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Corvallis

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Corvallis

In the dream, Sarah drives her rust-red Buick up the coast of Oregon, just past the city of Corvallis where she lives. I am sitting passenger side, trying to take a photograph of the waves, black-grey and glossy as obsidian, the shore dotted with rocks hard as jawbreakers. The crank windows are rolled down, Sarah's light blonde hair trailing and whipping in the early spring wind. I want to ask her a question, can feel the consonants of a *Wh-* word pulling at my lips from the inside, but just as my voice begins to rise from my throat, I wake up, pulled back into the muted navy blues and greys of my apartment bedroom. The back of my pajama shirt is damp with sweat, the scent of my own body salty, though I am shivering. I watch the caves my ribs make as they rise and fall beneath my shirt, beneath my now slick skin.

I have to remind myself, waking up, that I am not in Corvallis, have never been. Oftentimes, I picture myself getting fish tacos from a light blue truck near the ocean, Sarah munching one beside me, even though I don't know if there are any taco trucks like this in Corvallis. I imagine us sitting at a driftwood picnic bench overlooking the ocean, the planks rotting but sturdy. She would call the table beautiful, trace the dark spots and slanted marks with her finger.

When Sarah left, I promised that I would visit, in the spring when I could take a few days off work, or maybe for Easter. The two of us would share a meal at a square wooden table like the one from our Austin apartment, all scratches and sleek edges. I'd bake sweet potatoes dusted with cinnamon and drizzled with honey, Sarah's favorite, in her tiny kitchen, the ocean a grey blanket outside the window. We'd curl up on her corduroy couch, our mouths still dusted with the sweet substances.

I wondered, before she left, if I could go with her. I didn't have a job or graduate school waiting for me there like she did. Every attempt to picture myself navigating the city was merely a foggy daydream, slowly saturated by all the times I'd conjured the image. Deep down, I knew that Sarah needed to go alone. I had my own life to figure out, interviews to attend

for teacher's assistant positions, studio apartments going up for sale across Austin. I buttoned up my plain blouses, pressed my stomach in as I looked in the mirror. I thought of Ohio Man, how the first time he'd slipped his hand beneath my white shirt, I'd watched it move, like a bony ghost, across the ridges of my body.

After Sarah's departure, the days accumulated, as did instances of the dream, each one as grey as the last, Sarah's car the brightest object in the picture, the whipping of her hair the most delicate movement in sight. I stared at the pixelated digits of my bank account day after day, all that I had gathered from each month of work. My teaching job paid the bills, helped with upkeep of my studio apartment and battered Toyota, both of which still smelled of Ohio Man's scent: wintergreen mouthwash, cologne strong as bourbon, wood shavings from his job in set design. Kissing him, I wasn't sure whether to feel drunk or refreshed. After our first date, I called Sarah, but she didn't answer.

Ohio Man once took me on a tour of his workspace, briefly pointing to his coworkers—Rudy, Sam, Irwin, or names something like those—without telling them my name. I knew, lying in his musty sheets months ago, waking up to the diluted sunlight and smell of burnt toast, that this would be my last time with him. I just didn't know how to say it then.

It's been eight months since I last spoke to Sarah and I haven't looked at plane tickets in half a year. The job I had texted her about laid me off, my budget constricting in a single, icy curl, more snap than curve. I stopped texting her after she forgot my birthday, forgot the time she'd promised we would FaceTime after Ohio Man broke up with me, told me that Texas never had his heart, never would.

"It's just too different," he said one night, the two of us pressed together on his twin-size mattress, air conditioner sputtering just outside his apartment window. His body made me think of all the places I wanted to travel. He had one treasure map tattoo printed on his right rib, a triangular, mountain-like pattern moving across one bicep and down his shoulder blade.

"As a state?" I asked, reaching to run my fingers across the map, along the gaps between each arched bone.

“As different parts put together. You go from El Paso, borderland, to Austin with its hipsters and keeping it weird, and it’s like going to a different planet.”

I wanted to ask him what kind of planet he wanted to live on, if he wanted one more ocean than rock, more water than body. But as I looked at the treasure map tattoo, the dark spurts of hair around his navel, whatever wave of question that had risen within me was quelled.

Sarah was the middle child growing up, between an older brother and a younger sister. I met them when Sarah’s whole family came to visit for graduation. They all gathered around our scratched table, sharing confetti cake with pink frosting and talking about their upcoming hiking trip. They were athletes, small-bodied but built, with hair the color of aged honey and fresh bark. Sarah said little, gaze darting between one family member and the next, but from time to time she would catch my eye and smile. Sarah’s sister, petite with brown doe eyes, cut the cake into perfect squares. I ate half my slice, then, under Sarah’s watchful eye, the rest of it. I licked the frosting from my lips.

