 1.47 (e.g. see fig.11).

	Depressed	Control
<b>Avg Cog Distortions per page</b>	0.82	0.55

Author	Title	Avg CD p/p
Diaz	<i>Drown</i>	1.53
Gay	<i>Ayiti</i>	1.47

(Fig 11)

In fact, their average rates were nearly double the average rate found in the Thomas/Duke study. This can be attributed to the wide range between the multiple authors considered in the study. The Thomas/Duke results were compiled from the analysis of 34 authors, whose scores were then averaged to comprise the "depressed author" category. This average was derived by authors whose cognitive distortion use was quite high, perhaps even higher than Diaz's and Gay's, and authors with lower rates of usage. The hypothesis for objective one was verified by these results: Diaz and Gay's rate of occurrence match the depressed group in the Thomas/Duke study.

## OBJECTIVE TWO

The second hypothesis predicted the analysis of Diaz and Gay's memoirs would result in a higher number of cognitive distortions than their fiction pieces. The raters' averaged number of cognitive distortions per page for Diaz's "The Silence" came to 2.60, while the average number per page for Gay's *Hunger* came to 1.67 (e.g. see fig.12).

Fictional Work		
Author	Title	Avg CD p/p
Diaz	<i>Drown</i>	1.53
Gay	<i>Ayiti</i>	1.47

Memoir		
Author	Title	Avg CD p/p
Diaz	"The Silence"	2.60
Gay	<i>Hunger</i>	1.67

(Fig. 12)

Both Diaz's and Gay's occurrence of cognitive distortions were higher than their rate of distortions per page for the fiction work — Diaz's significantly greater. These results ratified the second hypothesis: more cognitive distortions per page were used in the memoir work, in comparison to the fiction.

## OBJECTIVE THREE

The third objective was to analyze my own work for cognitive distortions. The hypothesis predicted that the analysis conducted would result in similar findings to the first two objectives: the rate of cognitive distortions per page in *The Responsible Party* and "There's Nothing Like a Family Get-Together" would match those of the depressed authors in the Thomas/Duke study, and more cognitive distortions per page would be

found in the memoir piece, “There’s Nothing Like a Family Get-Together,” in comparison to the fiction, *The Responsible Party*. In the fiction piece, the raters’ averaged number of cognitive distortions per page came to 1.60, while “There’s Nothing Like a Family Get-Together” resulted in 2.50 (e.g. see fig.13).

Author	Title	Avg CD p/p
Brandon	The Responsible Party	1.60
Brandon	There's Nothing Like a Family Get-Together	2.50

(Fig. 13)

Both scores fell into the “depressed authors” category and the memoir count resulted in more cognitive distortions per page than the fiction, validating the third hypothesis.

## DISCUSSION

It’s unrealistic to conclude that the level of one’s psychological disturbance can be completely assessed and diagnosed by an analysis of one’s fiction or memoir. While there certainly seems to be a correlation between depressed writers and the more frequent occurrence of cognitive distortions, unless a much larger, more clinical study is performed, the link between the two remains merely an association. Even the Thomas/Duke study, while fascinating to me, is flawed by the lack of concrete, clinical diagnosis of the authors used in both the test and the control groups. However, these results, though imperfect, made me wonder whether or not this depressed writing is beneficial to the depressed author. I knew how reading the powerful words, ladled with cognitive distortions, made me feel, but did they writers benefit from their own expression?

While both Diaz and Gay have been open about their own struggles with mental health, neither speaks conclusively about whether or not their writing process is further damaging or therapeutic. Gay has written and spoken more about her childhood trauma and the concept of writing to heal than Diaz. In an article published on February 27, 2021, Gay wrote that she “is hesitant to call the writing process a healing one,” crediting “her brokenness as being essential to her story” and praising the “catharsis and patience that came with being so publicly vulnerable” (Benton). To date, Diaz has only written one piece about his own trauma and has never spoken about it during any interviews. In “The Silence,” he mentions going years without writing at all: “Entire literary careers could have fit into the years I didn’t write” (“The Silence” 25). This leads one to believe that his writing is difficult, and perhaps not cathartic, as Gay describes.

The statistical analysis of objective one and two found that Diaz’s and Gay’s usage of cognitive distortions in their fiction work fell in line with those of the depressed group of the Thomas/Duke study, and more cognitive distortions per page were used in their memoir work than the fiction. Objective two of this study shows their memoir work contained more cognitive distortions, which could lead one to conclude that they were in a more psychologically disturbed state when writing directly about their personal trauma. Additionally, my own work’s statistical analysis resulted in the same conclusion: more cognitive distortions were found in the memoir than in the fiction. Although I haven’t been successful in contacting Diaz and Gay to comment on whether or not they felt more disturbed when they wrote memoir as opposed to fiction, I can decisively speak to my own experience. Writing memoir put me very close to the way I felt when the trauma took place. In other words, I can state, without hesitation, I felt far more emotionally

charged while remembering and writing about my personal experiences, as opposed to writing something completely made up. Coupled with the statistical analysis, further research can uncover the depressed authors' own feelings about whether or not their writing is cathartic, or perpetuates mental instability and suicidal ideation.

This study can be used to conduct future research by analyzing samples of both fiction and memoir writing by a larger group of depressed and nondepressed writers. In comparison to the previous studies, the advantage of analyzing present-day authors is the ability to definitively identify authors with mental illness as opposed to using suicide as the indicator of psychological disturbance. While there has been research on using writing as a tool to diagnose and treat trauma and/or depression, there hasn't been significant studies or clinical trials done on utilizing what a person is reading to detect depression or trauma. As an example, studying what high school or college students are reading could lead to tracing depression. Treating depressed individuals early on has a positive impact on patients, as described by Aron Halfin, MD in *The American Journal of Managed Care*: "Depression has a profound impact on patient health, individual and family quality of life, activities of daily living, and daily functioning, as well as on healthcare providers, payers, and employers...early detection, intervention, and appropriate treatment can promote remission, prevent relapse, and reduce the emotional and financial burden of the disease" (Halfin S92). For me, this discovery moved me to uncover the pain that had remained hidden for so many years. Furthermore, the inspiration to write about my own trauma led me to therapy that assisted me to reveal and begin to deal with my own childhood trauma.

## THE RESPONSIBLE PARTY

CHAPTER ONE: YASEMIN  
AUNT LAURA'S MEMORIAL DINNER

JULY 21, 2013

It had been a bad couple of weeks. My grandmother and aunt committed suicide — not together and not the same side of the family. They weren't even the first relatives in our family to kill themselves — we come from a great, long line of depressed sons-of-bitches. My grandmother — my father's mother, or "Nene," as we called her — went on a food strike. Having spent the last twenty years in bed after being hit by a taxi cab while jay-walking across Istanbul's busiest roadway, she finally landed in a high-class nursing home that allowed her to starve herself to death. They tried force-feeding her for a day or two, and then let the process take its course. We got the phone call on Sunday afternoon from my Uncle John: Nene didn't have much time, and we should come right away if we wanted to say "goodbye." I grabbed my iPad and ran out the door — my father, who lives in Bodrum, Turkey, requested we "Skype" him from the nursing home so he could see his mother one last time. She moaned softly with her mouth open until we left. She didn't want us to be there. She just wanted to die. My aunt — my mother's sister — created a device that held a mask attached to a helium tank to her face. She took on this endeavor with her boyfriend, and the Newark Police Department rang my sister, Senny, at 11:30PM on the eve of her thirty-fifth birthday, to notify us. She reported the shocking news to my mother, tears streaming down her face: "Well, Happy Birthday to me," she said. The policeman gruffly apologized for the hour, and explained to Senny that she was the first person on Aunt Laura's mobile contact list to answer the phone.

I haven't been sleeping. Not hyperbolically speaking, either — I've slept three hours in a week and a half.

I saw my aunt about a week before we got the call. I didn't know it was her, at the time. It happened the same way it always does — she showed up in the doorway of my bedroom. She had wild, curly strawberry blond hair and was wearing bellbottom jeans and a white halter top that exposed her pale, slim midriff. There she was, in the corner of my bedroom, right next to the doorway. I woke up and I knew — I just didn't recognize who it was, yet. Their faces are always fuzzy — I never recognize them until after I find out they're dead.

The phone flashes to life with my newest ringtone, featuring one of my favorites, Frank Sinatra. He's singing about how he's riding high in April, and shot down in May. What was it, again, that he says about July? I answer the phone right before Frank gets there.

"Yo," says my brother Aydin. I can hear him exhaling smoke from whatever he's smoking. "Dad's here."

"Fuck." I fiddle with the phone to put it on speaker, since I'm driving.

"He's on his way to Senny's," says Aydin, huffing and puffing.

"Great—just where I'm going." I can hear him holding his breath, then exhaling.

"You know I hate speaker phone," he says. "What are you and Senny up to?"

"Senny and I are going to the mall. I need to find something less hobo and more 'hobo chic' for Aunt Laura's dinner." I still haven't managed to lose my baby fat, and my baby is almost four. Being that I work from home, I'm rarely out of baggy sweatpants

and college sweatshirts. The best thing about being overeducated is the vast wardrobe options.

“Hobo chic, huh” he says. “Did you read that in Cosmo?”

“For the record, Aydin, I haven’t read Cosmo since I was like, thirteen.”

“Yeah, right. Don’t fool yourself — there’s no chic in your hobo.” He takes a deep breath of the poison, maybe puffs out — it’s hard to tell if he’s inhaling or exhaling on my speaker phone.

“Alright — I can hardly hear you, and I gotta go. Talk to you later,” says Aydin, hanging up on me.

There are two big things coming up. The first is a memorial dinner for my Aunt Laura. This was planned mostly by my Aunt Jane — well-intentioned, but haphazardly thrown together without much thought for anyone but herself. It’s only been a couple weeks since we found out about her suicide and the Newark Police Department hasn’t even concluded the investigation, so they’ve yet to release her remains. The second is a memorial service for my grandmother, which won’t be thrown together at all. Every detail will be carefully planned, down to the precise editing of our personal eulogies, by my Aunt K.

The idea was we’d congregate at my aunt and uncle’s house to practice our songs for the funeral. This is going to include my father, even though he hasn’t spoken to his brother in a few years. He had an adolescent-style falling out with his father (my grandfather) about ten years ago, and was briskly disinherited. Anyway, my uncle insisted that my dad be involved. There was a time when they were a close-knit family —

my dad, my uncle and my grandparents — inseparable, even. My uncle felt his mother would have wanted them to be doing something together in her memory.

As I pull up to my sister's house, I see a car with New York plates in her driveway. This can only mean one thing: my dad has arrived.

I just remembered what happens to Frank in July — he rolls himself up in a big ball and dies.

CHAPTER TWO: SENA  
AUNT LAURA'S MEMORIAL DINNER

JULY 21, 2013

“Mom, dad needs you to find the adventure pack so we can bring it to his work today.” My five-year-old pulls my eyelid open — it’s 8:27 AM.

“Ok, babe. Mommy’s not feeling well, give me a sec.” I sit up slowly and head to the bathroom. I start feeling the acid creep up my throat and spit the bile in the toilet. I wipe my mouth and catch my reflection in the mirror. Not so fat anymore, but a bit deflated. I wiggle my thighs and arms, and turn away quickly. I hate myself. Also, I hate Fridays. I smell his cologne before he gets to the bathroom in his “casual Friday” jeans. The ones that I want to destroy with all my might, despite the therapist’s recommendation that I not. The words that are hard for me ever to forget — “you looked so sexy in those jeans today!!!” — ring through my head.

“Senny, come on. I gotta go. I’m going to be late.”

“I’m coming,” I say, toothbrush in mouth, motioning him out the door with my other hand.

I’m the one who bought him those jeans. He used to wear these baggy skater jeans. I always liked skater guys, and it’s one of the things that first attracted me to him in college. I found out later that he wasn’t really a skater — he just dressed like one. But I thought he was cute and asked him to be in our study group, and the rest is history. As the years went on, his style remained the same. He had his professional work uniform, which I rarely got to see, and his teenaged skater clothes he wore on the weekends. So

my husband agreed, after much coaxing (or nagging, as he would tell his friends), to try on a pair of “slim, boot cut” jeans from Express. He claimed that he didn’t like them, but we bought him a pair. And slowly, when I was on my own shopping excursions, I began replacing the old jeans with new, slimmer-fitting, more grown-up jeans. He hardly noticed until they were all gone — every baggy, skater-styled pair. One afternoon he came out in a well-fitted pair of boot cuts. He stuck his hands down the front of his pants, which I despise, and adjusted whatever men need to “adjust” down there.

“I hate these stupid jeans. They’re so tight on my balls!” Ryan, my younger son, started running around the living room in a circle screaming, “Balls, balls, balls! Balls, balls balls!” My husband Matthew walked across the room and lifted Ryan over his head.

“That’s right, RyRy! Daddy’s jeans are suffocating his big balls!” As he spun him around in a circle, he squealed with delight while continuing to chant: “Balls, balls, balls!!”

So in addition to being heartbroken over the realization of my husband’s affair, I feel an extra pang every time he wears a pair of the jeans I picked — jeans that I had to convince my husband he looked good in. Jeans she texted he “looked so sexy in” that night. The night I got up with heart palpitations and went into the kitchen to get a drink of water. The night I saw him sitting on the recliner, texting so intently he didn’t even notice I was there. The night I grabbed the phone out of his hands, read the texts, and it across the room.

We decided to stay together. We have a family, and a lot in common. We both love playing video games, and binge-watching trashy reality television. We love cars and camping. We’re still in love. But things haven’t been great, and I’ve been feeling worse

and worse. There are days I can't get out of bed. I'll have a migraine, or an upset stomach, or just feel under the weather. And then my aunt killed herself, and my grandmother went on a food strike. And here I am, spitting up acid from my stomach every couple hours. I upped my meds, got a stronger prescription of Xanax, saw all my doctors, but I still feel like crap.

I find the "adventure pack," a backpack with coloring books, markers, and a few plastic dinosaurs and cars in it, and bring it out to the living room. The boys are both sitting on the couch, looking tired, but ready to go with their dad to work.

"Here it is, boys," I say, handing the backpack to my eldest.

"No, I want to hold it," screams Ryan, the baby. His brother hides the backpack behind his back.

"No, Ryan. You're not responsible enough." Ryan hits him in the face so hard his glasses fly off his face and across the room. Ethan kicks him, and then Ryan bites his arm. All in a matter of twenty seconds. My head is pounding and my stomach is turning.

"Owwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwww," screams Ethan. "Mom! Can't you do something?" Ethan's arm is bleeding.

Matthew comes into the room and grabs Ryan. He kicks and scream, but Matthew holds him tightly.

"I'm getting his shoes on. Please take Ethan out to the car." His arm is still bleeding, and I go to get a paper towel with ice.

"Here you go, honey. Let's go outside." I lead him out the door when I see it — a small red car with yellow plates sitting in the driveway.

Whenever my dad comes to the US, he uses what we like to call “a sneak attack.” He visits about twice a year, and I think it's more to check on his businesses than to see us. He says he likes to surprise us, so he never tells us when he's coming. It's generally when my house is at its messiest that he pulls into the driveway in a car with New York plates. This is because he always comes into JFK instead of Newark — it's the cheapest flight. And he rents the cheapest car after negotiating it down to the cheapest price from the cheapest car rental agency he can find at JFK.

There's his wife, Zeynep, in the front seat beside him — we were all hoping that he'd leave her at home to come to this funeral, but no such luck. Ethan runs up to the car screaming, “Grandpooshka!”

That was dad's idea — he refused to be Dede, like his father, and “grandpa” was too American for dad.

“Ethancigim!” he says, kissing and hugging him. Ryan runs into his arms screaming, “Shuuuut up! Shuuuut up!” My dad made this up — they scream “shut up” to each other in funny voices. The kids love my father. There's no denying that he's a fun guy. He has tons of energy for a 60-year old, and plays very physical games with them, like wrestling, running, flipping, and jumping-type things. Also, he brings them each four or five toys from the bazaar that probably cost a total of five US dollars.

“Daddy,” I scream. My siblings always make fun of me for calling him “daddy.” But it's “our thing,” dad and I.

“Honey, look at you!” he says. “How did you do it?” he exclaims, as he gives me a big squeeze. He keeps hold of my upper arms, literally squeezing the fat, and steps back to look at me.

“I always told you there was a beauty queen under all that.” He puffs air into his cheeks, making his face look exaggeratedly fat. Like he thought I used to look. I suck my cheeks in a bit, to emphasize my now more hollowed cheeks.

“You know how I did it, daddy,” I say. Zeynep gets out of the car. She gives me an air kiss on each side of my cheeks. She is the only Turkish woman I have ever met who is completely unaffectionate. Most Turks are over-the-top, dripping sweet with affection to an overbearing level — arms around each other, calling each other “sweetheart,” “honey,” and “sister.” Not our stepmother, though. She’s cold as ice. And a bitch. As she eyes me up and down, I pull down my shorts to try and cover myself. She reaches out and touches my upper thigh.

“What do you do about this po-po, though,” she says, jiggling the deflated jello that is my thigh. I back away. As if I’m not self-conscious enough every hour of every day. My dad stands next to his wife, nodding as he jiggles my arms.

“Oh, it’s not so bad,” I say, pushing his hands away and my sleeve down, to cover my arms. “It’s better than being as fat as I was before.” I swallow hard, trying to push back the sob creeping up my throat.

“How’s your sister doing, honey?” asks my father, completely oblivious to the fact he just crushed my soul. “I mean, health-wise,” he adds. He’s asking me about her weight.

“She’s doing great, dad” I say.

“Yeah, but is she up again?” he asks.

“No, dad,” I say. “She’s about the same as she was last time.” His wife is still looking me up and down cynically. Just then, Yasi pulls in. I catch her eye from the road

as she's waiting to turn in. Yasi and I have this very strong psychic connection — we can speak to each other without saying a word. She looks exhausted. She's wearing sweatpants and a college t-shirt. Over that, she has a long navy blue cardigan — the kind of sweaters Mr. Rogers used to wear. Her hair is in a messy bun, she's wearing no makeup, and she has her glasses on.

“Hey, Yasi!” he says.

“Hi, Dad,” she says, giving him a kiss on each cheek. He hugs her, squeezing the fat on her upper arm.

“Honey, are you sick?” he asks her.

“No, dad,” she says. “I'm just really tired.”

“Oh, honey,” he says. “Is it work?”

“Not really, Dad,” she says sarcastically, although dad won't know it. He never gets sarcasm. “It's seems I had a really shitty couple of weeks.”

“Come on, Yas,” he says. “This is life. Death is a part of life.”

Yasi moves forward to kiss Zeynep on both sides of the cheek, and they both get back into the rental.

“Honies, I know you're on your way out, and we're exhausted. We just wanted to say a quick ‘Hello.’”

“OK, daddy,” I say. “We'll talk to you tomorrow.”

I hop into my sister's black van. “God, he had to bring her,” she says.

“Oh, you missed the best part,” I say. “She asked me about my ‘po-po.’”

“What the fuck is a ‘po-po?’ She's such a fucking cunt. She's lucky I wasn't there.” Yasi is my hero. She's been my protector since the day I was born. Don't get me

wrong — she can be a giant, judgmental pain in the ass. But you'll never find a sister more loyal.

“The next time I see her, I'm gonna ask her why she's such an asshole.” We laugh, both knowing she'll never do it. We'll continue take whatever shit my father, his wife, and his new kids dish out.

“Did you see the aunts today,” she asks me. Our aunts from Nebraska are here — our remaining two aunts, that is — Aunt Jane and Aunt Joann. Aunt Jane is mom's youngest sibling. She was born when my mother was eight. The other three girls — mom, Aunt Joann, and Aunt Laura — were all born less than a year apart. Aunt Laura and mom stayed here on the east coast when my aunts and grandparents moved to Nebraska in 1977. My grandparents died several years ago, thankfully. This news about Aunt Laura would likely have killed them.

“Please, I spent the whole day with them. Mom finally hit her breaking point with Aunt Jane.” My mom is possibly the kindest, most patient woman on earth. She defends and protects Aunt Jane's foolish actions by constantly reminding us that she grew up mostly alone, due to the vast age difference between her and the older three siblings, with “older parents” that worked all the time. Also, she reminds us that she grew up in Nebraska — the shit-kickin' capital of the world.

“So, Jane was on the phone trying to find butterflies to release after the dinner tomorrow night. Mom was cleaning the kitchen — gritting her teeth and rolling her eyes while Jane was talking in the other room. Finally, Jane is like ‘Denithe, how far ith Wethth Windthor?’” I can't help myself. Aunt Jane has this really funny, whinny voice with a slight lisp, and I imitate her to perfection. My siblings find it hilarious.

“So Mom goes, ‘Jane, West Windsor is nearly an hour and a half away.’ Then Jane starts asking about trains, or if one of us could drive her, and mom goes, ‘Jane, I can’t do it. This dinner you planned is tomorrow. We haven’t even started working on the power point presentation you told everyone we were putting together.’ Aunt Jane got really quiet. I mean, mom was as angry as I’ve ever seen her before.”

“Bravo, mom. It’s about time she reined that crazy woman in.” Yasi has much less patience for our Aunt Jane. Or anything else.

We get to the mall and walk in through Lord and Taylor.

“Hang on, Senny.” I follow her over to the scarves.

