

## Part I: The Christmas House

1

Just now she grabbed me. She grabbed me and I cried without bearing, coughing spit across my chin. I was scared and I have no other way to explain how I was completely destroyed by her touch. It might have been the fingernails in my thigh – the memory of my sister with her nails in my back and a knife in my hand.

I was taken by surprise.

Still, strands of darkness curled like black pearls across her face. The window was open, her nails in my thigh,  
no curtain night.

Gold slips flickered in her blue eyes, in the moon, and the gap between her two front teeth.

She screamed at me when she grabbed me. I didn't know what to do so I just let the tears cut down my face. It's strange because this scenario happens so often in my head. But she was there. She saw me and then she wouldn't let me go.

I was wearing my long johns again for the first time since I came here, once more, to live. I had been wearing hers. She wears all lengths of men's underwear. There is a lot to be said about that. She steals briefs from her dad. Huge and white, they've all become stained. When she was gone, for those months that she was gone and I was here in this house by myself, I wore them too. Like a loose ring around my finger, the elastic bands would wobble up my waist, past my belly button. I would hide this with her flannels and her long johns. (In my thin cotton thigh, she made two holes with her nails.)

2

This morning I woke up and drank unsteadily at the sink, counting to 14 before choking. I am sucking on throat drops for my sore throat, which is also just an excuse for some form of candy, which now since she grabbed me and I cried, she won't make fun of me for. Even though she is right, I am a sugar addict. Especially now since she is home.

It is that look when she purses her mouth and looks ready to hit anything,  
I know that means her feelings are hurt.

Especially now since I can eat so little.

I won't be here always, we have to tell ourselves, mouthing mantra  
when we think the other is sleeping or staring ahead, mostly staring down.

I've been thinking of ways to start over. I am afraid that I can't run. I am afraid that I won't leave the bed. I am afraid that I will not write another song in my life. I am afraid that I won't cry when I don't write a song. I am afraid that even though I am so young I am becoming so old and in the time I have left I won't accomplish enough to die with a proper tombstone above me, and my father satisfied looking over me without thinking

he was just a bank. I don't want my father to remember me.

3

Dannie tries to convince me that we are so much the same. She talks me through like bridges I've never walked over, the sounds reverberating up the heating vent when we're stretched out and panting. Everything new, like Christmas morning. In the bedroom, she takes over my mouth.

Dannie tries to convince me that we have a symbiotic relationship. We lay together in bed watching movies throughout the day and tending to our bodies in pain. When her arms are cold she slaps them and flexes her hands backwards underneath her thighs. These are times when I can't touch her.

(She is thinking about money or her music and her band,  
which she no longer has because of me. Or might have, like cancer.)

I know I can't say this right, but I have to try. She fell in love with a musician and I've never had good rhythm. She fell in love with the lyrics and the soft unraveling, the songs about her, me singing softly without care for the small voice and the strums that I could barely play, the truth about her before I knew it.

But I run to the bathroom with the lights off and I pound my knees against the tiles. I lie fitfully in her bed without sheets and count in my head when I drink, 14 for water, five for whiskey. But I can't touch that stuff now.

I am here in her kitchen and she is sleeping chin to chest with a dog at her feet and the window fogging above her head because the heat is on and it is so cold and the windows are poorly insulated, so we sleep with hats on our heads and colds when we wake up.

Things become complicated when you stop drinking coffee and wake up in the morning and have nothing but pets and rooms. Half the cats are asleep, that's how I feel. These lighthouse hours are longer when we fought the night before because she grabbed me and I cried.

She is this much bigger thing, this older and I don't need to tell you all that much, but don't stop. Be here. She fell in love with a musician and now demands all my sounds. I tend to be quiet or have my foot in my mouth. I want to gather details and ascribe them to the mortar. A million little notebooks that say nothing other than the time and here are the walls that are strikingly similar from year to year.

Her sounds are daunting. The sounds that I do not hear, that she hears all day, that she hums and sings and screams at the dog, I do not hear. Those working out sounds, those clustered together in bed with a bagel on her lap and my hand getting in the cream cheese, with my smile on her, and her smile on her mind thinking up the high beam sounds, the towers of sounds, the mass congregation of sounds.

My fingers sign when we are watching movies together.  
I silently repeat what people say.

I am here in the kitchen and it is morning and this feels like I should never have let it go. With the heater on that I cannot afford to pay and with the stove working early and with me so generously. With the door closed and already shadows stealing in over me from the window that has bars and seems so much like me in its heaving diversion, the kitchen is mine again. With my toes cold in these boots that have not seen the outdoors and with tiny indoor lights that blink in a pattern, with her in her bed without sheets and her dog at her feet still past noon, she is so much mine. But here only, here in this kitchen.

I've done this before and I didn't know who I was when I did it, and I didn't know who I would become, and I held my breath and hoped that someone would see who I was becoming and tell me. I asked my father how he knew what he was supposed to become in his life, how he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt what he was created for and what would kill him if he couldn't and he said he just knew.