I was in the middle, too, I suppose, but in a different way. My mom and aunt shared a house, so growing up, I lived with my three cousins, two older, one younger. I still remember us standing in the bathroom mirror one night, the three of them dark-haired, Milagros putting on burgundy lipstick, Ángeles mauve, while Caridad pulled a straightener through her curly strands. And me in the middle of it all, pale arms pressed to my sides, staring at the turquoise dress covering my limbs, hoping it made my breasts look bigger. I didn’t always mind being smaller than my cousins; I just thought I was the wrong kind of small.

Everything about my body was either too soft or too bony. My cousins pointed to my ribs, curved and hewn as Atlantic seashells, noted the slight protrusion of my lower belly below breasts that had not grown since late girlhood. While they whispered in our shared bedroom, summer dresses and suede heels strewn across our faded beige carpet, I prodded at my skin. The only comfort in watching those parts of myself was when Ohio Man kissed my stomach, rested his head in the hollow between my breasts. When Sarah, lying next to me, looked me up and down, said, “You’re soft-edged. I could lean into you for hours.” And though I wanted to trace my

finger down her arm like so many lines of a treasure map, I kept my hand where it was, didn't move until she rose for a glass of water.

I was still throwing up when Sarah and I started rooming together. I pressed two fingers down my throat until everything rose—my food, my tears—and fell into the bowl in front of me. She found me one day, knees scratched from a tumble off my bike that afternoon, tiles cool against dried blood and warm skin. The swelling of my throat subsided to thin, jagged lines of ache. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to be, but I knew it wasn't this.

Sarah pulled me off the floor and pressed her thumbs into my wrists, burgundy polish still wet on her nails. I remember how a thin line of it rubbed off on my own wrist, like smashed cherries. Like blood.

"Let's get you into bed," she said, pulling me upright. In the mirror, my face was gaunt, dark circles a near-permanent fixture on my dry, pale skin. I once dreamt I was an old woman, leaning over a porcelain sink, spitting out teeth hard as pearls, my skin the hue of an oyster's insides. That day, looking at the face of my twenty-one-year-old self, I knew I could not let myself become that woman when I was still so young.

Sarah had me brush my teeth, then brought me a foggy glass of water while I pulled my pajamas on. Our dishwasher back then rarely worked, often leaving white, scalloped streaks on the glassware, giving them an oceanic feeling. Like I was drinking from the Pacific itself. I hoped the water would take whatever made me keep digging and carving and wash it away.

Just before she left my room, Sarah slid under the covers with me, wrapping one arm around my waist, resting her head on the corner of my pillow, along the skin marking the space between jaw and neck. Her arm rested along that soft spot of my belly. When she went back to her own bed, sometime in the middle of the night, I felt the sheets beneath my open palm, barely wrinkled and now cold, as if no one had touched them.

The next day, I rode my bike for an hour, putting off an essay I needed to work on. The Texas sun seared my scabs. That night, sitting at the kitchen table in front of my laptop, I rubbed my palm over the skin, tracing upward until I reached smoothness.

Now Sarah is graduating, finishing her master's degree in Ocean, Earth and Atmospheric Sciences, with a concentration in Oceanography, just as I am about to start mine. I'm not actually in anywhere, just on the waitlist at two schools nowhere near her. One in Ohio, the other in Florida. I applied to do a Master's in ESL, imagined myself teaching in a small school by the sea, or between fields of grain. Anyplace where the space around me expanded, rolled and curved and bent without pain.

Ohio Man told me that his state was king of corn. He said this as he rolled over atop my just-cleaned white sheets, to face belly-down.

"More than Nebraska?" I asked.

"More than Nebraska." He nodded, looking me straight in the eye. His were brown with a ring of gold at the center that seemed to shrink whenever I looked too closely.

Besides school, I have no real attachment to either state, no particular fondness for corn or oranges. Neither could ever be sustenance. I wrap the rotting vegetables from my fridge in paper towels, toss them in my trash bin with a prayer or an apology.

And I wait. I stare at my inbox, scrolling through unopened emails that look important enough to glance at but maybe not enough to keep. Even to decide which ones to throw away seems too difficult a task.

One night, I dream I am in Corvallis, but I am alone. Here, at the border between land and sea, facing an ocean I have never touched. It's just me, standing at the shoreline, arms thrown up to the wind. Though I cannot see what I'm wearing, I know it's my grey and red sports jacket, the one with the zipper that goes all the way up my neck and flares out below my chin. My body is as hard and flat as a board. Dark etches run across my torso; I know this without looking at them, can feel their depth without touching them. I run my fingers through my hair and, when I feel it coming off, light and airy as dandelion puffs, I slowly start to panic, feel the age creeping up from the inside of my body, liver and stomach suddenly acidic. I press one palm to my forehead, the other to my heart, and awake in the same position. As if my real body knew my dream body, knew the place where it wanted to go but could not. And here, my real body, sweat-damp, remembering the jagged lines, the smooth rocks. Remembering the way I carved myself from the inside like a wolf, without knowing what hunger I would eventually find.