“I told mom I’d look for some accessories to doll up her black shirt.” Yasi’s looking at scarves, when I see it: a long pink scarf — salmon color on one side, and pale pink on the other. My sister had that scarf — not the very same one, but something just like it. Dad bought it for her from a department store in the basement of the World Trade Center, where he worked as an engineer on the 88<sup>th</sup> floor. He bought it to cover the bruised marks around her throat — the marks his hands left when he lifted her up by her neck to move her out of the way. She was standing in front of my mom during one of his scariest rages. He had backed mom into a corner, and moved closer and closer, getting angrier and angrier with each step. I was scared, and our little brother was really scared, so I grabbed him and hid us behind the sofa. But Yasemin just stood there watching, like she always did, tears running down her face, begging my father to stop. She jumped in front of my mom at the wrong time — dad was enraged. He lifted Yasi up by her neck to push her aside. At this point, mom started screaming and trying to get to Yasemin. The

prints on her neck appeared immediately. Actually, she successfully put an end to my dad's rampage. The last thing she needs right now is a memory like that.

"Come on, Yas. Let's see what they have at the Gap. I have a coupon." She steps into stride with me, and I realize that as hard as I tried to move her away, she got a glimpse of the scarf, too.

"I hate pink," she says.

"I hate dad," I say

CHAPTER THREE: AYDIN  
AUNT LAURA'S MEMORIAL DINNER

JULY 22, 2013

Christ, what is she doing? In the front yard....really? In addition to the fat, Midwestern woman chasing something — what, fireflies? — in the front yard, our driveway looks like a parking lot. I've told my sisters for years now that we're white trash. I park my jeep behind Yasi's car, and sneak off to the back of the yard to smoke before I have to face my family.

I'm not doing well with all this. Certainly, suicide is never pleasant, but identifying your aunt's dead body elevates the whole thing to the next level of trauma. Then there was the apartment we had to clean out. It reeked of death. And not stale, nursing home filth — human decomposition. The mattress was blood soaked with the permanent indentation of my aunt's body, which had lain in that position for two weeks before she was found. The cats were in and out of the window — lurking on the stoop, eyeing us suspiciously as we packed her things in brightly colored storage boxes. She loved those cats. That was the reason why the smell didn't permeate the building any faster — she left the window wide open for them, a row of bowls lining the sill.

“Hi, Aunt Jane!” She's on her way up the stairs, and hasn't seen me yet.

“Oh hi, Aydin. It's nice to see you.” God, that ridiculous lisp. Senny does it so well. “I caught a butterfly to release after the dinner.” She's holding up a jar that clearly contains a moth.

“Oh.....ok! It looks like a spotted grass moth.” Don’t ask how I remember that — I’ve loved animals since I was a kid. Her face falls and her expression matches that of an infant about to wail. “Which I believe, Aunt Jane, are even prettier than the butterflies you can find around here.”

She’s inspecting the jar with this gigantic pout on her face. She looks like a big, fat 50-year-old toddler. My sister, Senny, comes out on the porch, her usual glass of chardonnay in hand. “Aydin!” She comes over to give me a kiss on the cheek, which is only something she’d do if she were wasted.

“Senny, do you think this is a moth or a butterfly?” Aunt Jane is a tween trapped in a fifty year old’s body. She’s self-involved, emotionally instable, and insecure. It’s funny for about a minute, and then it’s intolerable.

“Did you ask the professor?” Senny puts her arm around me — another sure sign that she’s half in the bag.

“Aydin said it’s a moth,” she *literally* whines.

“A very pretty moth, though.” I just can’t keep this going. I open the screen door and head inside.

“Uncle Aydin!” My nephews are running around the kitchen-dining room-living room circuit like maniacs. I grab Ryan, the only one to recognize I’ve walked into the room. God, we need some little girls in this family.

“Remember when Dede was dead?” Ryan says some pretty weird things. Not usually completely out of the blue, but often a bit strange and jarring.

“Do you mean the funeral we had for Dede last year? When we all sang songs, and went to a restaurant afterwards?” Dede was my grandfather — my father’s father, and the kids’ great grandfather. In the “way of my family,” a carnival was made out of his funeral, as well.

“Yes. And remember when he was like, dead?” The other boys temporarily suspended the running game to get involved in the conversation.

“Ryan, he’s still dead. When you die, you’re dead forever.” This was Ethan, his older brother and the oldest of the kids. I’m pretty sure he’s about eight.

“I think Ryan was remembering the dinner and funeral service we had for him — kind of like what we’re doing tonight.” Yasi breezes down the hallway with a pot of hair gel in her hands.

“Alex and Julian, time for hair!” My nephew Alex sits down on the couch, and Yasi gives him a big kiss. This is interesting to see because the three of us have never been super-affectionate people. But we drench the kids with kisses and hugs. “Hey, Uncle Aydin,” she says.

I pat her on the head as I head down the hall into my mom’s room. The door is closed, which she only does when she’s getting ready, so I knock.

“Yes?” Her voice is strained. I can tell she’s pissed.

“Mom, it’s me.” I walk in slowly, just in case she’s changing or something. She’s sitting on the bed with a hand mirror, applying some kind of eye make-up.

“Hey, Aydin,” she says, squinting at me. She is nearly blind without her glasses.

“How are you holding up?” She puts her mirror and eye pencil down, and reaches for her eyeglasses.

“Jane is mad at me. I wouldn’t drive her down to fucking Princeton to buy a half dozen butterflies.” A very sure sign she’s stressed is the “fucking” that found its way into the sentence. Mom is not a prude, but she’s not nearly as vulgar as the rest of us. She reserves her “fucks” for necessity.

“Mom, she’ll get over it. Do you know where we’re going? I’m driving, but you know I have no idea what’s where up there.” We (and by we, I definitely mean Aunt Jane) decided to have this dinner in Newton, NJ where my mom grew up. There are still some relatives out there, and we’re the only ones who have to trek out to the country.

“I printed directions this afternoon, just in case. But I do know the restaurant.” Mom grabs a scarf and her pocketbook.

“They’ll be gone tomorrow, mom. Just keep that in mind.”

My mom’s expression is seriously pained for a moment, and I’m afraid she’s going to cry.

“I love my sisters, Aydin. It’s just that I didn’t need all this right now. I feel like I’m going to have a breakdown.” I give her a hug.

“Mom, we all understand. You’re doing great. No one else puts up with the kind of shit you do.” I follow her down the hall into the living room, where the boys are getting their shoes on. Senny is still on the porch with Aunt Jane, and Yasi is rushing around the living room gathering toys.

“OK, come on guys!” I head out to the porch. Uncle Bobby and Senny’s husband are standing next to the grill talking about my cousin Tyler.

“He’s on the Enterprise, now. That’s the first ship he was ever stationed on. That’s the one where he got to meet President Bush.” They are so proud of Tyler—they treat his mediocre naval accomplishments like a master’s degree from Harvard.

“OK, guys, I think we’re ready to go. Aunt Jane and Uncle Bobby—you guys come with me and mom.” Yasi and Senny buckle the kids into the van, as Aunt Joann and my mom file out of the house. An hour in the van with the aunts — there’s not enough marijuana in the world to prepare me for this.

CHAPTER FOUR: YASEMIN  
AUNT LAURA'S MEMORIAL DINNER

JULY 22, 2013

“Hi, Uncle Aydin!!” Ryan screams from the backseat.

My brother is headed toward the back of the restaurant. He nods and raises his hand in greeting. By the look on his face and his rapid departure out of the car, I'm guessing the car ride went as well as I expected.

“He better watch what he ‘does’ out here,” I say, using air quotations for the “does.” I know he smokes marijuana, and I don't like it.

My husband rolls his eyes as he gathers bags out of the back of the car. “Relax, honey — everybody smokes weed. It's even legal in some states.”

I'm not good with drugs and alcohol. I did get to try Xanax once during an MRI, and it was pretty awesome. As they strapped me in and rolled me back into the machine, I thought for a second, “what if I have a brain tumor?” One second later, I thought, “who cares? Everybody dies,” which was a great departure from the usual anxiety that suffocates my every orifice when I think about death. I get the kids out of the car and quickly realize why my youngest son Julian is coming out so slowly. He has a giant pink stain all over his light khaki pants.

“Julian, are you kidding me?” I say.

“Sorry, mom,” he says, looking at the ground.

“Great, and I don't even have a change of pants for you. Honey, you're five years old – you're too old to be spilling all the time!” I say. He lifts his head up, and I see the

tears welling. Great, Yas — make your five-year old son cry over a spilled juice box. I really need to get some fucking sleep. I grab my youngest son and hug him close to me.

“I’m so sorry, honey. Please don’t cry! Mommy’s not mad at you. Mommy’s really grumpy. Do you forgive me?” I lift his chin and kiss his tiny pout. I always thought it was so weird to see parents kiss their kids on the lips, until the moment I had my kids. At this point, I can’t imagine the day they’ll no longer allow me to kiss them on the lips. It’s too sad.

My older son and nephew are standing in the parking lot talking and fooling around — I can just see them walking across the lot without looking both ways.

“Chris, will you grab Alex and Ethan, please,” I say as I lift Julian out of the car.

“Honey, the kids are fine. I’m right here,” he says.

“I mean, come on, can you like hold their hands or something? Give me a break here,” I say.

“Yasemin, I’m right here. Chill out,” he says.

I hate myself when I act this way — it reminds me of my father. All three of us have a few of his traits. I see my dad come out when I’m stressed. I take my frustrations out on my family for silly reasons when I get like this. Like today. Or yesterday. Or the day before yesterday.

I haven’t seen my two cousins in about fifteen years. They had some kind of falling out with my aunt, which my mom and Aunt Jane still believe led to her suicide. My mother tried to intervene when Aunt Laura first told her about the situation. According to my Aunt Laura, she applied for a credit card in my cousin Jane’s name in order to take out enough cash to put down a deposit on a new apartment. She didn’t tell

Jane, and had every intention of paying it all back. Apparently, this was the last straw and both my cousins left her.

When my mom sends an email to my cousin Jane, she tells my mom kindly, but definitively, to stay out of it — that there's much more involved and she *really* didn't want to hear the details. My mom was hurt and upset that she couldn't fix anything, and my Aunt Laura started to go downhill shortly thereafter. She began taking all different kinds of medications — supposedly things she was prescribed, but she sure started to act like someone on serious drugs. She stopped accepting my mother's invitations to holiday gatherings, and in the year leading up to her death, we only saw her once very briefly, after my mom took her to a used book sale in town.

As we walk in, I scan the restaurant for my cousins. I always thought they were the coolest — partially because they were older than me, but mostly because they were so interesting. My cousin Jane used to do the most amazing things with my Barbie dolls — she dressed and coifed them in ways I couldn't believe one possibly could with the given resources: some dresses my mom made out of scraps of material, a few Barbie brand clothes, and the diversely themed costumes they came in: an astronaut suit, a couple of ugly, brightly colored bathing suits and a sparkly evening gown. She made them all look like they could be walking jauntily down a runway in London, circa 1987. My cousin John was a technological genius. He rewired my brother's remote control car to flash lights and play music as it sped down the hallway. They were just so cool. I spotted them right away — my cousin Jane, with her now husband Steve, who wore an English soccer jersey and had brightly colored tattoos up and down his arms. My cousin Rob was sitting

next to a petite, pixie-like woman with brown hair that fell past her backside and long, shaggy bangs. They all smile and wave as I head toward them.

“Hi, guys,” I say as I give them both a hug.

“Yasemin, this is my wife, Phoebe.” She gives me a wide smile and rises for a hug.

“I’ve heard all about you guys,” she said, sitting back down. This can’t be easy for them. We haven’t seen each other in years—they didn’t even invite us to their weddings. My cousin Rachel is closer with Cousin Jane than I am, and told me that there was much more to the estrangement than Aunt Laura had told us — that it involved substance abuse, which I know from my husband’s experience with his parents isn’t easy. I barely get the kids seated when Aunt Jane appears in the large framed doorway to the dining room. She’s got the poster she made for my Aunt Laura – collage style, like something you’d see in a dreary high school hallway over a locker: “Friends forever— Good luck at Rutgers!” She has the moth jar in her other hand—one was flapping around like crazy, the other seemingly leaning against the jar’s wall; probably not leaning, probably dead. She spots the cousins, practically throws the posters and jar at my uncle, and heads over to my cousins with open arms.

“I can’t believe it’s you guys! I missed you so much!” She’s walking across a dining room filled with people trying to eat their meals, screaming across the room as if there’s no one else there and we’re in our very own living room.

My cousin Jane smiles and gets up to give her a hug.

“Your mom would be so happy that we’re all together,” my aunt Jane says, absolutely blubbing.

Cousin Jane smiles politely. "It's so good to see you, Aunt Jane. This is my husband, Steve," she says. Steve stands up and gives Aunt Jane a hug. She wails into his shoulder, and then spots my cousin Rob.

"Rob!" She drops Steve, and sort of run/skips to the other side of the table, where Rob and his wife are seated. She puts her arms around both Rob and Phoebe and wails.

"I can't believe I never got to go to your weddings! Your mom would be so happy right now!"

My sister returns from the bathroom, a glass of chardonnay in her hand and her kids in tow. She settles right next to Aunt Jane, pats her on the back and hands her a tissue. Senny put a bit of a buffer between Aunt Jane and the cousins, although god knows that won't stop Aunt Jane. My brother walks in, looking very relaxed. He gives Jane and Rob a quick hug, and takes a seat next to Phoebe across from me. The waiter drops a basket of warm rolls right in front of me. I grab a pat of butter and a warm roll, and stuff nearly the whole thing into my mouth.

CHAPTER FIVE: SENA  
AUNT LAURA'S MEMORIAL DINNER

JULY 22, 2013

“We were hoping you’d bring some pictures from your weddings. I went to all of the girls’ weddings. I love weddings so much. I was really hoping you guys would invite me.” I pat Aunt Jane on the back while fishing through my purse for another tissue.

“By the way, Jane, Tyler’s in the military,” I say, hoping to change the subject.

My cousin Jane was named after my aunt. Aunt Jane was the youngest, and there were ten years between her and my mom, who had been the youngest until Aunt Jane came around. Aunt Laura was like a mother to Aunt Jane, so when she had her daughter, her seventeen year old brain could think of only one name she felt special about to name her own tiny infant: Jane, after her baby sister.

Cousin Jane nods and smiles. “Oh, yes — I heard! He’s in the navy, right?” Aunt Jane nods her head, and Cousin Jane mouths “thank you” while Aunt Jane is wiping her eyes.

Aunt Jane blows her nose loudly on what looks like a Turkish scarf. My grandparents used to own a store selling traditional, Turkish “things.” We have boxes of Turkish teacups, cheap jewelry, evil eye keychains, and decorative head scarves. I guess Aunt Jane thought the scarf was a handkerchief.

“He’s on the Enterprise. That’s the biggest ship in the fleet.” She perks up, a bit. “He got to meet President Bush.”

Cousin Jane smiles and nods affirmatively. “Wow, that’s something!”

“His wedding was so beautiful. It was on a dock next to the base. You could see the ship in the background.” She pulls her wallet out of her purse and holds up a picture of Tyler and his trashy wife on the pier with the aircraft carrier behind them. “Do you have a picture from your wedding?” I tried. Aunt Jane is on a mission, though. This is going to be more difficult than I thought.

Cousin Jane slowly finishes chewing her bread and smiles.

“No, sorry Aunt Jane. I don’t carry wedding photos with me. We got married ten years ago!” My cousin Jane is so sweet and patient. My cousin Rob, on the other hand, hasn’t said a word.

“Ah, so Jane, are you still working in the fashion industry?” Aydin to the rescue. Cousin Jane nods, taking a big sip of red wine. “I’m doing textiles for Dianne Von Furstenberg.”

“God, that’s amazing. My partner got us tickets for fashion week. His sister works for Bravo.” Aydin flips over a couple of glasses and pours himself and Aunt Jane glasses of red wine from the carafe in the middle of the table. He and I seem to have the same idea.

“What’s that, Aydin?” Aunt Jane asks. It’s fucking grape juice, Aunt Jane, what the hell do you think it is?

Aydin takes a small sip. “It’s red wine, Aunt Jane. Good for the heart. I’ll get some seltzer — we’ll make it a spritzer for you.” He gets up for the seltzer.

“Jane, your mom loved clothes. And she was so proud of you. She always talked about how you worked for these big fashion designers in New York City.” Cousin Jane

smiles and nods as she takes another sip. Aydin returns and pours seltzer and a few ice cubes into Aunt Jane's wine glass. She glances suspiciously at the shiny, burgundy liquid.

"Ok, Aunt Jane, take a sip," I say. Yasi is talking to Phoebe, Rob's wife, about some restaurant in the Village. Rob's fidgeting with something in his lap, and occasionally looking up and mumbling "yeah," or "uh-huh."

"Rob, are you still singing," asks Aunt Jane.

"Oh, no. I only did that for a short while. I was a terrible singer." He chuckles.

"Your mom loved your singing. She always said what a powerful voice you had." Rob goes back to working on whatever's in his lap. I now see it's his keys. He's moving them around in his fingers, like my grandfather always did with his worry beads.

My mom is deep in conversation with Uncle Tom, Aunt Laura's ex-husband. Chris and Matthew are talking about the Giants with Jane's husband.

"My little Ryry is a great singer," I say. Ryan stands up on his chair and belts, "Do you wanna build a snowman?" This gets a laugh.

"Your mom loved you guys so much. Why did you leave her?" Aunt Jane starts crying again.

"Matthew," I say. "Get Ryan!" Matthew gets up without even taking a break from his conversation with Chris, and picks Ryan up off the chair, mid-song. Ryan screams and kicks his legs.

"Whoa, buddy" he says, turning his head to look at Ryan. "Relax." Ryan grabs Matthew's glasses and throws them across the restaurant.

“I hate your fucking glasses!” he screams. This is a fairly new development with Ryan. When he has a temper tantrum or starts to get angry, he’ll curse. Not in a random way, either — he uses the words with the precision of Andrew Dice Clay.

Matthew grabs his glasses and carries Ryan, kicking and screaming, outside.

Aunt Jane is absolutely wailing. I put my arm around her and usher her out of the dining room. If everyone in the restaurant hadn’t been looking at us a minute ago, they certainly are now. This is the best show of the year. This is my life.

CHAPTER SIX: AYDIN  
AUNT LAURA'S MEMORIAL DINNER

JULY 22, 2013

"I remember a couple years ago we went to Block Island with some friends. It's fantastic there." My cousin Jane nods her head. I reach for the carafe of red wine and fill our glasses.

"You know Aunt Jane," I say, quietly. "This is the only way she knows how to act." My cousin Rob already left. A minute after Senny escorted Aunt Jane to the courtyard, he grabbed his wife, hugged my mother goodbye, and waved at Yasi and me on the way out the door.

"Oh, I know. She tried to call me a bunch of times when everything had first happened. I guess I wasn't expecting her to be so upset with me." Jane sips her wine. "I knew she'd be upset about my mom, but I guess I'm really surprised she blames me and Rob so much."

This is not my thing. I'm a gay adjunct professor who still lives with his mother. I walk the line between depression and suicide every day of my life. You want to talk about art, I'm your guy. You want to discuss the latest season of Game of Thrones, I'm all ears. I'm even the shoulder most of my girlfriends cry on. But when it comes to shit in my family, I just don't want to get into it. It's too close.

Jane's husband Steve is wearing a Liverpool jersey. Soccer is something I know very well.

"So, you're a Liverpool guy, eh?" Steve's attention quickly shifts from his wife to me. Straight guys are as predictable as gay men — talk about sweaty men chasing balls,

and their dicks get hard. Jane puts her napkin down and excuses herself, and I lean forward to talk to Steve.

“Yeah, mate. Who do you support?” Steve’s a big, brawny guy with a typical Liverpudlian, “Beatlesque” accent.

I pull out my black leather wallet with the Tottenham crest emblazoned on the front.

“Ah, a Tottenham man, are you?” I love this wallet. My mother gave it to me for my birthday in 2003, the summer after I came back from spending a year in England.

"Oh, hi everybody," says a tinny-sounding Aunt Jane. Jesus Christ, what is she doing? Just like in a movie or television show, the little karaoke amplifier squeaks with feedback when she speaks. Senny sits back down across from me, and mouths "I tried."

"Clearly, not hard enough," I say, out loud, and looking her straight in the eye.

"I made a slide show all about my sister Laura," she says, wiping her nose on her sleeve. Right off, there's two problems with this statement — first of all, the slide show was made by my mother, who was basically up all night finishing it, and secondly, it's not only her sister. My mom and my aunt Joann lost a sister, too.

"My son Tyler is in the navy fighting for our freedom, so I'd like to start with the pledge of allegiance."

"Sir?" Our waiter taps me on the shoulder as we both watch my aunt pull a small, American flag out of the CVS bag at her feet. And there she goes — she is waving that flag and pledging away.

"This is a public restaurant, and there are many other people trying to enjoy their meal," he says, as kindly as anyone delivering this type of information possibly can.

"Of course, I'm so sorry." I almost feel sorry for her. "She's nearly done — can I let her finish? She's really upset over the death of her sister and this kind of thing is important to her."

"Of course, sir," he says, nodding politely.

"...indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." I'm by her side and make my announcement sans mic.

"Thanks, Aunt Jane. We have a laptop on each table displaying the slide show. Let's play it now before our food comes."

Aunt Jane speaks directly into the microphone again, "but I have to do the narration!"