When she's running late, she will try to align the hallway table perfectly with the left wall.

We don't clean and we live like refugees in her bed and she leaves for a few hours and I wonder everything she's ever thought. Does she sing about me to the sounds she hears? Does she wonder, when I am here and she is sleeping, in the last moments before waking, if I am writing about her? "I don't have sounds when I am sick in her bed," I write in the kitchen. I don't know why I told her to read all my journals. I want to take it back and sit on them forever.

I hear sounds. I hear sounds but they are not hers and they never will come close.  
And here where I sit cloistered  
while my body is brambled and disputed and dim, while  
my body is fermenting, unrousing, while hers is not waking; my sounds  
are as silent as I.

My daddy is going bankrupt and I have a terminal disease.  
Sugar accelerated the deterioration.  
I'm too sick to move.

4

Sometimes the cats stare out the window and I just stare at them staring and marvel at their concentration and wish I could sleep like they did without guilt. I didn't wake up that half hour early today and my whole day feels half an hour behind. Because if I don't have that to hope for, I only have bottom drawers and wood floors. My little airport where I stay home.

The hallway table is perfectly aligned with the left wall.

I perform ablutions nestled up in her bed, stretched out on my elbows, then sitting up with my legs crossed in front of a mirror, analyzing my face. Finding slack lines that trace my fatigue, finding sallow slots that curve in close to my mouth, my face clayey - a pancake of loose skin, my hair bunched up in tangles and sweat. I try to find what Dannie sees.

I smile at myself and imagine that I am smiling at her and imagine that she is smiling back. I go to the bathroom and take off all my clothes and examine my full body. I hold my stomach in and turn to the side and look at my bones, see where they jut out in some places and in some places where they don't. I push my stomach out and try to imagine if I would be a beautiful pregnant woman and if I were a pregnant woman would Dannie like the way I looked with all my clothes off. I wonder if I have the kind of body that I am attracted to in women. I lift my arms and turn my head and take out the scale and I weigh myself. I look at this body and think about where all the weight is and I wonder if I weigh more when I am sad because I feel so much heavier than I normally do.

Sometimes I touch my breasts and am pleased with myself and the way that I feel. Sometimes my breasts disappear and I can't understand a desire for useless flesh. I can't see myself in a way that she would like and I can't see myself in a way that I would like and I push my skin in and fall to the floor. I hold my naked body and let tears roll down my bone knees. I feel dirty and unloved and I look at my watch and she has only been gone for half an hour and I told myself I would write about her while she was gone and all I can do is wonder why she tells me she is in love with me.

I had a dream about a house that was made out of wood slats found on beaches, covered in water and always slick to the touch. In this house lived a woman and a man and the woman loved women and the man loved men but they also loved each other and were a family. They had seven girls and all of the seven girls grew into seven women who loved women. They had no money and they stood naked together and told each other about their parts. And the littlest one knew that they were poor and tried to write the story of their lives and their house and sell it to a company so they could all get pregnant and keep loving each other. Each daughter rubbed her naked body against a stick and became pregnant with seven new girls. They were still poor. They were still naked. And they still loved each other.

When I woke up I told Dannie about my dream. I pushed my hands under her shirt and she winced because my hands were cold, so I kissed her chin and I kissed her forehead and I rubbed her belly and I touched her breasts and I touched her breastplate and I kissed her neck and she held me. We couldn't fall back asleep so we held each other in our wet bed with wet thoughts until we were hungry and left.

Sometimes we can't kiss. Sometimes I try to kiss her on her lips and she gives me her cheek and when she comes up behind me she kisses my neck, and when she is leaving she kisses me on the side of my lips in a way where she is kissing me but we are not kissing. And when I finally give up and kiss her with non-kissing kisses, I wonder if she puts more weight into our kisses, that they are more sacred to her and I ruin the kiss by

kissing her too much, and I feel ashamed and try not to kiss her and then when we kiss, it is the best kind.

5

There are moments of truth. Small moments like the sun breaking through on a cloudy day just enough, just enough to convince you to go outside.

*You have nothing to be afraid of.  
I've been a fucking wreck over you for SO LONG.*

And then it begins to rain.

*But, I feel like we've destroyed an entire city.*

I am in the kitchen again and it is morning and there is a cleaning rag on the floor. I am in a red robe and I've always wanted a robe like this and now that I wear it, I just feel sick and old. Veins pop out of the top of my hand like I am the floor. I want to write but I don't want to write about this. I want to sleep but I don't want to sleep in her bedroom. You can still desire non-desire, even that is a flaw.

*Our hearts set the whole damn thing on fire...*

There are moments when I can convince myself that this isn't real. The pain is in my head and I am just locked inside my body. But then my pills begin to wear off. And I am alone again in a miscarriage.

