

## Up the Ladder, Down the Snake

The game Snakes & Ladders is laid out on the floor—the shapes on the board are colorful and bright. I'm in the counselor's office at my elementary school. I don't remember what grade I'm in. Young enough to enjoy the board games spread in front of me, and young enough to sprawl on the floor and play by myself as Mr. Harris speaks softly in the background of my memory. It sounds like he's asking me questions, it sounds like I'm giving him answers. Nearly two decades later, I'll ask my mom over text about these visits to the counselor's office I used to have. I'll say I don't remember the reason I was there or what Mr. Harris and I discussed, all I remember is playing Snakes & Ladders. She tells me that I was "going through a lot" at that age and that some of it, but not all of it, may have had to do with Dave.

I move a piece forward and now I'm at Olive Garden with my grandma, who used to be married to Dave. She has a better husband now. I've just graduated community college, and she gives me a CONGRATS GRAD card full of Benjamins and my bank account and I are both equally grateful. She then asks me how I'm sleeping and how I'm doing. I stuff a breadstick in my mouth before answering. I tell her "I never sleep but I'm used to it," and I know she's asking about the depression that she's only recently been informed about, so I tell her that's fine too. Then her face morphs into a sadness that makes alarm bells go off in my skull, and she asks me if I think Dave has anything to do with my depression. "Why would he?" I ask; after all what does my grandma's supposed drug addict ex-husband that I haven't seen in years have to do with me? "Well," she starts, all nervous like, as if a bomb was dangling above our heads from the Olive Garden ceiling, "I know you don't remember much, but I sometimes wonder if he used to...hit you. He was always so mean to you." My face is blank as she speaks, because this is not the kind of conversation I imagined having in Olive Garden on a weekend afternoon, and I'm being honest when I tell

her I don't ever remember him doing that. I want the waiter to refill my raspberry lemonade, but they don't pass our table, so I attempt to swallow her words with a parched throat. But it sticks.

I roll the dice, and I move forward only to have to move a few spaces back. And now I'm just a few years old, at my grandma's old yellow house where the carpet used to burn the softness of my skin. This, this is where it's only fragments of time and space; I remember Dave and his curly hair, his wicked laugh as he shows me the toilet and tells me this is where goldfish get flushed away to die; I remember wanting to cry, but really truly crying in terror when E.T. comes on the tv and my grandma rushes into the living room to change the channel; I remember years later as I move my piece forward again, that my grandma said that he tripped me once on purpose, but all I hear is his laugh again banging in my four-year-old skull like a hammer.

Now the game is getting exciting, and I move across the board in a frenzy of back and forth and the memories are going back and forth and sideways and up and down and I am at the center of it all. Imaginary goldfish down toilets, him watching me from the recliner with his toes pointed up towards the ceiling like twin mountains, me in the car watching him take out the trash and I look at him like a stranger because I'm older now and maybe he's always been a stranger—perhaps even a figment of my imagination. But I love my grandma too much to have made him up myself. Up the ladder, and it's high school and I have to carry a restraining order with me at all times, and all the security officers and my principal know because Dave has made threats towards my grandma and me when she brought up divorce, but my parents don't want me to know exactly what kind of threats he's making. But I know he was mean, and mean men are often violent. Up another ladder, and I've graduated high school, but I feel as if I'm going down the back of a snake because one of my friends has just died a month before she'd turn nineteen, and after consoling me my grandma says, "I know it's hard, but there's so much to live for, remember that." And I'm going down, down, down into rage and sorrow because why is it when I've finally stopped being suicidal, this is when everyone's convinced I'm going to kill myself? Because I've been going through a lot, and it's never been an issue before, but now it's all that I am to them. Maybe I am the bomb hanging among the overhead lights on Olive Garden's ceiling

and they're all waiting for the moment I explode and collapse the world around me. I don't sleep and I don't remember and I don't know why.

All I remember is playing Snakes & Ladders and imaginary goldfish swimming in toilets. But my grandma thinks that Dave used to hit me, and that's part of why I am the way I am. But I would remember, wouldn't I? Roll the dice again, move a couple spaces forward, but bad luck, so I go winding down the back of a snake. I find myself at the start again.