I gently take the mic out of her hand, and speak quietly into her ear, "we can't use that in here, Aunt Jane. The manager asked me to turn it off."

My aunt bursts into tears, about 50 decibels higher than she was speaking with amplification a second ago. Senny hobbles to her side, obviously more than a few in the bag.

"It's a beautiful show, Aunt Jane," she slurs. "It doesn't even require narration!"

I catch Yasi's eye and roll mine. My mother sees this, and gives me a dirty look while helping an obviously very drunk Senny usher Aunt Jane back to her seat. We're all supposed to pretend, like mom does, that my sister is simply a casual drinker — that she doesn't have a major problem. I'm out of my seat; the opportunity presents itself for me to take a break. I wave to Yasi and point toward the bathroom. She nods her head in recognition, and I'm out.

I lean up against the small gazebo and feel myself begin to relax as the vapor permeates my lungs. I should have brought Martin, but I just wasn't ready to introduce him to this side of my family. Martin is from Russia. He came to this country at the age of nine, when his father's firm designed a building in Manhattan. He went to private schools in the city, and graduated from Columbia with a degree in Biology in 2000 — incidentally, the same year I graduated from Chatham High School. We met at Rutgers University, where he taught Biology I and II to undergrads, and I was working on my PhD in Art History. He was dating this older man — a closeted dean who had three kids and a wife. I'd sit in the campus coffee shop before one of my evening courses, and he'd be there working on his lectures. He saw me looking through some early pieces from India, and began talking to me about the Hindu and Buddhist temples he'd visited. That was a year ago. We started meeting at the coffee shop, and went on our first date about a month later. I keep waiting for him to realize this is a farce; that he's interesting, smart, and gorgeous and I'm an overweight Art History adjunct with an unusually close relationship with my mother and two sisters.

Actually, I have introduced him to my mom and sisters, and he really likes them. My father's coming from Turkey any day now, and he really wants to meet him. I only recently came out to my father, and my father's been particularly keen on talking to me about my "life as a homosexual," as he's said several times. I didn't plan to ever tell him, but I finally got sick of him trying to set me up with women every summer I spent with him in Bodrum.

I take off my jacket as I return to the building. The night air is warm, and I'm feeling relaxed. In the dining room, I can see a small commotion — my mother is

walking over toward the bar where a falling-down drunk Senny sits with Aunt Jane. This has got to be rock bottom. Maybe for all us.

CHAPTER SEVEN: SENA  
REHEARSAL FOR NENE'S MEMORIAL SERVICE

JULY 23, 2013

“Sen. SENA. SENNY! Come on, get up. I have to go to work.” Matthew has a mug in his hand, and it smells fantastic.

“OK. I’m up,” I say, as I sit up and sip the steaming coffee.

“And we have to talk about this drinking shit,” he shouts over his shoulder, as he walks out the bedroom door and down the hallway.

I get up slowly and follow him into the kitchen.

“You know what, Matthew? I had a pretty shitty few weeks,” I say. Out the sliding patio door, I see my two kids jumping on the trampoline.

“This is our arrangement, Senny. I work, you take care of the kids. If you can’t do that, we have a problem.”

“We had a problem the moment you fucked Brooke.” He grabs his backpack and walks out the door. I hold my middle finger up to his back until he pulls out of the driveway. It feels great.

I slide on my slippers and walk outside into the backyard.

“Hi, Mommy! Watch this!” Ethan, my eldest, does a somersault in the air on the trampoline.

“Great job, kiddo, but please be careful.” Water starts dripping from the deck above me — my mother, who lives upstairs, must be watering the plants.

My mom's had a pretty awful life. She was married to my dad, first of all, which is awful enough. He abused her both physically and psychologically. I remember looking at a picture of my mother holding a one-year old Aydin a few years ago, and thinking how incredibly beautiful she was. I always thought she was fat when I was young because my father constantly harassed her about her weight. He'd make us all do "weigh-ins" when he'd get into a weight rage. We'd have to get on the scale one at a time, while he announced our weights and beat us for being so fat. My least favorite, though, were the car episodes. He'd actually hit my mom while he was driving the car. Then, he'd pull over, make her get out of the car, and drive away. I remember thinking we'd never find her again. We always did — sometimes she just stayed there, and other times she'd start walking. The three of us would cry and beg him to go back for her. It was pretty fucking traumatic.

She finally divorced my dad, and a few years later, started dating the single father of one of Aydin's friends. His name was Charlie Boyd, but we always called him Mr. Boyd. She'd mostly see him on the weekends we were with dad. He wanted to marry her, but mom was done with marriage. She was perfectly content with their relationship — she loved him, and couldn't see why that wasn't enough. We were always her top priority. They were together for twelve years when he just took off; he woke up one morning and decided to go to Montana, was what he told her in the note he left. He was going to become a cherry-picker at a cherry ranch. We laughed about it — he had been acting crazy for a while, and we all figured it had to be a midlife crisis. She emailed him, she called him on his newly acquired cell phone — no response. About five years later, we were at an ice cream parlor a few towns over, and there he was. He was the manager

of the store and helped the owner, his live-in girlfriend, invent new flavors. How's mom, how's Aydin, your kids are so cute, see you, soon! Mom was devastated — in fact, even now, ten years later, she talks about wishing she had had some closure on the whole thing.

Her parents died, one after another. They lived in Nebraska, and she didn't make it there in time to say goodbye to either one of them. The only family she had on the east coast, besides us, committed suicide last week. And she had to claim the body, clean out the apartment, contact my cousins, and inform her sisters in Nebraska.

Mom hasn't had an easy time of it.

"Mommy, can we have breakfast with Yaya?" I sometimes think they'd prefer to be with my mom than me and my husband, which is just fine by me. There is no better parent alive than my mom.

"Yes — let's get some clothes on and go upstairs." I head into my bathroom to grab my robe, and nearly step right into a pile of puke. Christ, I don't even remember that happening. I grab the paper towels and bleach from under the sink, and clean it up as quickly as I can. Not quick enough.

"Ewwww, what happened, mom?" asks Ethan. "Are you sick again?"

Ethan is a real worrier. The last few times I drank too much and got sick, I told him I was ill. I could tell he's worried.

"I think I ate some bad fish last night," I reply.

"But we didn't eat fish at the restaurant, mom," he says. That kid doesn't miss a thing.

“I did have some fish when I was up at the bar with Aunt Jane. We had some sushi. I didn’t want to bring it back to the table because I know how much you guys hate it.”

“OK,” he says, completely over it. “Can we go upstairs? Pleeeeease?” I give him a kiss on the head.

“Yes. Get your brother and go on up. I’ll be there in a minute!” He runs down the hallway, and I hear their little feet running up the stairs that connect our place with my mom’s. I check the Advil bottle by the bed — empty. My head is killing me.

My phone whistles at me — new text message from Yasi: “Aunt K and Uncle John’s today at 10:30- be there, or be square!” Shit — of course I forgot about the memorial service rehearsal at my aunt and uncle’s. I’ve got to get my hands on some Advil.

CHAPTER EIGHT: YASEMIN  
REHEARSAL FOR NENE'S MEMORIAL SERVICE

JULY 23, 2013

Nobody has a normal funeral in this family. There are two dominant religions on my dad's side: Agnostic and Unitarian. We do have a couple of outliers — my father, the devout Atheist and my brother's boyfriend, the Buddhist. Everybody likes Aydin's boyfriend. I think it's partially because he's only had a couple of boyfriends we've gotten to meet. Dr. Martin Jakubowski is a biology professor at the community college with this remarkably soothing voice. He also looks like a movie star, so all the women in our family swoon every time he walks through the door.

We sing in this family. We're rather good at singing, actually. My Aunt K is a minister at the Unitarian church. She believes in therapy and self-help books. My Uncle John runs as far as he can from any type of controversy. The second we talk about something other than the kids, our current jobs, or our family's passionate interest in liberal politics, he walks into the other room to find some kind of complicated electronic project involving the seven grandchildren. The last time we got together and the conversation turned to my father, my Uncle John ran to the other room and set up a big screen so the kids could play Minecraft in virtual reality.

I'm walking into my Aunt and Uncle's big Victorian home. As I get closer to the house, I can see my brother is already there with the handsome Buddhist. Aydin appears to be fixing a drink and my aunt is deep in conversation with Martin.

"Yes, I read the book many years ago. I'm so tuned in to things like reincarnation. You see Kay, I'm a biologist," says Martin in his quiet, soothing voice. He's some sort of

Russian — I can't remember the details, but he has a very slight accent that presents itself when he says certain words. It all adds to his wonderful charm. My aunt's actual name is Kathleen, but he calls her "Kay" simply because we all call her "Aunt K" and no one has the heart to correct him. He's far too smart and beautiful.

"Many scientists I know don't believe in any sort of religion," continues Martin in 'the voice.' "But I was in Tibet for several years and I can't separate myself from the Buddhism. Some say it's not terribly scientific, but I believe there could be some science behind it."

My aunt has a way of nodding her head and seeming as if she's totally engaged. In fact, I do believe she is totally engaged — all those years interacting with my father and you tend to be skeptical about anyone's engagement while they're talking to you. He generally engages in the first word of the sentence, and the rest is gone. I shoot my hellos, give a kiss and hug to my aunt, get stuck in a "which side first" kiss situation with Martin, and then head to see what my brother's doing.

Aydin is the youngest out of the three of us. He was only eight when my parents got divorced, and the few years leading up to the divorce were very bad. My dad was at his worst during those years, and because he was so young, Aydin has no memories of the better times: my dad, taking us for rides around the block on his moped; my parents, laughing together when my mother still had a sense of humor for dad's jokes; and Christmas Eve parties, back when my father was less determined to convert all of humanity to Atheism. There was a time when there were fewer "flare-ups." Times Senny and I remember, and Aydin does not.

“Oh, hi Yas,” he says tersely, pouring himself a big glass of something he just uncorked. “Is dad here?”

“If you're asking if I arrived with dad, the answer is no.” I say. “Christ, are you drinking at 10:30 in the morning?” He doesn't even bother rolling his eyes — in fact, he hardly even looks at me.

My sister walks in the door without her family. I hear Martin tell her how wonderful she looks. She heads back to where we are — right outside the kitchen with the drinks.

“Really, what the fuck are you wearing?” asks Aydin.

She's wearing boots that go past her knees, and a microscopically short skirt. This is significant for two reasons: first, she never, ever wore skirts before her massive weight loss, and second, she's thirty-five and way too old to be wearing a skirt that barely makes it past her bikini line. She looks like a slutty cheerleader.

“I just got it. Do you like it?” she asks. As she spins around, the tiny, flared skirt swirls around her.

“You look like a fucking supermodel,” I say. She really does. She was always pretty, but now she looks like someone who belongs in Hollywood.

“Gimmie a drink,” she says, as she grabs a glass and sticks it out in front of my brother's face. He's in the middle of pouring himself another Cabernet, and fills her glass to the top.

“Christ Almighty, when did you people start drinking so much?” I ask them. “It's 10:30 in the morning. You guys are like a couple of winos!”

“It’s eleven o’clock, Fraulein Maria,” she says, holding out her phone’s display which reads: 10:58. “That’s nearly noon, and lots of people have a drink with lunch.”

My brother rolls his eyes.

“Ok, for the record, I don’t usually drink before dinnertime. But unless you’ve got something stronger hiding under that bulky, “I’ve-Given-Up-On-Myself” sweater, I’m going to have a glass of wine.”

I’m wearing a turquoise sweater I bought yesterday at the Gap.

“I like this sweater,” I say.

He rolls his eyes, sips his drink, and nods toward Martin, who’s talking with my aunt and uncle on the couch.

“I’m about to introduce that gorgeous man to our father—remember that guy? The short, chubby guy with the bushy black mustache who just flew in from Ataturk International Airport?” He chugs the remainder of his drink and refills his glass.

I follow Martin’s voice back into the great room. He’s now describing the role of the female goddesses in Hinduism. My uncle sits beside my aunt, nodding as if he’s listening while anxiously peering out the window every couple of minutes.

My husband and mom have the important responsibility of watching the four children: my two sons and two nephews. If you’re wondering how they drew these lucky straws, my mother spent seventeen years with my father — seventeen miserable years. She’s earned sainthood in our family. As for my husband Chris, it’s reasonably indisputable that his life has sucked the worst out of all of us. His mom was an alcoholic, his dad was a heroin addict and he was tossed around a bit between relatives before being permanently adopted by his grandparents. He’s seen things that people from our area, a

yuppie New Jersey suburb, only see on Dateline or 60 Minutes. After my mom, he's probably the closest in the family to canonization.

I don't drink or smoke or take drugs. Today, I stick with my usual vice of choice: food. I've already parked myself in front of the hors d'oeuvres and am stuffing my face with mini bagels smeared in scallion cream cheese as I listen to Martin talk about Hinduism.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Yasemin," says my brother, eyeing my plate of food. "Are you in the 16s, again?" Aydin sits down across from me and next to Martin, who's still too engaged in Hinduism to even realize we've joined them.

"Your stilettos look like the leaning tower of Pisa," he says. He'd know—he studied Art History in Italy for a semester. I stuff a crescent roll into my mouth.

"Dad's coming," I say, mouth full of food. My sister chugs a glass of what looks like water down her throat.

"Yep, he sure is," she says in her baby voice, which indicates to me and my brother that she is not drinking water.

"Jesus Christ, Sen. Can't you fucking control yourself," Aydin says, just to us. Martin's going strong on Shiva Natraja, and my aunt and uncle are fully engrossed.

"I don't know who's worse — fatty or drunk, over there," he says, motioning his head back toward my sister, who just tripped on her way to refill her drink.

"God, is he talking about Eastern Religion again," Aydin asks. My two cousins are sitting directly across from Martin, my aunt and uncle next to him — all nodding, smiling, and occasionally fixing their hair. Uncle John included.

“He should just whip it out so everyone can suck on it, already.” Aydin grabs a mini muffin from the plate on the table and shoves the whole thing in his mouth. He reaches for another one, takes a bite, and then quickly wraps the rest of it in a napkin.

“Shit, your nervous eating is contagious,” he says, tossing the wrapped-up muffin onto his plate.

I pick up the ornate cheese knife and slice myself a big chunk of brie.

“At least you’re married,” he says. “And straight. Try being a single, gay man in fat pants.”

Martin looks over at us.

“Aydin, where was the place you took me last summer,” Martin addresses us loudly from across the room — of course, maintaining the voice; just a louder, more projected version.

“Do you remember? The place we meditated in the hot springs?” He’s interrupted by the opening of the back door in the foyer. The door slams shut and we hear him.

“Hi, guys,” says dad, in his strained, attempting-at-cheerful voice. He’s got the guitar with him — I can hear it banging melodiously against the wall. I brought my guitar too, of course, but there’s no doubt that he’ll take over this musical event. Aydin, Senny and I drop everything and sort of jog toward the door.

Even though he’s terrorized us since childhood, we all seek his approval. I get to him first, and when he sees me he gives me a big hug and kiss on both cheeks.

“Honey, I’m worried that you’re working too hard. It doesn’t seem like you’re taking care of yourself,” he says. This means he thinks I’m looking fat.

“Yes, dad. I work very hard,” I say. Senny isn’t far behind.

“Senacim, helal olsun!” He hugs and kisses her, and steps back to get a good look at her lean body. She gives him a twirl. He whistles.

“Your husband must be worried you’ll run off with some young guy!”

Aydin is last. They hug and kiss, and we all begin walking toward the great room.

“You know, Aydin, I’ve been thinking about men who like men.” I can see Aydin stiffen up.

“Well you see, in Turkey we all try things out when we’re boys — before we have sex with women. So maybe that’s what this is for you, honey,” he says.

Aydin tolerates the least shit from my father. He barely ever answers his phone calls and spends the least time with him when he comes to visit. That’s not to say that what my father says doesn’t affect him. Aydin’s face is turning red and I know he’s angry. By this point, we arrive in the main room and there’s Martin, looking handsome and waiting to meet my father.

“Dad, this is Martin — my partner.”

Martin leans forward to offer his hand and says, “how do you do, Yill-Drum?”

My father’s name is Yildirim, and Martin makes a valiant effort. My father grabs him around the neck and plants a kiss on each cheek

“You know, Martin, I love all people,” he says. “My mother, the one who just died, always taught us to love and cherish all human beings. It doesn’t matter to me if you’re a homosexual or a black person or a Chinese person. I even love the Greeks,” he says. “I do have a problem with the Arabs, though, because they’re such religious fanatics,” he continues. “But really, I love all human beings on this planet earth.”

Martin nods politely. I can tell he's been briefed, although I find no matter how much you prepare someone for dad and what might come out of his mouth, they never quite believe it until they meet him. Aydin puts an arm around my dad and leads him toward the kitchen. Distraction — good tactic, Ay.

“How about a bagel, dad? I got them fresh about a half an hour ago.”

I pick up my guitar. This is the surefire way to get my dad to shut up.

“Dad, we were just practicing ‘Those Were the Days,’” I shout toward the kitchen. My Uncle John is up and greeting my dad in Turkish. The rest of us shuffle around the room to get into musical-practice position. Martin scoots a chair in front of us.

“I can't wait to hear you guys. Aydin says you're like the Von Trapp family!”

I used to fantasize that my dad was simply a little “order driven” like Captain Von Trapp. When we were learning about drugs and alcohol in school, I also wished my father just got violent and verbally abusive with us because he drank too much. Both were better scenarios than the truth — something that made us afraid even to have friends sleep over. He neither drank nor cared very much for order — he just had a terrible, violent temper. You never knew when he'd snap, or who it would be in front of. He didn't discriminate — he'd shown his bad side to nearly all our close friends and relatives.

Dad comes back with a bagel, puts it on the table, picks up his guitar and starts strumming.

“What key is this,” he asks accusingly.

He starts playing the song in C. I was playing it in G because it's easier for people with higher voices to hit the notes. It's also easier for me to do a chord progression in G

— I don't have to play an F, which is difficult for my small, un-calloused, out-of-practice hands. Dad plays an F chord very well. He starts singing — his strong, loud, flawless vibrato booming over ours.

“Come on, John,” he says, nodding in my uncle's direction. “Sing with me.”

My Uncle John stands up a little bit taller and projects his voice in my father's direction. My father starts harmonizing with him.

“See, I told you guys my brother was a good singer,” says my father.

They sound great together, of course. They all used to sing together as children — Dad, Uncle John, and my grandmother. My father's mobile phone rings. He grabs the phone out of his pocket with the guitar still hanging off his body by its multi-colored strap.

“Alo?” he says.

Everyone sort of stops singing one at a time. Dad gets up, takes the guitar off, props it against the coffee table, and walks into the other room speaking Turkish. We all look at each other. Without his presence dictating our actions, it's as if we're not really sure what to do next. My sister grabs her drink — at this point, a Mimosa. Dad's on his way back into the room and Senny rapidly moves to put her drink back on the coffee table. There's a lot of miscellaneous food and hors d'oeuvres on the table and by now, she seems pretty wasted. She misplaces the glass and it spills, much of it landing on dad's propped-up guitar — and just in time for my dad to arrive back into the room. My dad curses in Turkish, and Aydin, Senny and I start maniacally looking around the room for napkins.

“Look alive, Sena! Christ, you’re half dead.” He finds a pile of white, cocktail napkins, and begins to clean up the spilled drink. “I could never take you guys anywhere. Your whole lives you’ve been spilling things.”

Senny’s lower lip begins to quiver — something that’s also happened her whole life. I’ve spent *my whole life* trying to decrease the occurrence of that quiver—make a happier life for my mom, sister, and brother. Since as far back as I can remember, I’ve protected them: ushered four-year old Senny and one-year old Aydin into the back bedroom as he shoved my mom into a wall; jumped in front of him as he leaned forward to pinch my mother’s arms; pleaded with mom to say what he wanted her to, so he’d stop hitting her; used the money I saved working at “Cost Cutters” to buy Chinese takeout, a birthday cake, and a Coach purse from the three of us for my mother’s birthday. I’ve made it my job to protect them, so now, my innate instincts kick in. She’s sitting right across from me, and I feel like a stake’s been driven into my heart.

My Aunt K jumps in. “It’s just a drink, Bill. Can you give it a rest? “

He looks up at her, eyes wide, bright, alert, and crazy.

“You know, Kath,” he says. “I believe in honesty and I have to say right now, it’s hard to sit here in your house and sing with you after the way you’ve treated me our whole lives. You took my brother away from me, you insulted my wife, and took money out of my pockets. You never call, never invite us over — my wife has tried so hard.”

My aunt sighs audibly.

“Please, Bill.” she says. “We’re doing this for Nene. If you have something you want to talk about with me and John, we can discuss scheduling a session. I don’t know if your brother is up for it — he’s still healing — but we can talk about it.”

Somewhere between the telephone call and the spilled drink, my uncle has made his exit. Several years ago, when everyone was still speaking to each other, my uncle, father and grandfather tried sessions with a therapist. Neither my grandfather nor my father, who shared the same temperament, tolerated these mediated sessions very long. I think they went two or three times before stopping abruptly, with my father storming out in rage.

My dad laughs dryly. "I'm not John," he says. "I don't believe in that bullshit." He looks around the room, flailing his arms about in an exaggerated manner.

"And where the hell is that guy? Our whole lives he's been doing this — running and hiding."

Tears are silently pouring out of my drunken sister's eyes.

"Dad, please stop," she says, quietly.

"Look at my daughter — look at her tears!" he yells.

He looks at the three of us.

"You guys love her so much," he gestures toward my aunt, looking directly at us. "Don't you know she kept your cousins from being with us your whole lives? And speaking of your cousins, those girls don't even have the decency to call their uncle once in a while."

He turns toward the girls, who are sitting on the couch together.

"Do you know how many times I've called and left messages? Nobody ever calls me back." He turns back to us. "Where's their common fucking decency. This would never happen in Turkey. In our culture, we're respectful to our elders."

My cousin Kara, who has been sitting on the couch with tears silently pouring down her face, gets up, puts her arm around Senny, and ushers her into the other room. Aydin slowly begins to rise, his eyes on the floor. Martin, seated next to Aydin, puts a hand on his leg and motions for him to sit back down. He pulls worry beads out of his pocket and hands them to my brother.

“Take these, Aydin,” he says.

Aydin sits back down, not once looking up. His eyes are focused on the floor, presumably in shame, or wishing he could bury himself under the carpet. We are helpless around dad — adults, all in our thirties, regressing to our childhood roles when he’s in “a mood.”

“Please, Dad,” I say, still standing next to him. “Can we have a break from this?”

Martin picks up his glass of wine, takes a sip and puts it back down. “Yill-Drum, have you ever thought about meditating?” he asks.

“I don't believe in medication,” my father says.

“Not medication,” Martin says. “And in fact, I don't believe in medication either. I'm talking about eastern religion — Buddhism, in particular,” he says.

Oh, fuck. He had to say the R word.

“In Buddhism, we meditate in various ways to bring ourselves back to a Zen place.” My dad hears nothing after “Buddhism.”

“You know, Martin, I don't believe in religion. I'm a scientist. How can you say that there's a god...” he begins.

Martin cuts him off, expertly authoritative — an experienced professor. “Eastern religion is not necessarily about God. It's about finding peace in the world.”

“You know, Martin,” my dad starts. Aydin gets up, both hands on the side of his face, looking sort of like he’s closing his ears.

Martin cuts my father off, speaking directly over him.

“Aydin, stay where you are,” he says, his smooth voice having a soothing, yet “take-charge” effect on all of us left in the room.

“You’re not ‘the little boy’ anymore,” he continues. “You’re a mature adult.” Martin turns back toward my father.

“Yill-Drum, you need to learn to control your anger.” He’s nodding his head slowly, internally affirming his newly derived solution to our “dad problem.” “I do think that some yoga and meditation would do you wonders.”

Everyone in the room is in a trance. Martin’s words are momentarily suspended in the air — just floating there, right in the middle of the room. Nobody speaks this way to Dad. When he begins his angry tirades, we run, cry, or beg him to stop. Not Martin.

The voice had taken control of the situation.

The voice was no match for my father.

“Look at you Martin,” he says, as his eyes narrowed and a small, slow smile began curving his lips ever-so-slightly upwards.

“You’re intelligent, you’re fit, you speak many languages. Do you know what these kids did to me?” he asks, his voice rising dramatically in pitch.

“Look at them. They’re overweight.” He gestures into the room my sister and Kara have retreated to.

“That one had to get a surgery to get her weight under control. She may look good now, but give it a few months. She’ll blow up again by the time the summer is here. Try

sitting on the beach with that — it's a humiliation I had to deal with my whole life. Your husband over there," he continues, as Martin unmistakably flinches.

"I tried to get him to play soccer, exercise, and take care of himself. Have you ever seen him run?"

My father waves his hands madly around in circles while sort of galloping around the room, mocking my brother. Aydin is still looking down at the carpet.

"I've taken them all over the world," continues my father, as he walks slowly back toward the center of the room.

"All I've ever wanted was for them to be thin and speak Turkish. Is that too much for a father to ask? I tried so hard, Martin," he says. "We spent time in Turkey. I spent my hard earned money to send them to Turkish School at Rutgers University. To this day, they can't speak well. They always buy things for people — all kinds of gifts for me, for you, for each other, spend spend spend — when their lives are a wreck."

I can see the spit flying out of his mouth as he's madly gesturing with his hands to emphasize each point. He's standing in front of the window, and the light is reflecting off each speckle as he gets more and more impassioned.

"One had some kind of a foreclosure, one had a bankruptcy," he gestures again, to Aydin, "this one's student loans are in default," he says. "They're losers, Martin. They're not like you, they're losers. And I've tried to teach them with as much time as their mother allowed me to see them. You know," he says, turning to speak directly to me, "it was her who wanted a divorce, not me."

He turns back around to face Martin.

“I tried so hard to teach them that it's all about how you present yourself in this world. Oh yes, they're very smart, they go to college, they get degree after degree, they are so nicey-nice and sweet to everyone, but this world is not about nice, Martin. It's about how you look and present yourself. Your body, your demeanor, how you handle your business,” he continues. “The world's unforgiving to a bunch of nice, chubby, faggots.”

The sharp staccato of the “TS” at the end of my father's words echo in the room and set Martin up like a spark lighting a firecracker. He takes four wide steps toward my father and regards him directly, looking down at dad's petite frame from his six-foot plus vantage point.

“You tiny, fucking man.”

He shoves my father hard, sending him fast to the ground. While the Buddhist's demeanor was incredibly calm, the manicured hands he'd use to gesture as he spoke so articulately about eastern religions and biology turned out to be as volatile as my father's temper. But like the lightening of his birth name (Yildirim means ‘lightening’ in Turkish), dad jumps up and winds his fist toward Martin's face, cursing in Turkish in this strange, sort of animalistic whisper — face and neck red with rage.

Aydin jumps between Martin and my father — he's facing Dad, both arms outstretched to form a shield between my father's fist and Martin.

“NOOOO!” he screams, pleading through the tears now running freely down his face.

“Noooo, Dad, stop — please! Just stop. Please.”

Aunt K rises from her seat and is rapidly by Aydin's side. She's a tall woman with a strong, broad frame, which she's never shrunk from even though she towers over my uncle. It takes her only a couple of long, powerful strides to reach Aydin and Martin. She puts one arm around Martin, the other around Aydin, and pulls Aydin's head to her mouth, kissing him firmly on the top of his head. Aydin's body shakes, now crying audibly and leaning into my aunt while she guides them out of the room. Dad brings his fist back into his body and by his side. Nobody's left in the room but me and my father. Neither of us say a word for a few seconds.

"Get out, Bill," says my uncle John, who seemingly appears from thin air in the doorway. "Just get out."

Dad looks at him as if he's about to say something, then glances at me before rapidly walking through the room and out the back door. I spot his guitar leaning against the coffee table and pick it up, running after him.

He's halfway across their huge circle driveway when he hears me and stops. He turns to face me, speaking as if we're in the middle of a conversation; as if none of what happened ever happened; as if we'd just been having one of his usual, frequent discussions about how everyone in the family has wronged and injured him so terribly.

"You know, Yas, I had to leave the kids at home. Kathy told me not to bring them," he says, red splotches rising from his neck.

I was with him the day he had the "falling out" with his father, and it was the first time I noticed this phenomenon: literally, the ability to watch the anger rise to the top.

"Tansu and Burak wanted so badly to sing with their family. They're amazing musicians, just like you guys. They love everyone so much."

Tansu and Burak are my half-siblings. Since they moved to Turkey ten years ago, I've seen them only once a year — sometimes less. Tansu is thirteen and Burak is fifteen, and have only met my grandparents and aunt and uncle a handful of times. They were toddlers when my dad emancipated himself from his father and brother. They live in a glass house overlooking the Mediterranean, and sail to the Greek Islands in my father's boat during their summer breaks.

I hand the guitar to my father, and he grabs my arm with both hands.

"Tansu was crying when we left Bodrum. I had to leave her in the doorway in tears, Yas. They're my kids, goddammit! What am I supposed to do!"

I am thirty-eight years old, and both bigger and taller than this man. My belly is filled with bagels and crescent rolls, and I've had enough.

"WE'RE your fucking kids," I say, shaking his hands off my arm and pointing to my heart. I turn around slowly and walk back into the house.

That was the last thing I ever said to my father.

CHAPTER NINE: AYDIN  
REHEARSAL FOR NENE'S MEMORIAL SERVICE

JULY 23, 2013

He speeds up and out of the driveway in his econo-rental. Yasi looks up and I swear for a moment, she sees me through the small bathroom window all the way on the top floor of my aunt and uncle's house. She looks down and walks quickly into the house, pausing by the stairs to whack her heels on the cement before coming in. Typical, conscientious Yasi: the world is coming to an end — better make sure I don't drag any dirt into the house. Another knock: "Aydin, honey, you want to talk for a minute?" I peer under the door — in these old houses, there's enough space between the door and the frame to peek under. I see my aunt's slippers and Martin's socks. I just can't do this. This is not how I'm built.

"Thanks, Aunt K. Can you give me a few more minutes?" I hear shuffling and she replies: "Of course, honey-bun. Whenever you're ready."

This is why I don't tell my father about my life, introduce my friends to my dad, or even communicate with him. He hasn't changed in thirty-three years. You can't expect him to act reasonably, and believe me, I don't expect him to act reasonably. Why would I let this happen in front of Martin? I look at myself in the mirror, as I wipe the tears off my red, splotchy face, which by the way, looks quite chiseled. The lighting in this house is fantastic.

I hear some moving around in the hallway, and another knock on the door:

"Aydin, it's me."

Yasi, of course. I look under the door and see the kitten-heeled Aldo stilettos, looking slightly lopsided from her increased weight. I open the door about a centimeter.

“I can’t Yas, I just can’t. Can you tell him I’ll call him later?”

She nods her head and I shut the door. I stand near the door and listen, but can’t hear a thing. Only soothing, muffled tones from the people I love best in the world. Sounds of the door opening and closing, footsteps on the deck — I hide behind my aunt’s long, white curtains and peer out the window at Martin getting into his small, dark blue BMW. I love that car. It makes me feel like I belong, like we belong. We’re the poised, wealthy, intellectuals that vacation in Bali have dinner parties. But how can I face him after this? I’m so ashamed — the drunken younger sister, the overweight older sister, the chubby, useless son with the bigoted father who gets into fist fights at family gatherings? It’s too much.

CHAPTER TEN: SENA  
NENE'S MEMORIAL SERVICE

JULY 24, 2013

*I get out of bed, put on my favorite Miss Piggy slippers, and tiptoe out the door. I glance back over my shoulder before sneaking out into the hallway — Yasemin is curled up on her side, her dark ponytail stark against the pale, lilac pajamas our mother made us just for Christmas. I looked down the long hallway at the Christmas tree, its colorful lights sparkling in the early morning dark. There were packages under the tree — it looked like there were hundreds of them. I ran on tip toes, like a ballerina, the long, lilac pajamas tickling my ankles with each step. I wasn't supposed to open them until everyone was awake, but I was allowed to open my stocking. I took down the stocking, and peeked inside. There were chocolates—so many shiny, metallic wrapped chocolates. I wanted to eat one, and I started to unwrap it, when all of a sudden the urge to vomit came so quickly I couldn't stop it. I heard Yasi run down the hallway—she must have heard me gagging. “Senny? Senny! Senny?” she screamed, as I hurled into the stocking.*

Someone is picking me up. The fluorescent light is shining in my eyes, and the nurses are lifting me up as I gag. Yasi is next me, screaming my name and looking panicked. I can't stop the vomit. I lean over the side of the bed and am helpless against it: my body's complete emptying of its contents. When it finishes, I sit up and wipe my face on the big, cotton gown that has somehow replaced my clothing. Yasi is standing next to me — hands on her face, covering her mouth. My mom is sitting on the chair across the room with a coffee in her hand. One of the nurses leave the room, and the other helps me

out of bed. There is an IV in my arm, and she moves it while I slowly make my way to the bathroom. I am covered in puke.

“I’m going to help you take a shower. How’s this?” she says, as she moves my hand under the nozzle.

“It’s kind of hot,” I say, my throat feeling sore and my voice raspy. She turns the knobs and sort of shoves me under it.

“Sit down on the stool. I just put a new cover on.” The stool looked like the portable toilet my grandfather used to cart along on road trips with us for my grandmother. I sit down slowly, my head still spinning.

“Here’s the soap,” she says, handing me a small, hotel-sized bar. Her mobile jingles and she answers, speaking French to whoever is on the other side. From the quick conversation and the high school French I vaguely remember, it sounds like she’s telling someone she’ll be off duty soon.

“Are you from France?” I ask, quickly soaping my body.

“I’m from Haiti, love. Do you speak French?”

“Yes, I do. I mean, not in a long time. My dad’s second wife was French Canadian.” She hands me the shampoo — some kind of two-in-one kind.

“How many wives does he have now, love,” she asks.

“He’s had three altogether,” I say, rinsing the soap off my hair and body. “He’s a great guy.” She hands me a towel and snorts.

“Sounds about as great as my ex-husband,” she says, as she hands me a thin, stiff towel and a new hospital gown. “Put this on and we’ll get you back in bed.”

My head feels sore on the back near my neck, and I have a splitting headache. She helps me shuffle back to a fresh bed, and a room that now smells strongly of bleach. Yasi drags my mom's chair next to the bed, and she gets up to help me back in.

"How do you feel now, love," the Haitian nurse asks.

"I'm sick to my stomach, and I have a very bad headache." I touch the back of my head, where it hurts the worst.

"I'll get you some pain medication. I can give you Advil, or something stronger. What do you prefer?"

I can't even believe this is a question. I think there may only be one person on the face of the earth that would say no to painkillers, and she's sitting right next to me. Yasi took Tylenol after pushing out a ten pound baby. She wouldn't even take one Advil. She's an idiot.

"I'll take the strongest thing you're allowed to give me," I say, trying to smile. Everything hurts, and I feel like my insides are on fire.

"Ok, darling. I'll be back." She leaves the room and shuts the door behind her. Yasi pulls her chair even closer to my bed.

"Jesus Christ, Senny. I thought you were dead," she says, her voice breaking.

I'm trying hard to remember, and it starts to come back: practicing at my aunt's house, my dad freaking out, the fight with Martin, my brother crying in the bathroom...and then there's nothing. My sister knows me too well, and it's like she's reading my mind.

"How much do you remember?" she asks, wiping her eyes.

"Aydin crying, Martin leaving..." I shrug, and touch the back of my head.

“So you wanted to go to Vanderbilt’s. We went: you, Claire, Kara and I. You got up to supposedly go to the bathroom, and then there was a commotion near the bar. You passed out and fell. Nobody was with you, and nobody around knew exactly how you hit the ground. You were out cold — completely out, like you were dead, Senny — for seven minutes. There was a doctor at the bar, and he said you had a pulse.”

Yasi can hardly speak she’s crying so hard. She blows her nose, takes a few sips of her water, and continues.

“Kara called 911, and I went with you to the ER. They did a CT scan, and a few other tests, and it seems like you only have a concussion, thank god.” She wipes her eyes on her sleeve, this time. “You’ve been sleeping for hours, and I haven’t slept a wink.”

I reach for her hand, which is cold as ice. “I can’t drink as much as I used to, Yas, and I’m just not used to it yet.”

“All I could think about was that girl, Senny. Remember the one who died after having that stupid stomach surgery?” There was a woman I knew in college who got gastric bypass surgery, and dropped dead after drinking too much. It was a freak thing. She’d had all kinds of heart problems since birth.

“I know, Yasi, but it’s ok. I know what I’m doing. I just haven’t gotten used to the smaller stomach and lesser body weight.” I touch my flat belly. “Skinny-people problems, right?” Yasemin leans over and kisses my head.

“Nene’s memorial is in four hours. You are not going, obviously, but I have to.” She kisses my mom on the cheek, and walks out the door as the nurse comes in with my medicine and injects it directly into my IV.

My mom straightens the sheets and pushes my hair out of my face.

“Do you want some of Gabby’s good bread,” she asks. This is a family joke — the restaurant in the hospital is called “Bon Pain,” which means “good bread” in French, and Gabrielle was my father’s second wife. I don’t know — it’s a stupid joke, but it’s ours.

“I’d love one of Gab’s warm, crusty rolls,” I say, attempting a grin. She kisses my cheek and walks out the door to get me the bread, as I drift into the delightful daze of prescription painkillers.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: AYDIN  
NENE'S MEMORIAL SERVICE  
JULY 24, 2013

He rings the doorbell, and I feel the butterflies swirl around in my stomach. And these are real butterflies, not Aunt Jane's slowly dying, spotted grass moths. He left five messages since yesterday afternoon, none of which I returned. After the fifth call, I sent him a text: "There's no way for me to cleverly put this, Martin. I'm all fucked up in the head and can't face you right now. I'll see you tomorrow at noon, ok?"

He didn't respond to me, and I was worried. I mean, this guy is a god. I don't know what the hell he's doing with me in the first place. I took two Xanax, courtesy of my sister Senny, and let myself fall into dreamland. I woke up at 10:30 AM to seventeen texts and three voicemails from my sisters, my mom, my cousins, and my aunt. I scrolled quickly through the texts: how are you, do you want to meet us at Vanderbilt's, I heard about what happened — please call me (multi-colored heart emojis, kiss-faced emoji, sad emojis), Senny's in the hospital — call me, Senny's getting a CT scan for head trauma, Senny's ok — call us, are you ok, etc., etc., etc.. I can't deal with another Senny crisis. She does this every time there's drama — a trip to the hospital because she "feels like she's passing a blood clot," or "having heart palpitations," or "can't breathe." I don't even care to get the details on this one. I just can't handle it right now.

I shower, shave, iron, and dress quickly and efficiently, leaving exactly four minutes to smoke. I finish smoking, change my shirt, and hear the familiar tap-tap-tap on the windowpane. I open the door and there he is, in his black suit from Express, with a

dark gray shirt and black tie. His light brown hair is brushed back and lightly disheveled, with some kind of expensive, all-natural European product. He smells like clean laundry and the beach. He looks so good I can barely look at him. He grabs my arms.

“Aydin. I love you. Look at me.” I can’t look up. He lifts my face gently by my chin, and kisses me.

“OK. We talk later. Let’s go. I’ve got the Buddhist meditation chants playing in the car. Let’s relax.”

I grab my wallet and phone, and follow him down the back stairs, instantly enveloped in the summer heat. The car is on, and cool air blows right into my hot, sweaty face. I sit back, sink into the soft, leather seats, and let myself become “that guy” — the boyfriend of an intelligent, good-looking, worldly man.

The thing is, whenever we meditate and listen to “the chants,” or the Reiki, or the “haunting sounds of the humpback whales,” my brain settles into thinking about my life. I’ve tried to make something out of the wreckage left from our childhood trauma. I couldn’t do what my sisters did, and conform to what dad dictated for us: go to engineering school, become an engineer, or computer scientist, or mathematician, or physicist. Instead, I majored in art history, studied abroad, worked in international museums, got into a competitive doctoral program, and couldn’t finish it. I choked. I cracked under pressure. I took my consolation prize, a Master of Philosophy and the three letters that label me the loser I am: ABD. All But Dissertation. All But Finished. All, then Choked. And now I teach. I love teaching, but without the three real letters I had been striving for, PhD, I’m an adjunct. I teach three classes per semester, for a grand total, if I teach summer and winter session, of twenty-four thousand dollars a year. Yes, that’s

twenty-four thousand US Dollars per year, not Euros, which would still be pathetic for an intelligent, well-educated thirty-one-year-old.

It begins pouring outside in the five minutes it takes to drive from my mother's house to the funeral home. Martin parks the Beemer out front, pops the trunk, and gets out of the car. He grabs a sleek, dark gray umbrella, releases it in one, quick motion, and opens my door. He puts his arm around me, walks me into the lobby, and parks the car. I stand by the window and wipe the tears that seemingly, for the past few days, won't stop slipping out of the corner of my eyes.

CHAPTER TWELVE: SENA  
NENE'S MEMORIAL SERVICE

JULY 24, 2013

They let me out in time to make it to part of the service. I arrive at the worst time: my sister is starting her speech. I scope the room for my husband and the kids as her clear, familiar voice fills the room:

“I imagine the willows on the shady campus of Robert College wept tiny, lilac petals the day our Nene died. Throughout our lives, Nene regaled us with tales of boarding school — a French school during her elementary years, and the American boarding school for high school. A daughter of the surgeon general for the Ottoman Empire, she made the decision to continue at the prestigious Robert College in Istanbul, Turkey as opposed to returning home after twelfth grade to get paired with a suitable husband. Her father refused to pay for her final years, and she had to take on a part-time job working in the school library to make up the difference in tuition. Of course, she had a scholarship to cover most of it. Who do you think was the brains of this operation for all these years? She was a very special woman, and an amazing role model for each and every member of the Solu family.

But she was also the best grandmother in the entire world. Nene held sleepovers at her house, where we all slept on the floor and sometimes under the dining room table! And she laid down in a sleeping bag with us, telling scary stories, or funny stories, or stories from her childhood. She'd always stay up the latest — she was a notorious night owl.

We played all kinds of games, most memorably bingo and a Turkish version of gin rummy called “Kasdet.” We’d always play for money — pennies, usually. She’d buy ice cream — cookies and cream was her favorite. I remember one night she slept over at our house, and snuck me into the kitchen to eat a bowl of ice cream after my parents went to bed. We used to dress up and put on plays. Every Christmas, we’d all get together at the Chinese Restaurant to celebrate. She’d take us into the bathroom and we’d blow bubbles in our hands with soap. How about the purple Cadillac? I thought it was the coolest car in the world...whose grandmother would choose purple? She loved to shop for bargains. We used to go to Woolworths, where she’d browse the aisles searching for deals. In recent year’s influx of ‘Dollar Stores,’ I always thought how much she would have loved them. But she had her accident, and things would never be the same.

I know she is happy now. I know she is free, wherever she is. She's free of pain, and the restrictions her terrible twist of fate handed her. She remembers everyone's name, and can go wherever she wants. And we aren't sad. We are happy for her life, and how she helped formed ours. And most of all, for the love she unconditionally provided us all.”

There isn’t a dry eye in the room. My Aunt Jane is actually blubbering in the front row. My mom has her arm around her, and Aunt Jane puts her head on mom’s shoulder. Aydin walks past me to the front of the room, and Yasemin grabs her guitar. I get up, take my place next to my cousins and siblings, and together we sing her favorite song to her one last time: Kokomo, by the Beach Boys.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN: YASEMIN

## THANKSGIVING

NOVEMBER 28, 2013

"What makes the temple truly unique, though, is the placement of the goddess Lakshmi," Martin says, pausing to take a sip of his red wine. Aydin grabs his glass and mine, and refills them. I motion to him to stop pouring — I've had two glasses already, and one more will make me goofy.

There's a big crash in the room where the kids are playing.

"Excuse me for a sec, guys," I say. I get up to check on the boys. The playroom is next to the living room, and for the most part, I feel comfortable with the boys playing in there on their own. This does not mean they always play harmoniously.

I walk into the room, and the giant orange box filled with matchbox cars is spilled all over the floor. My two sons are watching, bemused, awestruck expressions on their cute little faces as their younger cousin is trying to pin down his older brother — mouth wide open, trying to get close enough to bite his arm.

"Hey, hey, hey!" I pull Ryan off his brother, which is ridiculously hard given his tiny size.

"What's going on here, guys?"

Ryan, my youngest nephew, gets up and his brother Ethan runs away and sits on the couch with my two sons. Ryan turns to the three of them and says, "You guys are a bunch of fucking assholes!"

I kneel on the ground next to him, grabbing both his arms at his side.

"Ry Ry, can you tell auntie what happened?"

Ryan has ADHD, and a few other things I can never remember. He's five, and when he starts swearing like this, I try very hard not to laugh. The thing is, he uses the swear words quite appropriately— it's not like Tourette's, where swears and other words are shouted randomly and without reason. His use of four letter words is spot on. He turns his head away from me and I gently guide it back toward me.

"Ry Ry, you know you have to come get a grown up if something's happening. You can't hurt people. Then you're in the wrong." He looks away from me again, and I guide his cute little chin back to my face.

"If you'd have come in to get me, I could have reprimanded them."

He looks me straight in the eye and says "fuck you, auntie," knocking my glasses across the room. At this moment, my mother's at the door. She walks over and attempts to pick him up. He begins punching her and wriggling his arms and legs.

"Fuck you, Yaya! You're the worst fucking grandma!" I look over at the couch, where the three boys are covering their mouths and giggling.

"That's not very nice, Ryan," my mother says, remaining calm. This woman was a Kindergarten teacher for twenty-five years. There's not much that fazes her. He carries on in this manner all the way down the hallway to her room, where she puts him down and closes the door.

Ryan's behavior has worsened since my sister's continual level of intoxication has increased. In fact, this situation probably inflated due to the fact that their mother was present for about fifteen minutes of Thanksgiving, after which point she "didn't feel well," and passed out in their apartment on the first floor of my mother's two-family

house. Matthew was out having a cigarette, and when I return to the living room, my brother is relaying to Matthew what happened with Ryan.

“Where the hell is their mother,” I say, fully knowing where she is.

“This is every night, Yas,” says Matthew. “I don’t know what to do, anymore.”

I open the door to the stairwell that goes down to their apartment, and feel my way down the steep, dark stairs. When I get into their apartment, I see her standing at the stove, stirring a pot with one hand, and steadying herself with the other. I’m practically next to her when she finally notices I’m there, and she slowly turns her head toward me and smiles. Her eyes are nearly shut, and completely vacant.

“Hey, Yasi,” she says, in a slow, mellow voice.

“Hi,” I say, glancing into the pot. It’s filled with dirty, brown water. “What are you cooking?”

“I’m cleaning the pot,” she says, almost falling into the flame.

“Come sit with me,” I say. She keeps stirring, seemingly not even hearing me. She’s going to light herself, and possibly the entire house, on fire. I feel around the stairwell wall for the light, and bound up the stairs.

“Matthew, you’ve got to help me. She needs to be in bed.” I tell him about the stove, and the stirring, and the drunkenness in one, long, run-on sentence, and he shakes his head and looks at the ground.

“This is every single night, Yasi, and when she wakes up in the middle of the night, she starts up again.” He and I are heading down the stairs and into the kitchen, where she’s still at the stove. She slowly turns her head our way, continuously stirring the pot of dirty water.

“Come on, Senny,” he says, gently removing the spoon from her hands and ushering her in the direction of the hallway. “Let’s get you to bed.”

She jerks her shoulders from side to side, and falls to the ground.

“Help me, Yasi,” she says, in a soft whimper. “He’s putting his hands on me,” she says. “Call the police.”

I help him lift her up. ‘C’mon, Senny,” I say. “We are just trying to get you to your soft, comfy bed. Doesn’t that sound nice?” She smiles slowly, both her mouth and eyes closed.

“Yes,” she says, putting her arms around his neck and trying to kiss him. “Come to bed with me, sexy,” she says, laughing.

As soon as we get her into bed, she’s out cold. “I better stay down here with her, Yas,” he says. “Can you send the kids down?”

I walk back up the stairs feeling exhausted. I never imagined I’d be in a situation like this. We’ve had some pretty shitty circumstances, but this addiction thing is brand new. I walk into my mom’s room. She’s cleaning a cut on her arm.

“What happened,” I ask.

She answers me without even looking up. “Ryan bit me hard. I’m just cleaning it up.”

My brother walks in and shuts the door behind him. “OK, we have to do something about this. We need to involve some kind of professional. We are obviously not equipped to handle this.” In the past few months, since we’ve all recognized and have been impacted by the “around the clock” drinking, we’ve tried talking to her, marking

bottles of vodka to gauge her drinking, and moving her away from her drinking friends. None of it has worked, and the situation has gotten worse and worse.

My mother still doesn't look up from nursing her wound, at this point, preparing a bandage to put over the cuts.

"Aydin, we have to give her a chance," she says. "I talked to her yesterday, and she says she's really trying this time."

This is the third "talk" my mother had with Senny, and under the worst circumstances, yet — she drove right into my mother's white picket fence with both her kids in the car.

"What about Aunt K?" I ask.

My mom finally looks up and glares at me.

"What about her?" she says.

"Well, she knows a lot about therapy. And she's a minister. She may be able to refer us to someone," I say. Aydin is nodding his head, and we're both watching my mother carefully. She's been a different person since this drinking business, and we know it's weighing heavily on her.

"I don't want to bring everyone into your sister's business, Yasemin," she says, with force and determination, which is incredibly unusual for her.

"It's not 'everyone,' mother," Aydin says, purposely addressing her formally to express his frustration. "She's our aunt, and our closest relative outside the immediate family."

My mom gets up and heads to the door.

“Fine. You guys do what you want. But I’m not involved,” she says, as she walks out of the room.

“I’m going to talk to Matthew,” says Aydin. “I’ll take care of this.”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN: SENA

## REHAB

DECEMBER 19, 2013

They walk in, and my worst fear is confirmed — my mom is with them. I can lie to him, but I can't lie to her. I wave, and they head toward me. My eldest runs.

"Mommy!" He hugs me hard, and I feel the reality set in: this is my life.

"Hi, honey," I say, burying my head in his hair and neck. Their smell is intoxicating, my children. In the few weeks I've been here, I forgot that part. I knew what I had to do, now.

"Mommy, when are you coming home," says Ryan, hugging my leg.

"Mommy's not sure yet," says Matthew, picking Ryan up.

"Next week," I say, taking Ryan from Matthew's arms. My mom's face literally lights up.

"But Matthew said," she starts.

"I'm coming home next week," I say, cutting her off. "It's my decision, ultimately, and I need to be with them," I say, hugging Ryan tightly in my arms and pulling Ethan's head against my body for a sort of half hug. Chaz, someone I've been talking to at rehab, walks by with his daughter on his shoulders. He's trying to catch my eye, but I keep my eyes on my family.

"Hey, Senny," he says, coming over to us. I look up and I feel my cheeks blazing.

"Hi," I say, as coldly as I can.

"This is my daughter, Jenny," he says. I smile.

“These are my boys, and my mom and husband,” I say, putting my arm on Matthew’s shoulder.

My mom and Matthew look up and smile. Chaz stares at me intensely, pleading silently for an explanation.

“Chaz, maybe we’ll see you in the caf,” I say. He takes the hint and says goodbye.

“That’s someone from my group,” I say.

“Is he a friend of yours?” asks my mom.

“Yeah, we’re all friends,” I say, quickly. I’ve got to change the subject. She can see right through me. “So tell me everything, boys! How’s school?”

“Ryan bit someone,” says Ethan. Ryan lunges toward him and punches him in the arm.

“Owww!” screams Ethan, instantly in tears. I pick him up, although this is starting to get hard. He’s eight years old, and beginning to get heavy.

“Fuck you, Ethan,” says Ryan.

“Ryan, that’s not nice,” says my mom, touching his shoulder. Ryan shakes her hand off.

“I hate you fuckers!” he screams, running toward the door. Michael puts down the backpack he had on his shoulder and runs after him.

Ethan lifts his head up from my shoulder, a bemused look on his face.

“He says bad words all the time now, mom.” I look at my mom, and she nods her head.

“Well, we’ll have to do something about that when I get home.” Ethan nods his head solemnly, and puts his head back on my shoulder.

This is my life, and it's time I get back to it.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN: YASEMIN

## UNCLE JOHN'S NEWS

JULY 20, 2015, 9:30 AM

My mobile rings on July 17th, 2015 at 9:30 AM. The display reads, "Uncle John."

"Hi, Yasi," he says, in a voice atypical of my favorite uncle — the funniest guy in the world to me, for the first ten years of my life or so. Today, he sounds uncharacteristically anxious.

"Hey, Uncle John!" The car seat is in my hand and I'm trying to get everyone into the house. I wouldn't usually answer the phone, hands full, child round-up in progress. Uncle John hardly ever called though, so I figure it is something important.

"How are the kids," he asks. Some people ask these types of questions as a sort of mechanical ritual. Not my Uncle John. He actually cares to know.

"Great," I answer, slightly out of breath. "I'm just coming home from the grocery store," I say, grunting as I charge up the stairs with the car seat in tow.

"Yasemin, I wanted to catch you before you heard the news," he says. By now I'm on the deck, and I sit in the chair and place the car seat down in front me. The baby remains asleep, looking like an adorable little cherub.

"Your dad and his family are missing." Missing? The sun hits me right in the eye, and I use my hand as a visor to block the rays.

"He's probably traveling somewhere," I reply. But something's up. Uncle John may be even less inclined than I to speak to or about my father.

"Yasi, I got a call from the American consulate in Istanbul. They have reason to believe they were murdered."

Of all the things I was afraid he was going to say, this was not one of them.

"Why?"

"Your stepsister's boyfriend contacted the local authorities when she didn't return the day he expected her. Evidently, he had tried to reach her at your father's house for days prior." He pauses for a second, seemingly taking a bite of something. I can't help but wonder what it is; like Uncle John, I, too, am a stress-eater.

"When the police got to the house," he continues, "the door was ajar and the car was gone."

This instantly brings me back to 1984, when my family bought our brand new silver Aries K. I was eight years old, and fascinated by the way the car spoke when the door was open: "the door is ajar," it said, in a robotic female voice. My dad spoke directly back to her and said, "it's not a jar, it's a door!" My mother, siblings and I thought this infinitely funny, from the first time he said it when we test-drove the car, until five years later, when we traded it in for the Dodge Dynasty.

"The way they described the blood on the floor was as if someone was bleeding and dragged out the door."

His voice is nearly muffled beyond recognition, desperately trying to eat this part away. The baby pops open his beautiful blue eyes, and gives me a sleepy smile. I pick up the car seat and walk into the house.

"Uncle John, give me one sec." I bring the car seat over to where the boys are playing in the living room.

"Boys, keep him happy for a second," I say, as I sit on the couch. "Ok, Uncle John — I'm back."

"So the police pull up their information, and go to the house. The doors were open. There was a lot of blood, both in the living room and bedrooms. But no bodies. The car is gone, though, and they were able to pull the license plate on the vehicle."

He brought their big, American car across the Atlantic to Turkey, when they moved to Bodrum ten years ago. His high school nickname, "the Turk," followed him all forty-five years he spent in the States. In Turkey, he drives around in his big, white American van and is known as "the American." Or "was known," I guess.

"Ok," I say.

"I'm sorry, Yasi," says Uncle John, as he swallows something.

"It's ok, Uncle John. I don't know what to say. I hadn't planned to ever see him again, so I just don't know how to feel." I glance at the calendar, and realize it's about two years since I'd last spoken to him.

"I know," he says, taking a drink of something. At this point, I have to know.

"What are you eating?"

"I'm in Paterson — I just got some simit and ayran. I was going to drop some off with you." Simit was always Uncle John's favorite. Back when he and my father used to speak, my dad would bring some back to him every time he travelled to and from Turkey. It's a hard, circular bagel-like thing, covered in sesame seeds. Ayran is a plain yogurt drink — similar to kefir, but much thinner in consistency. I loved both, too, and now my mouth watered for them.

“Yasemin, I hate to ask you this, but I’m hoping you guys would come with me.”

The baby is giggling like crazy — his big brothers are dancing around and putting on some kind of show, involving fart sounds and toilet humor.

“Of course we will. I’ll check with Senny and Aydin.” My siblings may want to do this even less than I do.

“Thanks, Yas,” he says, sounding relieved.

I hang up and look at the boys, again.

“Boys, can you stay here for a minute while mom goes to the bathroom?”

They’re giggling so much they hardly know I’m there. I walk into the bathroom and splash cold water onto my face. I pat my face with a towel, and look up at my tired eyes beginning to weep. My long, thick, dark hair that used to be my greatest attribute looks like a rat’s nest piled on top of my head, with a wiry, white hair or two standing center stage. My olive skin, which used to tan so well in the summer months, is red and sweaty from sitting on the porch in the sun. My tired black eyes are glassy and bloodshot.

“You stupid fucking asshole,” I say to my broken reflection.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN: YASEMIN

### THE CALLS

JULY 20, 2015, 2:14 PM

The baby is down, the boys are playing in the other room, and I'm sitting with my mobile in my hand. I'm used to doing the hard things in the family. It has always been my place to make the hard decisions, inform the masses of bad news, make the plans, get the gifts, the list goes on and on. This is just ludicrous, though. And yet not at all. He drove around in his big, super-American Dodge Caravan that, in fact, had New Jersey license plates for nearly a year and a half until they received the Turkish ones. He debated any Muslim who dared wear a hijab, or kneeled to pray on the pier about the existence of God, and the negativity religion inflicts on the "world according to Yildirim." I mean, he'd do these things when we were kids visiting Turkey, and even back then, we always feared that one day he'd get into a discussion with the wrong person; he'd tell someone kneeling to pray that there was no God and instead of kindly listening to his arguments, as all Muslims he's engaged always have, they'd stab him to death on that pier — right in front of his entire family. And maybe they'd stab his family, too.

I go into "favorites" and select my sister's number, which is listed first. She answers on the second ring.

"Hey, Yasi," she says, sounding chipper. Sena's had a big year. Her drinking got worse and worse, until it came to a halting climax in November: she nearly burned the house down on Thanksgiving. After an unusually firm "talking to" from me and mom,

she went to the emergency room, where they stabilized her blood pressure before sending her directly to detox. She spent the next two months in rehab, and has been working hard to stay sober. I'm really proud of her.

"Hey, Sen," I start, hearing the kids talk to her in the background.

"Sorry, Yas," she says. "Ethan was showing me something on his phone."

"Senny, something happened to dad." Silence.

"What do you mean?" she asks, after a few seconds.

"Uncle John called this morning. He was contacted by the Turkish police, or something like that. From the looks of his ransacked house, they seem to think they were killed."

She gasps, and I hear her crying.

"That fucking asshole!" she says.

"Senny, we don't know anything yet," I say. "And you're right. He is a fucking asshole. We've said that for years."

"But I didn't want him to die, Yasi!" she cries. I had the feeling she'd react this way. My sister will pour out her emotions, and my brother will exude none.

"I know, Senny. But listen, we know nothing yet," I say.

"I'm going over there tonight. Shit — how much will that cost?" She wails.

"Listen to me, Senny. Uncle John has asked us to go with him. He's going to buy you a ticket. He just wanted me to make sure you were ok to go." I hear her sniffing, and blowing her nose.

"Did you talk to Aydin, yet?" she asks.

"No," I admit. "I'm saving him for last."

“You know he won’t come willingly,” she says. This I did know, and was still contemplating how to handle it. Aydin was the most strong-willed, and the least forgiving of our father.

“I’ll figure it out, Sen. Listen, let me get back to Uncle John and I’ll call you later with details.” I hang up, go into the kitchen, grab the box of donuts, and pick up the phone to call Aydin.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: YASEMIN

### THE CALLS

JULY 20, 2015, 7:14 PM

I left three messages for my brother, and texted several times. I knew this wouldn't be easy by any stretch of the imagination. My husband is giving the baby a bottle and I am stuffing my suitcase when he finally calls back.

"Hey," he says, "thanks for interrupting my worst class." His voice is slightly hushed, and I glance at the clock: 7:45 PM.

"I'm so sorry," I say. "I forgot you had class. Are you on break?"

"Yeah, yeah," he says, clearly annoyed. "What do you need? You called like twelve times, so I'm guessing it's not to talk about fifth century Greek temples."

I hate being rushed. It makes me so nervous.

"Yeah, ok. No — I do have a purpose. So Uncle John called me. Our father is missing."

He snickers. "Undoubtedly on some European coast with his family."

"No, no. That's what I thought, too, but no. Something bad has happened, as it turns out." I hadn't quite thought this through enough.

"Look, Yas, I have to get back to teaching class. Can I talk to you tomorrow?"

"Aydin, Uncle John wants us to go to Turkey. The house needs to be cleared out, and they have questions for us." I open a bottle of water and chug it. This somehow always calms me down.

“OK, I gotta go. You don’t need me. Do what you have to do without me. I don’t want anything.”

“Aydin, he’s an asshole, but he’s our dad.”

“No, Yasemin, he’s not my dad. I don’t have a dad.” And the phone goes dead.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: AYDIN

### CRY UNCLE

JULY 20, 2015, 9:27 PM

I have the top off the car, so there's nowhere to hide. I move the car to the far corner of the parking lot, and pull out my cell. Three messages from my sister, all before 7:45, when we talked. One from Uncle John at 8:47, and one from Martin at 8:51. "Hi, Ay, it's Uncle John. Can you please call me? It's ahhh, well, it's about your dad. Ahem. Thanks, Aydin." Next, Martin: "Kay dropped by. We'll talk when you get home." It's nearly 9:30, and I hate the idea of calling Uncle John any later than this.

"Hey, Ay," he says. My uncle has been calling me Ay since I was born. Somehow, it doesn't seem silly coming from him.

"Hi, Uncle John. I just got out of class."

"I know you must be tired. Thanks for calling." He takes what sounds like a bite or a sip of something before continuing. "This thing with your father is very bad, Ay. I know you haven't spoken to him in a long time. As you know, I also separated my life from my brother's many years ago. But something's happened to him, Aydin," his voice breaks, and so does my heart.

"Uncle John, I'll come with you." I mean, how could I not? This man has asked nothing of me my entire life, and had to put up with my father for more years than I have.

"Thank you, Aydincigim." He never calls me that. "I want to make sure we can communicate with these people properly, get the things out of the house, and put this all behind us once and for all."

“OK. When are we going?” I have a bad feeling he’s going to say something like “tomorrow.”

“I have some tickets on hold. I hoped we’d leave on Friday.” OK, so not tomorrow, the day after.

“Ok, Uncle John. I can make that work.”

“Thanks, Ay. I love you, good night.”

I pull out of the parking lot and head to the highway. Nothing feels more like “old Aydin” than driving this car on a warm, summer night. It reminds me of my senior year in high school — the year I was on top of the world. I remember cruising down to the jersey shore after the prom with my best friends in this exact jeep. The smell of the car still reminds me of everything — my senior year in high school, college, England, my first boyfriend, and even Martin. It’s fourteen years old now, with 150,000 miles, and it’s still my favorite thing I’ve ever bought. I have this car because of the car my dad helped me buy, my real first jeep. It was used, but in excellent shape. My dad negotiated the price down from \$11,000 to \$8,500. I loved that car. I was making a left turn and a big pickup truck smashed into the jeep, nearly killing my best friend. The cops said that it was lucky we had our seatbelts on. The car was totaled, and I got \$12,500 for it. I used that money to put down on this car — a brand new, at the time, hunter green jeep wrangler. So my dad was good for something.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN: AYDIN

### DEPARTURE

JULY 22, 2015

“Here’s the folder of information,” Martin says, handing me a leather portfolio.

“La-vent said the Bodrum Kalesi hosts magnificent events.”

It’s actually pronounced Leh-vent, as in “he stares at ‘le vent’ on the ceiling of his bedroom” while his wife goes down on him, imaging it’s Justin Trudeau performing oral sex on him as opposed to Aysegul. Levent is a Chemistry professor who wants to sleep with Martin so badly, it’s embarrassing. I’ve known Levent since childhood, and I’ve known he was gay since I was seven and he was ten. Somehow, his Turkish mom, dad, sisters, and wife don’t know this, though. I marvel at how many closeted gay men there are in Turkey that get away with the ridiculous escapade of “living it straight.” Anyway, as far as I know Levent has never acted on his natural inclinations, but it’s only a matter of time until he does.

“I got it. Let me see if I have time. If I don’t, we can go check it out together over Thanksgiving break.” Martin crosses the room and hugs and kisses me. I no longer shrug away — I’ve gotten more used to his affection. I’m not completely comfortable with the public displays of affection, but I’m working on it. I grab my leather backpack and carry-on suitcase, and we head out the door. Martin is going to drop me at my uncle’s house, where we’ll all catch a town car to JFK.

As Martin turns onto Main Street, I check the front pocket of my backpack for my bottle of Xanax.

“I know you have the pills, my love,” says Martin. “I put something in there I hope you’ll use instead.”

I open the front pocket wider to see if there’s anything at the bottom. I find a small, dark brown velvet pouch. Inside is a set of, what I only imagine must be, platinum gold worry beads with a black opal crab in the middle.

“Martin, it’s beautiful,” I say, unable to curb my emotions. The familiar feeling of tears spilling out of my eyes overcomes me.

“Don’t forget how much I love you, my love,” says Martin, putting his elegant hand on my thigh. I had thought about asking Uncle John if I could bring him with us, but decided against it. The bottle of Xanax will have to be a substitute for the way he centers me.

We pull into Uncle John’s driveway, and there are my sisters sitting on the porch with my aunt. Yasi has on her standard black, boot cut yoga pants and a big, “I’ve given up on myself” college sweatshirt. She looks like a big fat forty-year old trying to look like a teenager. My other sister similarly looks like she’s trying too hard to look half her age — an ashy, puffy-faced-from crying, deflated middle-aged woman dressed in skin-tight ripped jeans and a bright blue camisole with a plaid shirt draped around her waist. I have half a mind to tell Martin to turn the car around and drive directly to Quebec, where we could hide out at the base of Mont Saint-Hilaire and live the rest of our lives in peace with our country, our world, and ourselves. Martin can read me like no one else.

“Courage, Mon Amour,” he says, planting a kiss on my mouth as he pops the trunk of his car and brings my luggage to the front porch.

## CHAPTER TWENTY: YASEMIN

## ARRIVAL

JULY 23, 2015

“Jesus Christ, Yasi, what the hell do you have in there?” Aydin grabs my bag for me, thankfully. I slept for only twenty minutes on our final descent, and I’m barely functioning.

“I had to make sure I had an outfit for every occasion we could encounter, and a light jacket, and a few light sweaters,” Aydin rolls his eyes.

“I don’t know why I’m even answering you,” I say. “Just cut the crap and get the luggage.”

Aydin grins, and grabs his bag. Senny’s bright green “Zelda” bag appears on the conveyer belt.

“Let me guess — that’s our sister’s,” says Aydin, grabbing the plastic, childlike suitcase. Senny said she desperately had to use the bathroom, but with the length of time she’s been gone, she must be doing something else. Uncle John grabs a bag and heads over toward Aydin and me.

“Ok, guys, are we ready?” he asks. Sometimes he sounds so much like my dad, it’s jarring.

Senny walks over, changed and fresh-faced.

“Thanks for getting my bag, guys!” she says, sipping a coffee.

“You know what I wish I had in my hand right now?” I ask the group. “A COFFEE.”

Senny smiles. “I couldn’t just get one for you and me, Yas, and I can’t carry four.”

“Also, nice makeup.” Not only are her eyes and lips made up, but she seems to have covered the circles under her eyes. I’ve got to invest in whatever miraculous cream that is.

She laughs. “Hey, I’m a single woman, now!”

Senny got back from rehab in January, went to five meetings a week, at first, and started returning to her old self. The counselors say “don’t get married or divorced for at least a year after rehab;” her divorce was finalized exactly two years from the day she got out of rehab.

Aydin picks up his duffel bag and heads toward the exit. “Let’s go, guys,” he says over his shoulder.

Uncle John pulls his phone out of his pocket and powers it on as we line up behind Aydin. His phone chimes, and he pulls out his glasses to read the text message.

“We gotta hustle, kids. Let’s get a car.”

Uncle John speeds around corners in the small, old Renault. He rented the cheapest car he could find — an old, maroon Renault that smelled like diesel gas, man-sweat, and cigarettes. As we whip around the corners, I take a quick look down: it’s terrifying. There are hardly any guardrails on the roads in these parts of Turkey, and I don’t even want to google how many deaths there are per summer. Actually, I’m mostly afraid to type “death” into the google search box. I just don’t want to see what shows up.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: SENA

## THE STATION

JULY 23, 2015

The mountains of southern Turkey always bothered Yasi's stomach. Even though we let her sit in the front, we stop twice so she can puke on the side of the road. This brings back memories of taking the same road up and over the mountains to get to the Turkish seaside: Aydin and me on the bus, looking out the smeared window at my mom helping Yasi on the side of the dusty road, while my father explained to the bus driver in his regal Turkish that his daughter had food poisoning and could he please wait a few more minutes until she's thrown up outside the bus? My father was so angry at Yasi that night — he told her if she didn't eat so much she wouldn't get sick all the time. I remember Yasi crying and explaining that she had hardly eaten anything, and my father twisting her arm so hard she had a purple band around it. When my mother tried to intervene, he shoved her into the corner and told Aydin and me to get our bathing suits on so he could take us to the beach. Aydin was only five, and told my father he didn't want to go. My father kicked him in the leg, sending him straight to the ground, and stormed out the door alone. My mother comforted our tears away, and we played card games until bedtime. She was reading to us when we heard his feet shuffling down the hotel hallway and toward our room. We quickly shut off the light and pretended to be asleep, my mom included. The next morning, he acted as if nothing happened. This was often the way with dad — sudden onset amnesia.

The police station is located right off the main drag, which runs along the docks. Uncle John parallel parks the tiny Renault, and Aydin and I get out of the car. Yasi gets out slowly, looking pale as a ghost and sick as a dog.

“Yasi, should I try and find you a water,” I ask her, patting her back.

“No — I’ll be ok. Thanks, though,” she says, smiling at me. “Nothing like adding ‘puking my guts out’ to this shitty day.”

Aydin jogs to catch up with Uncle John, and we walk into the station.

The police station looks like the visa office, and just about every other governmental office I’ve seen in Turkey. For departments that are so disorganized you have to submit paperwork several times to get things processed, it’s clean, sparsely furnished, with a large, white-walled/floored waiting area. There’s a big desk in the center of the room, and a young military-looking gentleman sitting at the desk. Uncle John walks straight up to the desk and addresses the man respectfully with a slight bow of his head, as I’ve seen my father and grandparents do since I was a kid.

“Merhaba, Abe,” says Uncle John to the young man. He gives his name, and a quick explanation of who we are. My Turkish isn’t perfect, but the three of us have a near perfect understanding. The speaking always became more fluid after the second or third day of our stay in Turkey, but it’s been years since I’ve spent a summer here. We all murmur a reverent “Merhaba,” and give a nod and a wave in greeting. The kid is very professional, and nods back with neither a smile nor verbal recognition.

“Lutfen, bir dakika, bay Solu.” He heads to the back, leaving us alone in the stark room. Yasi sits down and begins massaging her temples. It was a long flight, and I’m fairly certain she didn’t sleep a wink.

The young man is back again with another, even more official-looking gentleman wearing a tan police-like uniform. This guy looks about my uncle's age, and has curly, salt and pepper hair with a black, bushy mustache. We exchange greetings and follow him to the back and into a small conference room. There's a round table in the middle of the room, with five chairs around it. There are papers and manila folders all over the table- some sitting open, and some closed. I can see the bottom of a photograph poking out of one of them. My heart skips and I lay my hand across my chest.

"Lütfen arkadaşlarımı otur," he says, gesturing to the chairs around the table. We sit down, and he begins speaking to us.

He's talking about a son of someone (I can't understand who)...this son comes to the door and is having problems with his car (I can't understand the details of the mechanical failure)...the respected man (I think he's referring to my father, but I can't understand all the words) follows him to the car...the son starts talking about god and religious groups (I can't understand much of this part)...there are more kids in the car and they hold my dad and walk into the house with him...(there is little I understand before he continues) they shoot them on the wall...they are found in the car and something about trying to find a party.

I lift my head and look and Yasi, who does the same. "Party," I mouth to her. She shakes her head and shrugs. Uncle John won't want us to ask him in English in front of the official, so we'll just have to continue to wonder.

The man starts talking again: It's important that you look at this (I don't understand what) in this white (I don't understand what)...

Then he opens the manila envelope and shows us the picture.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: AYDIN

## THE (FIRST) PHOTO

JULY 23, 2015

Although my Turkish is, for the most part, colloquial, I speak and understand much better than my sisters do. I could attribute this to my superior brain, but it would be immodest and probably incorrect. I spent several summers working in an art museum down the hill from my father's house in Bodrum. In addition to writing and research, I handled tours and customer service. So I do know some technical and formal language from an Art Historian's standpoint, but mostly my everyday Turkish is quite good. So while I had no opportunity to warn my sisters when the detective pulled out the photo of our dead family, I was able to quickly prepare myself. Senny became instantly hysterical, and Yasi turned her head, got up, and ushered Senny out.

What the detective said, which my sisters failed to completely understand, was that we needed to try and identify my family by the photograph they took of them in the car. This would preclude us from having to view the actual bodies. And then he snapped open the folder, and there they were. My dad, step-mother, and siblings all slumped over in my father's family car: the white, dodge caravan he purchased in East Hanover, New Jersey, and brought across the Atlantic to a port in Istanbul. They lay my father and brother in the front seats, and my step-mother, step-sister, and half-sister in the back. They were wrapped to their necks in what looked like burlap sacks, although the dark blood was everywhere.

“Lütfen efendim, kapat,” says my uncle. Close it, he’s saying. These are his children. This is too difficult for them to see. Before I can say a word, the sergeant tells my uncle that this is a necessary thing, or else we’ll have to see the bodies. He quickly adds that someone, either the children or him, must also review the close-up photographs of their faces.

I grab my uncle’s arm and say: “Uncle John. I love you. It’s okay. I will be here with you, and we will do this.”

Uncle John squeezes my shoulder and keeps his arm around me. He nods to the detective, who takes out the photographs.

“OK, sir, it’s them. This is my brother, his wife Zeynep, his children Burak, and Tansu, and her daughter Filiz. Where should we sign?”

He pulls out two more pieces of paper, and we sign and print our names. He gives us a copy of the official documents they sent this morning to the American Consulate in Ankara, and we walk out, his arm still around me.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: YASEMIN

## TRANSCRIPTIONS

JULY 23, 2015

Seni is hysterical, I am pretty shaken-up, and it's hot as hell outside. I lead her out the door to a bench and we sit.

"What the fuck, Yasi," she cries, quite loudly. Although we're in a country where English is not the official language, pretty much everyone speaks some, and they certainly understand the meaning of "fuck."

I rummage through my backpack to look for a tissue and find a small, airplane-sized can of ginger ale. I open it up and drink. The warm, fizziness of it burns my throat.

"I don't know what's worse — the puke, or the soda," I say, as I set the soda on the floor and continue to look for tissues. Senny wipes her eyes with the sleeve of her t-shirt.

"Or how about the image of our dad's dead body," she cries, starting up again.

I find the tissue and start wiping her face for her. I pull her face in toward my chest and hug her.

"I know, Senny. Weren't we fucked-up enough? Why did this have to happen? Why does anything happen? What did we ever do to deserve this?"

I never talk this way, but I'm feeling pretty fucking defeated right now. Uncle John and Aydin walk out of the building slowly, arm in arm.

"OK, kids," says Uncle John, giving both Senny and me a quick hug. "We've got to get to the house. We're going to follow the detective."

“Please tell me we don’t have to identify their bodies,” said Senny, erupting in tears again. “I just can’t do it!”

I pat her head, and Uncle John grabs her shoulder.

“No, Senny. You don’t have to do anything else with that. Aydin took care of it for you guys.” He pulls her head to his mouth and kisses her.

“Uncle John,” I say, remembering the detective’s words. “What was he saying about a party? I understood that some young men killed dad, but there was something about a party?”

“I have some papers you can read, Yasi, but I don’t know if you should. They’re very detailed and upsetting. But I’ll let you take a look, if you want,” he says, handing me an envelope.

“But they said something about a party, Uncle John. Both Senny and I were confused.”

Uncle John thinks for a moment, and then Aydin answers.

“He said that although the men left a note painted on the car saying they were members of the ‘Blue and Gold’ terrorist group, they’re still not sure this group is the responsible party.



Polis Noktası

Torba Mahallesi

Rıza Anter Cd.

48400 Bodrum/Muğla, Turkey

**Translated to English:**

“Not many details about the initial assault and murder were collected at the house, located at Merkez Mh., Sülüklü Cd., 37999 Yalıkavak Bld./Bodrum/Muğla, Turkey, but the house had extensive security cameras equipped with audio and high definition video. The cameras were also located outside the house, on the perimeter of the property. The outdoor cameras were not equipped with a sophisticated audio system, so we could not decipher what was spoken outside. The transcriptions of the indoor cameras are as follows:

A 1987 HONDA CIVIC TURNS IN TO MERKEZ MH., SÜLÜKLÜ CD., 37999 YALIKAVAK BLD./BODRUM/MUĞLA, TURKEY AT 4:30 ON MONDAY, JULY 15TH, 2015. THE DRIVER (MALE, APPROX. AGE 18-25) EXITS THE VEHICLE, AND TWO PASSENGERS (MALE, APPROX. AGE 18-25) EXIT EACH REAR DOORS. THE DRIVER WALKS AROUND THE BUILDING TOWARD THE FRONT OF THE RESIDENCE. THE PASSENGERS WALK TOWARD THE ROAD, OUTSIDE OF THE CAMERA’S VIEW. ONE FRONT PASSENGER (MALE, APPROX. AGE 18-25) REMAINS IN THE VEHICLE. THE DRIVER RINGS THE

DOORBELL AND YILDIRIM YARKUT SOLU, OWNER OF THE HOME,  
ANSWERS THE DOOR:

Driver: Hello, sir. My car broke down and I am hoping you can assist me. I think it's the battery.

Mr. Solu: Of course, my friend. Let me get my keys and I'll take a look.

(FRONT DOOR CLOSES. THE DRIVER REMAINS ON THE PORCH AND MR.  
SOLU RETURNS 41 SECOND LATER.)

Driver: Thank you for doing this, uncle.

Mr. Solu: You're welcome, son. It's no trouble.

(THEY GET TO THE CAR AND APPROACH THE DRIVER SEAT. THEY ARE  
TALKING. MR. SOLU IS MOVING HIS HANDS ANIMATEDLY. AFTER ABOUT A  
MINUTE OF TALKING, MR. SOLU TURNS AND STARTS TO RUN BACK INTO  
THE HOUSE AND TWO MEN COME FROM OUT OF VIEW OF THE CAMERA  
INTO VIEW AND CATCH AND RESTRAIN MR. SOLU. THE PASSENGER OF THE  
VEHICLE EXITS AND GETS SOME THINGS OUT OF THE TRUNK OF THE CAR  
AND FOLLOWS THEM ALL AROUND TO THE FRONT OF THE HOUSE.)

Mr. Solu: You say this God is so good but you do this to your uncle and your fellow

Turks. How can you do this? (spoken in English: Run and hide, guys! Run and hide!)

(THEY ALL PUSH INTO THE FRONT ROOM, MR. SOLU RESTRAINED BY TWO  
MEN ON EITHER SIDE. THERE IS NO ONE IN THE ROOM. THE ROCKING  
CHAIR IN THE PARLOR IS ROCKING BACK AND FORTH.)

Driver: God is good to those who obey, uncle. You don't obey. You and your big  
American car and big American house built with your big American money.

Mr. Solu: I am a Turk, friend, just like you!

Driver: You are a rich American. (THEY BEGIN TYING MR. SOLU UP WHILE HE STRUGGLES). And you pay my father pennies to be your slave, don't you uncle? (SOUNDS OF SCREAMING COME FROM THE OTHER ROOM AND MR. SOLU GETS UP AND TRIES TO RUN TOWARD THE OTHER ROOMS. THE DRIVER GRABS HIM AND SHOVES HIM BACKWARD ONTO THE COUCH WHERE THE OTHER TWO MEN CONTINUE TO TIE HIM UP. THE DRIVER RETURNS WITH THE PASSENGER NINE MINUTES LATER. THEY EACH CARRY A PERSON OVER THEIR SHOULDER TIED UP IN ROPE AND WRAPPED IN BURLAP. BOTH ARE FEMALES. THEIR MOUTHS ARE RESTRAINED WITH A SCARF. THEIR MUFFLED SCREAMS CAN BE HEARD.)

Mr. Solu: My son, I love your father! I have given him so much in addition to his salary! Your older brother comes to the house with his kids! They swim in our pool and eat with my family!

Driver: You are like the American slave owner, aren't you? You treat my father and my family like the Americans treat their African people. Like donkey shit, uncle. You don't believe God will punish you? Well you will find out, uncle.

(THE DRIVER AND FRONT PASSENGER RUN BACK DOWN THE STAIRS. THE TWO MEN TIE A HANDKERCHIEF AROUND MR. SOLU'S MOUTH AND CONTINUE TO FINISH WRAPPING HIS BODY IN BURLAP. ANOTHER WOMAN AND MAN ARE CARRIED BACK UP ELEVEN MINUTES LATER AND ALL THE BODIES ARE LAIN ON THE FLOOR.)

Driver: God will not have mercy on you. You deserve to go to hell. But perhaps he will save you. You will not forget the Blue and Gold.

THE TWO PASSENGERS GIVE THE DRIVER AND FRONT PASSENGER RIFLES AND THEY SHOOT EACH PERSON SEVERAL TIMES. THE BODIES ARE CARRIED OUT ONE BY ONE AND PUT IN THE WHITE DODGE CARAVAN OWNED BY MR. SOLU. THE MEN COVER THE FLOOR AND WINDOWS OF THE RESIDENCE WITH BURLAP. THEY SPEAK VERY LITTLE WHILE THEY WORK — ONLY TO TELL ONE ANOTHER TO HURRY OR ASK FOR HELP. THEY LEAVE THE HOUSE AT 5:52PM AND MOVE TO THE DRIVEWAY. THE DRIVER REMOVES THE LICENSE PLATES FROM THE DODGE CARAVAN AND DRIVES THE VEHICLE, THE FRONT PASSENGER DRIVES THE HONDA, WITH THE TWO REMAINING MEN IN THE BACK, AND THEY ALL LEAVE MERKEZ MH., SÜLÜKLÜ CD., 37999 YALIKAVAK BLD./BODRUM/MUĞLA, TURKEY.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: YASEMIN

## THE HOUSE

JULY 23, 2015

So this is it. Dad's dead, and we're here.

I've never seen the house before. I'd heard all about it from my brother: gorgeous glass house on the mountains overlooking the Aegean Sea. My dad Skyped in his underwear when the Giants had won the super bowl.

"You were so cute, Yas. We'd watch football together and you'd say, "go suckers, daddy!" It has been some Americanism he'd picked up in college: encouraging his team to "go" by referring to them as "suckers."

"I wish you could see how beautiful it is right now, Yas." It was 4 am, his time, and all I could see out the window was black nothingness.

"You can see the lights on the dock from here. And there's a boat out there—probably close to the Greek side."

The windows he loved so much are covered in some kind of thick, dirty material nailed to the walls over the windows. They are hung haphazardly, and the seams are uneven, with holes between coverings letting long, sharp slices of light into the otherwise dark room. My father's light gray sofas are covered in, what appeared to be, deconstructed burlap sacks. There is activity in the kitchen — three uniformed officials of some kind are sitting at the breakfast bar.

"Merhabalar, abe," says one of the three mustached men to my uncle, who bows his head and responds.

“Merhaba, kardes.” My sister and brother follow my uncle, and introduce themselves.

I can’t take my eyes away from the room. There are more sacks on the floor — some cut up, and some still together. Dark blood stains the light-wood floor, and dried brown on the floor coverings. There are photos on the mantle — my kids at various ages, my high school yearbook photo, an old family portrait from twenty years ago, taken outside the house I grew up in. The smell — I put my hand over my nose and mouth. It all of a sudden stings my eyes and throat, and I head to the balcony and step out. I can see the ocean from here, and the islands in the distance.

“Yasemin, look out onto the horizon,” my grandfather used to tell me. I had a terrible stomach. I was always throwing up on busses, boats, and small planes. The horizon didn’t help — I famously threw up off the side of the boat. It trickled down to the lower deck, where it landed on a few unsuspecting tourists.

“Jesus, Ay. You couldn’t use the bag?” My father shoved the back of my head, while my mother gently rubbed my back. Dad shook his head in disgust, and went down to apologize to the staff.

The ocean looked the same, and I feel the same vertigo I’d felt that afternoon on the boat. With both hands on the railing, I lean over the balcony and throw up all over my dad’s bushes.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: AYDIN

## THE BALCONY

JULY 23, 2015

The truth was, I thought she was falling. If I'd known she was throwing up (and I should've realized — for a strong woman, her stomach's weak as hell), I probably wouldn't've come out.

"Christ, Yasi, are you okay?" She sits on the floor wiping her mouth.

"Well, no, it seems not." She jumps up and wrenches over the side again. I hold on to her back.

"I swear to little baby Jesus, Yas, if this is how we're destined to die, I'm taking you with me to hell and will torment you for all of eternity."

She smiles for a second, and vomits again. There was a shadow in the doorway. I turn around, and Senny's standing inside, crying.

"Sen, go get her a drink," I scream. The sliding glass door was closed, and she cups her ears, shakes her head, and shrugs her arms.

"Jesus. OPEN THE DOOR PLEASE, SENNY!" She opens the door, finally.

"Yasemin is a little sick. Can you get her some kind of drink?" Senny just stands there for a minute, rubbing her eyes with her fists.

"Senny, please — in our lifetime." Yasi has goosebumps on her arms. It's about 700 degrees Fahrenheit, probably 39 degrees Celsius. Fuck, I need a drink.

“You’re ok, Yas,” I say, helping her sit on the chair and patting her back. We don’t do touchy-feely-affection very well, but I’m sure trying hard. Martin’s good at this — much more natural than I.

“I need a drink.” Yasi moves closer to the other side of the chair — away from me. That’s a relief. She’s perhaps less comfortable with touchy attempts at soothing than I am.

“Well, me too.” She looks at me and rolls her eyes.

“Water, I meant.” She says, shaking her head.

“Yes, well, to each their own,” I say. Senny returns with what looks like a big glass of milk.

“Ayran,” she said, handing Yasi the cup. “It’s the only thing they had in there.” Ayran is basically a plain yogurt milkshake, only thinner and saltier. We all like it, but maybe not what someone craves after vomiting.

“I know it seems gross, but Uncle John says there’s nothing better for vomiting.”

Uncle John thinks tea and yogurt cure everything. Yasi takes a very small sip, and concentrates hard on the horizon — another amazing natural Solu remedy. This one, for motion sickness.

“Why is this happening,” she says, hardly audible.

“Well, you obviously have a very weak stomach for such a chubby woman.”

Humor helps. Almost always, humor helps.

“And the gazing into the horizon,” says Senny, “has never helped.”

“No. Why is THIS happening? How could THIS happen.” She bangs her fist on the ceramic floor tile. She uses the railing to help her stand, slowly.

“THAT FUCKING SON OF A BITCH!” Yasi screams with all her might. It’s loud, and unexpected.

“Yas,” Senny is pointing toward the kitchen, where the officials seem mildly concerned with Yasi’s outburst.

Yasemin seems not to care.

“HE TOOK AWAY ALL THE GOOD! AND WHAT ARE WE LEFT WITH? HIS BLOOD? FUCK HIM! FUCK HIS STUPID, DEAD FAMILY! FUCK HIS HOUSE AND HIS FUCKING FAMILY PHOTOS!”

Yasi throws down the frame she was apparently, unbeknown to me, holding under her arm, onto the ceramic tile, where it anticlimactically bounces. She picks it up and hoists it off the balcony, where it lodges itself between two branches.

I lean over to look at it. The photo is of the three of us when we were kids. I look like I was two or three, and we’re all dressed up and smiling.

“Fuck,” she screams off the cliff.

“FUCK!” she screams into the ocean.

“FUCK YOU,” she screams up into the sky.

She sits down on the white, plastic patio seat and sips her ayran.

“Well, now I’m going to have to climb into the bushes, aren’t I?” I look down at the picture frame again, which is lying flat on its back in the bushes, smiling up at us.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: YASEMIN

## THE (SECOND) PHOTO

JULY 23, 2015

Aydin gets up, opens the French doors, and walks back into the house.

“Where the heck is he going,” says Senny, wiping her eyes with the sleeve of her t-shirt. I watch him walk through the dark living room and out the front door. Senny looks at me quizzically, and then leans over the railing toward the front of the house. Aydin appears from around the corner, stops below the balcony, where we are, and examines the bushes.

“What the hell are you doing, Aydin,” I ask. He doesn’t answer — he turns his head to look behind him, takes off his white linen blazer and lays it gingerly on the wooden picnic table.

He goes back to the bushes below us and starts carefully picking at branches, his arms outstretched far from his body, as if he may get infected by “plant germs” if he gets too close.

“Who wears a blazer in the summer,” I ask.

My brother doesn’t even look up to acknowledge me — he just continues to examine the bush.

“You know, Yas, white, linen blazers do wonders for covering up sagging, aging, upper arm fat. You might try one.”

He grabs ahold of one of the big bush’s branches, and uses it to steady himself as he steps up onto the post of the small wooden fence surrounding dad’s shrubbery.

“Oh, you see,” he says, to no one in particular, as he pulls himself up. “Now look what I’m going to have to do.”

“Jesus Christ, Aydin — it’s just a picture,” I say. “You’re going to fucking kill yourself, and then what?”

“Double funeral,” Senny quips.

Aydin doesn’t smile. He’s doing the white-man overbite as he balances himself and stretches to reach the photograph.

“You know, Aydin, I’m going to have a fucking heart attack,” I say. Uncle John comes out onto the porch. “Sorry for the F-word, Uncle John.”

“I’m sixty-years old, Yasi. I’ve heard them all before,” he says, chuckling as he pats my back. Uncle John wipes the sweat off his face with his forearm, rolls his sleeves up and looks over the railing.

“You ok, Aydin?”

Aydin stretches as far as he can, and makes a small leap for the frame. We hear his body thud to the ground, but can no longer see him.

We all scream at the same time: “Aydin!?!?!?”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN: AYDIN

## THE (THIRD) PHOTO

JULY 23, 2015

That was surprisingly painful. I always figured falling into bushes from a balcony may not be so bad. It was my plan as a child that if there were a fire, I'd carefully fall legs-first out the window. We grew up in a two-story house, and I figured at most, I'd break my legs. Just now, I fell only a couple feet sideways into the bushes, but I feel like I broke most of my ribs. Probably unlikely, since I can breathe and am walking back inside through the front door, the picture of us, now with a crack down the center of the glass frame, in my hands. I think I'm about two in this picture, and I have a one-piece sailor suit on. I'm looking down, and Yasi has her arm around me with her head cocked toward mine. Senny and Yasi have on matching dresses my mom made them — both lavender with little flowers. Senny is sitting on my other side, looking adorable with a big smile on her little face.

I walk through the front door and out onto the balcony, where my family continues to sit, staring out at the horizon.

"I know it's just a picture. And I know we've seen many, many pictures like this: the three of us with our smiles, hiding whatever pain and shame we felt. But I'll tell you why I saved it. I saved it because of us. It's us. We get through this. The three of us. It's the only thing we take out of this place alive. Us. See, the thing is, he doesn't make it. But we do. That's the way this is going to go from here on out."

Yasi takes the picture from me, examines it for a few seconds, and stands next to me. She puts her arm around me and leans her head on my upper arm. I'm no longer small enough for her to lean her head on my head in her ever-protecting way.

Senny takes the picture from Yasi, looks at the picture, and stands on my other side. She leans into me, arms behind her back with a big smile like in the picture.

"I love you guys," whispers Senny, pulling our heads together in a sort of "head hug."

Uncle John wipes his eyes and searches his back pockets for his phone. Just like in the old days, his angling of the camera takes way too long.

"Ok, kids — say cheese!"

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT: SENA

## THE LAW OFFICE

DECEMBER 27<sup>TH</sup>, 2015

I didn't want to see the pictures, read the official paperwork from the consulate, or be at dad's house. It was very painful. But coming back to the states was worse. It was all over the news for a solid two weeks. Americans don't take the loss of their own lightly; add on terrorism? This was primetime news.

Yasi pulls into the parking lot with Aydin. This was the only time that fit all our schedules — we're all off for the holiday and the kids are with their dad. It's supposed to snow this afternoon, so we decided to meet as early as the lawyers could see us.

"Yas, is that supposed to be hobo chic?" Yasi is wearing yoga pants that I suppose at one point were tight on her legs. They're baggy and long, and the navy-blue puffer jacket looks like it's two sizes too big.

"No — this is 'I have a toddler and I've yet to get a chance to buy some smaller clothes' chic." Yasi has been obediently following weight watchers since August. Aydin tosses his cigarette to the ground as he walks toward us.

"Sorry, I wanted to make sure it was out before I got too close."

I take a long whiff of his jacket when he's near enough.

"MMMMmmm. Just one, and I swear that'll be it," I say, as we start toward the glass doorway. I've finally kicked the cigarette habit I'd leaned on to get me off everything else. I'm trying hard, but the aroma is intoxicating.

We get to the tenth floor, and follow the signs toward Suite 1017. The receptionist brings us right back to the conference room, where our lawyer and a few paralegals await. We exchange pleasantries and sit down at the table. Yasi sits between Aydin and me, and pats our legs under the table.

“It’s all done,” says our gorgeous, young lawyer. She looks about twenty-nine and is nice and efficient. “Everything’s liquidated, and all the information is here.” There’s a folder for each of us. I lean forward and open mine.

This can’t be right.

“Ummm, ok, is this the grand total? I’m confused.”

Our lawyer smiles and sits down, handing us each a smaller envelope.

“No, Sena. That’s your portion of his estate. This is the check, and we’re all done. Just take a look, and let me know if you have any questions. I’ll need your signature, but then you’re all set.”

I can’t stop it. The tears are pouring down my face. Yasi looks at me and starts, too.

“You guys are sentimental a-holes,” Aydin says, tears pouring down his face, as well.

Yasi puts her arms around us and we hug for about thirty seconds — perhaps the longest hug we’ve ever had. Yasi kisses us both on the cheek and releases us.

“Well, that’s it,” says Yasi. “It’s over.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE: AYDIN

### ROBERT COLLEGE

MAY 15<sup>TH</sup>, 2016

The campus looks the same as it did all those years ago, when we last visited in 1989 — a small, exquisite gem hidden on a hill overlooking the Bosphorus. I was seven, and even then, I understood the beauty and importance of this place. I snap a few shots with my cell phone, as the sun begins its evening descent. My nephews are playing under the weeping willow — climbing the low branches and chasing each other around the trees.

“You ready to get started,” asks Yasi, brushing something off my jacket.

“I’m not even going to tell you what that was,” she says, brushing the hair out of her face. The weather is mild, but it’s windy at this time of year.

“Get those brats in their seats,” I say, sticking my phone in my pocket. “Then come back with Senny for a sec. I want to get a quick photo of us next to the sign.”

“Okay,” she says, holding the skirt of the long, dark blue dress as she skips down the hill.

“By the way, it was a daddy long legs,” she says, over her shoulder.

I shudder, and head up the hill toward the old building. I can picture her here, all those years ago — my grandmother, a true woman of the world, fresh out of French boarding school and ready to begin her academic journey. As I get to the old “Robert College” sign, I hear my sisters running behind me.

“Jesus Christ, you two may have lost some weight, but it doesn’t mean you’re physically fit enough to run up a hill without shvitsing all over your gowns.”

Senny gives me the finger.

“Those dresses, my dear, cost me a thousand dollars apiece,” I say.

Senny gives me the Turkish fuck-you gesture.

“For the record, Aydin, I’m very physically fit,” says Yasemin, breathing somewhat mechanically to hide the fact she’s breathless.

“Alright, cut the shit and let’s get this picture.”

The three of us squeeze together and I angle the camera as far from my body as I can to get us with the “Robert College” sign in the background. I snap a few photos and we start back down the hill.

“Martin and his brother are ready,” says Senny, grinning hard.

“God, you see why I didn’t want to do this? It’s because of that giddy excitement,” I say, pointing at Senny and rolling my eyes.

“You think she’s bad? You should see Aunt Jane! I think she’s taken a photograph of every inch of the Bosphorus from up here. It’s as if she’s working for Google Earth.”

I flew the whole family to Istanbul, and put many of them up at the Hilton down the street from our place. Of course, Senny, Yasi, my mom, and all the kids are staying with us. I bought the apartment my grandparents owned in Istanbul. My uncle had inherited it when they died, but rarely used it. He was happy to sell it to me, to keep the place in the family. The first thing I did when we moved in was hang the picture of Yasi,

Senny, and me from my dad's house. I didn't reframe it — the crack in the glass reminds me of who we are. Who I am. Or perhaps, who I'm trying to become.

Yesterday afternoon, my mom tossed the rest of Aunt Laura's ashes into the Bosphorus. She had loved traveling, and Mom and I spent the past few months going everywhere Aunt Laura liked and spreading bits of her ashes. It was a lot of fun, and meant a lot to my mother and her sisters. We dropped the last of them right in front of the Bosphorus, incidentally not far from where my grandmother was hit by the cab all those years ago.

I proposed to Martin on our balcony one cool night, a couple months ago. We were watching a cruise ship dock, and the twinkling lights in the dark night were fantastic. We had already been talking about it, and we both knew it would happen eventually. But I made it formal with a ring and a promise: we'd do it soon.

Yasi starts playing the piano, and Senny begins to sing.

"For you, they'll be no more crying. For you, the sun will be shining. Because I feel that when I'm with you, it's alright. I know it's right."

I begin walking down the hill to join my husband in front of the small altar my mom made out of...I don't know what. But it's fantastic. And my Aunt K stands at the altar, ready to read the beautiful sermon she wrote just for us.

Here I am, standing on the campus my grandmother inhabited during her most developmentally formative years, with all the people I love.

And I suppose, in a fucked up way, I have dad to thank for it.

## CHAPTER THIRTY: YASEMIN

## HOME

JULY 20<sup>TH</sup>, 2016

2.7 million dollars. After we paid everything off — lawyers, mortgages, and whatever else of dad's expenses they took care of for us — that's what we each got from my father's estate.

Aydin took off. He moved to Istanbul with Martin, who now teaches Biology at one of the biggest universities in Turkey and speaks better Turkish than any of the three of us ever could. In less than a year. I'll tell you one thing — dad was certainly right about him. He's a God, in so many ways.

Aydin is the Dean of the Humanities department at Robert College, where my grandmother attended high school. They spend a month between semesters in the winter, and usually the beginning or end of the summer, here in the States. They split their time staying with us, Senny, and mom. Also, they spend a lot of time at the Short Hills Hilton. Hey, who can blame them?

Senny and I bought houses on the same street — hers with a small cottage in the rear for my mom. The kids walk back and forth between the houses, and mom can have her space when the kids make her crazy. Also, she can keep an eye on Senny, who's doing great. She hasn't had a drink since her minor slip up about six months ago. She is going to school to get her Master of Arts in Teaching. She's specializing in music, and has straight As. I'm really proud of her.

As for me, I'm getting by. After we bought the house and paid off our student loans, I decided to take some time off. I wanted to write — I had to write. And I knew exactly what I'd write about. This. So that's what I did. I wrote about this.

I've lost thirty pounds, which has taken me from the 16s to the 12s. I'm proud to say my shoes no longer wail in terror when I lean back on my heels. Hopefully, by next summer I'll be able to retire my double-digit clothing for good.

We're all in therapy — for childhood trauma, teenage trauma, adult trauma, depression, anxiety, and everything else we're battling. It wasn't easy for me. I'm not a "therapy-kind-of-gal." Yes, I know that makes me sound a bit like dad, but the difference is I'm trying. And it hasn't all been awful. I found a therapist I like, and I think it's helping. Also, the Lexapro. That helps a bit, too.

I think about Dad sometimes. Well, a lot — and not all bad, not all sad. I've learned not to feel so guilty and angry, but I still do. Hey, I'm human. Worse, I'm Yasemin. And I come from a great, long line of depressed sons-of-bitches.

## MEMOIR PIECE: There's Nothing Like a Family Get-Together

It had been a bad couple of weeks. My grandmother and aunt committed suicide—not together and not the same side of the family. They weren't even the first relatives in our family to kill themselves — we come from a great, long line of depressed sons-of-bitches. My grandmother — my father's mother, or "Nene," as we called her — went on a food strike. Having spent the last twenty years in bed after being hit by a taxi cab while jay-walking across Istanbul's busiest roadway, she finally landed in a high-class nursing home that allowed her to starve herself to death. They tried force-feeding her for a day or two, and then let the process take its course. We got the phone call on Sunday afternoon from my Uncle John: Nene didn't have much more time, and we should come right away if we wanted to say "goodbye." I grabbed my iPad and ran out the door. My father, who lives in Bodrum, Turkey, requested we "Skype" him from the nursing home so he could see his mother one last time. She softly moaned with her mouth open until we left. She didn't want us to be there. She just wanted to die. My aunt — my mother's sister — created a device that held a mask attached to a helium tank to her face. She took on this endeavor with her boyfriend, and the Newark Police Department rang my sister, Nilly, at 11:30PM on the eve of her thirty-fifth birthday, to notify us. She reported the shocking news to my mother, tears streaming down her face: "Well, Happy Birthday to me," she said. The policeman gruffly apologized for the hour and explained to Nilly that she was the first person on Aunt Laura's mobile contact list to answer the phone.

My mom has had a shitty life. Things weren't so bad growing up — she had three sisters, and they were a somewhat normal, somewhat middle class family. She went to the College of Saint Elizabeth, in Convent Station, NJ, where she met my dad at a dance. This is where the shit begins. Yes, he plays the guitar, and yes, he's from Turkey and has lived in several different countries, and yes, he's a lot of fun. He has an interesting, close-knit Turkish family who embrace her like the daughter they never had. They hug and kiss her constantly, something that never happened in her own family. Mom and Dad got married six months later — she's nineteen and he's twenty-one — and even made it to the birth of their first child in 1976. That was me. To this time, Dad has only been a bit crazy. He hit her a couple of times during a temper tantrum, but begged for her forgiveness. He loves her too much, he says. He's insanely jealous, with even a yearly visit to her best friend in Blairstown, NJ, enraging him. Things get progressively worse. He continues to bully her emotionally and physically, keeping her cowering with fear through two more pregnancies. Anything could put him "in a mood:" a bad day at work, an upcoming meeting with his father, or trouble with one of his tenants. His temper affects us all — he strikes my eight year old brother when he misses a multiplication factor, he shoves my sister into the wall when she misses a goal in a soccer game, and he lifts me up by my neck when I intervene during one of his most frightening attacks on my mother, where he had her pinned against the kitchen counter with a knife to her neck. Sixteen years later, and after a final, frightful episode involving the police, she broke us free. I was fourteen, my sister Nilly was eleven, and our brother San was eight. We live then happily with mom, only having to brave the beast every couple of weeks.

The idea was we'd congregate at my aunt and uncle's house to practice our songs for my grandmother's funeral. This was going to include my father, even though he hadn't spoken to his brother in a few years. He had an adolescent-style falling out with his father about the family business ten years earlier, and was briskly disinherited. Anyway, my uncle insisted my dad be involved. There was a time when they were a family — my dad, my uncle and my grandparents — and he felt it would've been important to my grandmother that he be there.

Nobody has a normal funeral in this family. There are two dominant religions in the Solu clan: Agnostic and Unitarian. We do have a couple of outliers — my father, the devout Atheist and my brother's boyfriend the Buddhist. Everybody likes my brother's boyfriend. I think it's because he's only had a couple of boyfriends we've gotten to meet. Dr. Martin Jakubowski is a biology professor at the community college with this remarkably soothing voice. He also looks like a movie star, so all the women in our family swoon each time he walks through the door.

My father is an excellent singer. In fact, most people I know would prefer my father to sing and play guitar than anything else. My Aunt K, Uncle John's wife, is a minister at the Unitarian church. She believes in therapy and self-help books. My uncle runs as far as he can from any type of controversy. The second we talk about something other than the kids, our current jobs, or our family's passionate interest in liberal politics, he walks into the other room to find some kind of complicated electronic project involving the seven grandchildren. The last time we got together and started talking about my father, my Uncle John ran to the other room and set up a big screen so the kids could play "Minecraft" in virtual reality.

I'm walking into my Aunt and Uncle's big Victorian home. As I get closer to the house, I can see that my brother is already there with the handsome Buddhist. My brother appears to be fixing a drink and my aunt is deep in conversation with Martin.

"Yes, I read the book many years ago. I'm so tuned in to things like reincarnation. You see Kay, I'm a biologist," says Martin in his quiet, soothing voice. He's some sort of Russian — I can't remember the details, but he does have a very slight accent that you can hear at the end of some words. It all adds to his wonderful charm. My aunt's actual name is Kathleen, but he calls her "Kay" simply because we all call her "Aunt K" and no one had the heart to correct him. He's far too smart and beautiful.

"Many scientists I know don't believe in any sort of religion," continues Martin in the voice. "But I was in Tibet for several years and I can't separate myself from the Buddhism. Some say it's not terribly scientific, but I believe there could be some science behind it."

My aunt has a way of nodding her head and seeming as if she's totally engaged. In fact, I do believe she is totally engaged. All those years interacting with my father, and you tend to be skeptical about anyone's engagement while they're talking to you. He generally engages in the first word of the sentence, and the rest is gone. I shoot my hellos, give a kiss and hug to my aunt, get stuck in a "which side first" kiss situation with Martin, and then head to see what my brother's doing.

San's the youngest out of the three of us. He was only eight when my parents got divorced, and the few years leading up to the divorce were very bad. My dad was at his worst during these years, and because he was so young, San has no memories of the better times: my dad, taking us for rides around the block on his moped; my parents,

laughing together when my mother still had a sense of humor for dad's jokes; and Christmas Eve parties, back when my father was less determined to convert all of humanity to Atheism. There was a time when there were fewer "flare-ups." Times Nilly and I remember, and San does not.

"Oh, hi Ay," he says nervously, pouring himself a big glass of something he just uncorked. "Is dad here?"

"If you're asking if I arrived with dad, the answer is no." I say. "Christ, are you drinking at 10:30 in the morning?" He doesn't even bother rolling his eyes — in fact he hardly even looks at me.

My sister recently lost ninety pounds. She got some horrific-sounding operation that prevents her from eating a full meal. She walks in the door without her family. I hear Martin tell her how wonderful she looks. She heads back to where we are — right outside the kitchen with the drinks.

"Really, what the fuck are you wearing?" asks San.

She's wearing boots that go past her knees, and a microscopically short skirt. This is significant for two reasons — first, she never, ever wore skirts before her massive weight loss, and second, she's thirty-five and way too old to be wearing a skirt that barely makes it past her bikini line. She looks like a slutty cheerleader.

"I just got it. Do you like it?" she asks. As she spins, the tiny, flared skirt swirls around her.

"You look like a fucking supermodel," I say. She really does. She was always pretty, but now she looks like someone who belongs in Hollywood.

“Gimmie a drink,” she says, as she grabs a glass and sticks it out in front of my brother’s face. He’s in the middle of pouring himself another Cabernet, and fills her glass to the top.

“Christ Almighty, when did you people start drinking so much?” I ask them. “It’s 10:30 in the morning. You guys are like a couple of winos!”

“It’s eleven o’clock, Fraulein Maria,” she says, holding out her phone’s display which reads: 10:58. “That’s nearly noon, and lots of people have a drink with lunch.”

My brother rolls his eyes. “Ok, for the record, I don’t usually drink before dinnertime. But unless you’ve got something stronger hiding under that bulky, “I’ve-Given-Up-On-Myself” sweater, I’m going to have a glass of wine.”

I’m wearing a turquoise sweater I bought yesterday at the Gap.

“I like this sweater,” I say.

He rolls his eyes, sips his drink, and nods toward Martin, who’s talking with my aunt and uncle on the couch. “I’m about to introduce that gorgeous man to our father — remember that guy? The short, chubby guy with the bushy black mustache who just flew in from Ataturk International Airport?” He chugs the remainder of his drink and refills his glass.

I follow Martin’s voice back into the great room. He’s now describing the role of the female goddesses in Hinduism. My uncle sits beside my aunt, nodding as if he’s listening while anxiously peering out the window every couple of minutes.

My husband Chris and my mom have the important responsibility of watching the four children: my two sons and two nephews. If you’re wondering how they drew these lucky straws, my mother spent seventeen years with my father — seventeen miserable

years. She's earned sainthood in our family. As for my husband Chris, it's reasonably indisputable that his life has sucked the worst out of all of us. His mom was an alcoholic, his dad was a heroin addict and he was tossed around a bit between relatives before being permanently adopted by his grandparents. He's seen things that people from yuppie, old Chatham and Madison, where the Solus have spent their lifetime, only see on Dateline or 60 Minutes. After my mom, he's probably the closest in the family to canonization.

I don't drink or smoke or take drugs. I've had the opportunity to try Xanax while getting an MRI, which I enjoyed quite a bit. A symptom of my anxiety disorder, as it turns out, is that I'm scared shitless to take medication. Today, I stick to my vice of choice: food. I've already parked myself in front of the hors d'oeuvres and I'm stuffing my face with mini bagels smeared with scallion cream cheese as I listen to Martin go on about Hinduism.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Aylin," says my brother, eying my plate of food. "Are you in the 16s, again?" San sits down across from me and next to Martin, who's still too engaged in Hinduism to even realize we've joined them.

"Your stilettos look like the leaning tower of Pisa," he says. He'd know — he studied Art History in Italy for a semester. I stuff a crescent roll into my mouth.

"Dad's coming," I said, mouth full of food. My sister chugs a glass of what looks like water down her throat.

"Yep, he sure is," she says in her baby voice, which indicates to me and my brother that she is not drinking water.

"Jesus Christ, Nil. Can't you fucking control yourself?" San says, just to us. Martin's going strong on Shiva Natraja, and my aunt and uncle are fully engrossed.

“I don't know who's worse — fatty or drunk, over there,” he says, motioning his head back toward my sister, who just tripped on her way to refill her drink.

“Christ, is he talking about Eastern Religion again?” San asks. My two cousins are sitting directly across from Martin, my aunt and uncle next to him—all nodding, smiling, and occasionally fixing their hair. Uncle John included.

“He should just whip it out so everyone can suck on it, already.” San grabs a mini muffin from the plate on the table and shoves the whole thing in his mouth. He reaches for another one, takes a bite, and then quickly wraps the rest of it in a napkin.

“Shit, your nervous eating is contagious,” he says, tossing the wrapped-up muffin onto his plate. I pick up the ornate cheese knife and slice myself a big chunk of brie. “At least you're married,” he says. “And straight. Try being a single, gay man in fat pants.” Martin looks over at us.

“San, where was the place you took me last summer,” Martin addresses us loudly from across the room — of course, maintaining the voice; just a louder, more projected version.

“Do you remember? Where we meditated in the hot springs?” He's interrupted by the opening of the back door in the foyer. The door slams shut and we hear him.

“Hi, guys,” says dad, in his strained, attempting-at-cheerful voice. He's got the guitar with him — I can hear it banging melodiously against the wall. I brought my guitar too, of course, but there's no doubt that he'll take over this musical event. San, Nilly and I drop everything and sort of jog toward the door.

Even though he's terrorized us our whole lives, we all seek his approval. I get to him first, and when he sees me he gives me a big hug and kiss on both cheeks.

“Honey, I’m worried that you’re working too hard. It doesn’t seem like you’re taking care of yourself,” he says. This means he thinks I’m looking fat.

“Yes, dad, I work very hard,” I say. Nilly isn’t far behind.

“Nillycim, helal olsun!” He hugs and kisses her, and steps back to get a good look at her lean body. She gives him a twirl. He whistles.

“Your husband must be worried you’ll run off with some young guy!”

San is last. They hug and kiss, and we all begin walking toward the great room.

“You know, San, I’ve been thinking about men who like men.” I can see San stiffen up.

“Well you see, in Turkey we all try things out when we’re boys — before we have sex with women. So maybe that’s what this is for you, honey,” he says.

San tolerates the least shit from my father. He barely ever answers his phone calls and spends the least time with him when he comes to visit. That’s not to say that what my father says doesn’t affect him. San’s face is turning red and I know he’s angry. By this point, we arrive in the main room and there’s Martin, looking handsome and waiting to meet my father.

“Dad, this is Martin — my partner.”

Martin leans forward to offer his hand and says, “how do you do, Yill-Drum?”

My father’s name is Yildirim, and Martin makes a valiant effort. My father grabs him around the neck and plants a kiss on each cheek

“You know, Martin, I love all people,” he says. “My mother, the one who just died, always taught us to love and cherish all human beings. It doesn’t matter to me if you’re a homosexual or a black person or a Chinese person. I even love the Greeks,” he

says. “I do have a problem with the Arabs, though, because they’re such religious fanatics,” he continues. “But really, I love all human beings on this planet earth.”

Martin nods politely. I can tell he’s been briefed, although I find no matter how much you prepare someone for dad and what might come out of his mouth, they never quite believe it until they meet him. My brother San puts an arm around my dad and leads him toward the kitchen.

“How about a bagel, dad? I got them fresh about a half an hour ago.”

I pick up my guitar. This is the surefire way to get my dad to shut up.

“Dad, we were just practicing ‘Those Were the Days,’” I shout toward the kitchen. My Uncle John is up and greeting my dad in Turkish. The rest of us shuffle around the room to get into musical-practice position. Martin scoots a chair in front of us.

“I can’t wait to hear you guys. San says you’re like the Von Trapp family!”

I used to fantasize that my dad was simply a little “order driven” like Captain Von Trapp. When we were learning about drugs and alcohol in school, I also wished my father just got violent and verbally abusive with us because he drank too much. Both were better scenarios than the truth — something that made us afraid even to have friends sleep over. He neither drank nor cared very much for order — he just had a terrible, violent temper. You never knew when he’d snap, or who it would be in front of. He didn’t discriminate — he’d shown his bad side to nearly all our close friends and relatives.

Dad comes back with a bagel, puts it on the table, picks up his guitar and starts strumming.

“What key is this,” he asks accusingly. He starts playing the song in C. I was playing it in G because it's easier for people with higher voices to hit the notes. It's also easier for me to do a chord progression in G. I don't have to play an F, which is difficult for my small, un-calloused, out-of-practice hands. Dad plays an F chord very well. He starts singing — his strong, loud, flawless vibrato booming over ours.

“Come on, John,” he says, nodding in my uncle's direction. “Sing with me.”

My Uncle John stands up a little bit taller and projects his voice in my father's direction. My father starts harmonizing with him.

“See, I told you guys my brother was a good singer,” says my father. They sound great together, of course. They all used to sing together as children — Dad, Uncle John, and my grandmother. My father's mobile phone rings. He grabs the phone out of his pocket with the guitar still hanging off his body by its multi-colored strap.

“Alo?” he says. Everyone sort of stops singing one at a time. Dad gets up, takes the guitar off, props it against the coffee table, and walks into the other room speaking Turkish. We all look at each other. Without his presence dictating our actions, it's as if we're not really sure what to do next. My sister grabs her drink — at this point, a Mimosa. Dad's on his way back into the room and Nilly rapidly moves to put her drink back on the coffee table. There's a lot of miscellaneous food and hors d'oeuvres on the table and by now, she seems pretty wasted. She misplaces the glass and it spills, much of it landing on dad's propped-up guitar — and just in time for my dad to arrive back into the room. My dad curses in Turkish, and San, Nilly and I start maniacally looking around the room for napkins.

“Look alive, Nil. Christ, you’re half dead.” He finds a pile of white, cocktail napkins, and begins to clean up the spilled drink. “I could never take you guys anywhere. Your whole lives you’ve been spilling things.”

Nilly’s lower lip begins to quiver — something that’s also happened her whole life. I’ve spent my whole life trying to decrease the occurrence of that quiver — make a happier life for my mom, sister, and brother. Since as far back as I can remember, I’ve protected them: ushered four-year old Nilly and one-year old San into the back bedroom as he shoved my mom into a wall; jumped in front of him as he leaned forward to pinch my mother’s arms; pleaded with mom to say what he wanted her to, so he’d stop hitting her; used the money I saved working at “Cost Cutters” to buy Chinese takeout, a birthday cake, and a Coach purse from the three of us for my mother’s birthday. I’ve made it my job to protect them, so now, my innate instincts kick in. She’s sitting right across from me, and I feel like a stake’s been driven into my heart.

My Aunt K jumps in. “It’s just a drink, Bill. Can you give it a rest?” He looks up at her, eyes wide, bright, alert, and crazy.

“You know, Kath,” he says. “I believe in honesty and I have to say right now, it’s hard to sit here in your house and sing with you after the way you’ve treated me our whole lives. You took my brother away from me, you insulted my wife, and took money out of my pockets. You never call, never invite us over — my wife has tried so hard.”

My aunt sighs audibly.

“Please, Bill.” she says. “We’re doing this for Nejla. If you have something you want to talk about with me and John, we can discuss scheduling a session. I don’t know if your brother is up for it — he’s still healing — but we can talk about it.”

Somewhere between the telephone call and the spilled drink, my uncle has made his exit. Several years ago, when everyone was still speaking to each other, my uncle, father and grandfather tried sessions with a therapist. Neither my grandfather nor my father, who shared the same temperament, tolerated these mediated sessions very long. I think they went two or three times before stopping abruptly, with my father storming out in rage.

My dad laughs dryly.

“I’m not John,” he says. “I don’t believe in that bullshit.” He looks around the room, flailing his arms about in an exaggerated manner. “And where the hell is that guy? Our whole lives he’s been doing this — always running and hiding.” Tears are silently pouring out of my drunken sister’s eyes.

“Dad, please stop,” she says, quietly.

“Look at my daughter — look at her tears!” he yells. He looks at the three of us.

“You guys love her so much,” he gestures toward my aunt, looking directly at us. “Don’t you know she kept your cousins from being with us your whole lives? And speaking of your cousins, those girls don’t even have the decency to call their uncle once in a while.” He turns toward the girls, who are sitting on the couch together. “Do you know how many times I’ve called and left messages? Nobody ever calls me back.” He turns back to us. “Where’s their common fucking decency. This would never happen in Turkey. In our culture, we’re respectful to our elders.”

My cousin Kara, who has been sitting on the couch with tears silently pouring down her face, gets up, puts her arm around Nilly, and ushers her into the other room. San slowly begins to rise, his eyes on the floor. Martin, seated next to San, puts a hand on

his leg and motions for him to sit back down. He pulls worry beads out of his pocket and hands them to my brother.

“Take these, San,” he says.

San sits back down, not once looking up. His eyes are focused on the floor, presumably in shame, or wishing he could bury himself under the carpet. We are helpless around dad — adults, all in our thirties, regressing to our childhood roles when he’s in “a mood.”

“Please, Dad,” I say, still standing next to him. “Can we have a break from this?”

Martin picks up his glass of wine, takes a sip and puts it back down.

“Yill-Drum, have you ever thought about meditating?” he asks.

“I don't believe in medication,” my father says.

“Not medication,” Martin says. “And in fact, I don't believe in medication either. I'm talking about eastern religion — Buddhism, in particular,” he says.

Oh, fuck. He had to say the R word.

“In Buddhism, we meditate in various ways to bring ourselves back to a Zen place.” My dad hears nothing after “Buddhism.”

“You know, Martin, I don't believe in religion. I'm a scientist. How can you say that there's a god...” he begins.

Martin cuts him off, expertly authoritative — an experienced professor.

“Eastern religion is not necessarily about God. It's about finding peace in the world.”

“You know, Martin,” my dad starts. San gets up, both hands on the side of his face, looking sort of like he’s closing his ears. Martin cuts my father off, speaking directly over him.

“San, stay where you are,” he says, his smooth voice having a soothing, yet “take-charge” effect on all of us left in the room. You’re not ‘the little boy’ anymore,” he continues. “You’re a mature adult.” Martin turns back toward my father.

“Yill-Drum, you need to learn to control your anger.” He’s nodding his head slowly, internally affirming his newly derived solution to our *dad problem*. “I do think that some yoga and meditation would do you wonders.”

Everyone in the room was in a trance. Martin’s words are momentarily suspended in the air — just floating there, right in the middle of the room. Nobody speaks this way to Dad. When he begins his angry tirades, we run, cry, or beg him to stop. Not Martin.

The voice had taken control of the situation.

The voice was no match for my father.

“Look at you, Martin,” he says, as his eyes narrowed and a small, slow smile began curving his lips ever-so-slightly upwards. “You’re intelligent, you’re fit, you speak many languages. Do you know what these kids did to me?” he asks, his voice rising dramatically in pitch. “Look at them. They’re overweight.” He gestures into the room my sister and Kara have retreated to. “That one had to get a surgery to get her weight under control. She may look good now, but give it a few months. She’ll blow up again by the time the summer is here. Try sitting on the beach with that — it’s a humiliation I had to deal with my whole life. Your husband over there,” he continues, as Martin unmistakably

flinches. “I tried to get him to play soccer, exercise, and take care of himself. Have you ever seen him run?” My father waves his hands madly around in circles while sort of galloping around the room, mocking my brother. San is still looking down at the carpet. “I’ve taken them all over the world,” continues my father, as he walks slowly back toward the center of the room. “All I’ve ever wanted was for them to be thin and speak Turkish. Is that too much for a father to ask? I tried so hard, Martin,” he says. “We spent time in Turkey. I spent my hard earned money to send them to Turkish School at Rutgers University. To this day, they can’t speak well. They always buy things for people — all kinds of gifts for me, for you, for each other, spend spend spend — when their lives are a wreck.” I can see the spit flying out of his mouth as he’s madly gesturing with his hands to emphasize each point. He’s standing in front of the window, and the light is reflecting off each speckle as he gets more and more impassioned. “One had some kind of a foreclosure, one had a bankruptcy,” he gestures again, to San, “this one’s student loans are in default,” he says. “They’re losers, Martin. They’re not like you — they’re losers. And I’ve tried to teach them with as much time as their mother allowed me to see them. You know,” he says, turning to speak directly to me, “it was her who wanted a divorce, not me.” He turns back around to face Martin. “I tried so hard to teach them that it’s all about how you present yourself in this world. Oh yes, they’re very smart, they go to college, they get degree after degree, they are so nicey-nice and sweet to everyone, but this world is not about nice, Martin. It’s about how you look and present yourself. Your body, your demeanor, how you handle your business,” he continues. “The world’s unforgiving to a bunch of nice, fat, faggots.”

The sharp staccato of the “TS” at the end of my father’s words echo in the room and set Martin up like a spark lighting a firecracker. He takes four wide steps toward my father and regards him directly, looking down at dad’s petite frame from his six-foot plus vantage point.

“You tiny, fucking man.” He shoves my father hard, sending him fast to the ground. While the Buddhist’s demeanor was incredibly calm, the manicured hands he’d use to gesture as he spoke so articulately about eastern religions and biology turned out to be as volatile as my father’s temper. But like the lightening of his birth name (Yildirim means ‘lightening’ in Turkish), dad jumps up and winds his fist toward Martin’s face, cursing in Turkish in this strange, sort of animalistic whisper — face and neck red with rage.

San jumps between Martin and my father — he’s facing Dad, both arms outstretched to form a shield between my father’s fist and Martin.

“NOOOO!” he screams, pleading through the tears now running freely down his face. “Noooo, Dad, stop — please! Just stop. Please.” Aunt K rises from her seat and is rapidly by San’s side. She’s a tall woman with a strong, broad frame, which she’s never shrunk from even though she towers over my uncle. It takes her only a couple of long, powerful strides to reach San and Martin. She puts one arm around Martin, the other around San, and pulls San’s head to her mouth, kissing him firmly on the top of his head. San’s body shakes, now crying audibly and leaning into my aunt while she guides them out of the room. Dad brings his fist back into his body and by his side. Nobody’s left in the room but me and my father. Neither of us say a word for a few seconds.

“Get out, Bill,” says my uncle John, who seemingly appears from thin air in the doorway. “Just get out.”

Dad looks at him as if he’s about to say something, then glances at me before rapidly walking through the room and out the back door. I spot his guitar leaning against the coffee table and pick it up, running after him.

He’s halfway across their huge circle driveway when he hears me and stops. He turns to face me, speaking as if we’re in the middle of a conversation; as if none of what happened ever happened; as if we’d just been having one of his usual, frequent discussions about how everyone in the family has wronged and injured him so terribly.

“You know, Ay, I had to leave the kids at home. Kathy told me not to bring them,” he says, red splotches rising from his neck. I was with him the day he had the “falling out” with his father, and it was the first time I noticed this phenomenon: literally, the ability to watch the anger rise to the top.

“Tansu and Burak wanted so badly to sing with their family. They’re amazing musicians, just like you guys. They love everyone so much.” Tansu and Burak are my half-siblings. Since they moved to Turkey ten years ago, I’ve seen them only once a year — sometimes less. Tansu is thirteen and Burak is fifteen, and have only met my grandparents and aunt and uncle a handful of times. They were toddlers when my dad emancipated himself from his father and brother. They live in a glass house overlooking the Mediterranean, and sail to the Greek Islands in my father’s boat during their summer breaks.

I hand the guitar to my father, and he grabs my arm with both hands.

“Tansu was crying when I left. I had to leave her in the doorway of the hotel room in tears, Ay. They’re my kids, goddammit — what am I supposed to do!”

I am thirty-eight years old, and both bigger and taller than this man. My belly is filled with bagels and crescent rolls, and I’ve had enough.

“WE’RE your fucking kids,” I say, shaking his hands off my arm and pointing to my heart. I turn around slowly and walk back into the house.

That was the last thing I ever said to my father.

My uncle was gone when I walked back into the great room. I found my family upstairs in the formal dining room, minus San. Nilly looked up at me, still crying, and I gave her a hug. This was big for me — despite the typically-over-affectionate Mediterranean blood flowing through my veins. But it felt good to hug Nilly. It reminded me of my role in this shit-storm of our life: to protect. I let her go and asked where San was. She pointed at the closed bathroom door. I walked over and knocked softly, then louder, and louder still. The door opened just enough so I could hear him whisper: “I can’t, Ay. I just can’t.”

My father didn’t make an appearance at the funeral. As it turned out, we didn’t really need the rehearsal. We all spoke from the heart, and concluded the service with an impromptu performance of my grandmother’s favorite song: Kokomo, by the Beach Boys.

The thing is, Nene and Aunt Laura, they knew just what they wanted: they wanted to die. I desperately don’t want to die. I want to live. I want to be happy; not worry all the time, or feel bad about myself anymore. That’s why I cut him out of my life. I wrote him an email expressing my feelings, and left him the key: an apology.

It's been nearly four years, and I've yet to hear from him. As time has gone by, and I have had my third child, bought a new house, and landed an impressive job, I learned the answer to something I'd long wondered: why did I put up with him for all those years? As it turns out, it's not easy to fill the void of a parent—even a parent like my dad.

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