*Don't burn out sweet girl. Stay with you. I need you.*

I made cream of wheat to help combat the nausea and tomorrow is an upper endoscopy. We have been in bed for nearly three months now and the idea of leaving gives me panic attacks. We feed each other our pills at bedtime, and though the bottles add up, there never seem to be enough. And the empty bottles dance like sugar-plumb fairies on the hardwood floor. Our bedroom is The Nutcracker. We haven't taken down our Christmas decorations. We are not planning on taking them down at all.

6

When Dannie was on tour for those two months in 2009  
and I was

o  
l n  
a e  
in her house  
and it was just  
me and her dog  
and her clothes  
and her smells.

When Dannie was on tour for those two months,  
and we had only actually been together for one month,  
which was spent in preparation for her leaving and us vainly  
trying to restore the house after we just might as well have burned it down,  
and we spent our days in thrift shops looking for rain boots, refrigerator shelves,  
and warm jackets.

When Dannie was on tour with the band that had broken up because we fell in love  
and they wouldn't talk to her in the van on the road, and they wouldn't talk to her  
preparing to go on stage, and they didn't talk to her for two months at all and it was  
my fault, it was my fault and she sat alone in the backseat and she wasn't allowed to talk  
to them, and she wasn't allowed to talk to me on the phone in front of them for fear  
that they would try to talk to her and those words, their words were stronger than me,  
all alone, in her house.

We  
told each  
other about  
Christmas and  
how together we  
would light red and  
green candles and place  
them around the bathtub  
and bake gingerbread cookies  
shaped like reindeer and before  
that Thanksgiving and role-playing  
our fantasy of me in a white apron and  
her in a white button-up shirt watching  
football  
while I  
delivered  
cold beers  
in high heels.

I felt younger then. I didn't have this red robe.

When Dannie came back from tour, surprising me  
a full five days before Thanksgiving, we started decorating the house.  
We spent hours rummaging through holiday thrift store sales,  
comparing bargain bags of assorted Christmas ornaments and filigree,  
trying to fill our empty house,  
trying to live in our empty house,  
trying to love each other here as a family.  
We had risked everything in the belief that this love would work,

that this love would fill  
all the emptiness it would create.

In this kitchen there are 57 Santa Clauses:  
on table tops,  
in snow globes,  
on aprons,  
on oven mitts,  
sewn on decorative towels and fabric napkins,  
made of burlap,  
made of wood,  
made of plastic,  
made of glass,  
handmade out of clay, cornhusks, and papier-mâché,  
sledding down tiny plastic trees,  
holding up presents on the backs of trains,  
playing guitar,  
under street signs,  
on rooftops and in the snow,  
that are a candle,  
that are a music box,  
that are a cookie jar,  
that are a paper-towel holder,  
that snore,  
that dance,  
that light up,  
that sing when you walk by.

The two tables to the left of me are clothed in red and green plaid with gold lining.  
The large woven sleigh beside me displays multicolored orbs of every size, shape, and color. Some are frosted, some are beaded, others distort your body when you stop to find yourself in their reflection. The filing cabinet next to the refrigerator hides beneath quilted poinsettia designs. Two open green cookie tins filled with the sharp curves and angles of Christmas cookie cutters crown it. Snowflakes and angels, bells, rocking horses, teddy bears and skinny Saint Nicks, four different versions of star-topped trees.

Before I got sick, I was the cookie queen of the kitchen.

I wanted the house in twinkling white  
to always smell like lavender shortbread  
or lemon bars,  
oatmeal raisin without walnuts  
or chocolate chunk macadamia nut,  
snickerdoodle  
or molasses ginger drop  
cookies were always in the oven.

I made long trays of soft sugar cookies covered in frosting that hardened to look like stained glass. I learned that cooling cookies on baking racks was better so they wouldn't lose their shape and stick to the other cookies on a stacked plate, so they wouldn't continue to bake on a hot sheet pan.

I made gingerbread walls and gingerbread paths to the house for the gingerbread people who filled our bellies while we smiled and licked our fingers, drank almond milk and felt everything filling with sweetness.

It was the first week of December 2008.

\* \* \* \* \*  
\* \* \* \* \*

The night we went to dinner with my father and my sister and ate Thai food in her neighborhood for her birthday, and we talked about the parties she was going to because Cassandra loves parties, and we talked about the clothes she wore because Cassandra loves clothes, and we talked about the celebrities she spotted on vacation and Dannie and I gripped each other tightly under the table with laced knees.

I wore the brown dress that Dannie told me I looked pretty in, even though it looked like something her ex-girlfriend would wear because she was femme and Dannie is butch and that dynamic made sense. (I am sitting here now in my red robe and I haven't changed out of my long johns in a week. I bought dresses to show her that she could stay as she was, that I would change for her.)

The night we wore gloves and folded our fingers around each other's and our hands began to sweat, I brought molasses ginger drop cookies for my sister in a vintage red Christmas tin with a photo of frosted evergreen sprigs, white bells, and red bows on the lid. When we got home we talked about how she would never eat the cookies as we sat in bed and ate our cookies and smiled our loving smiles and fell asleep with tummy aches.

The night we held each other's bellies all night long.  
It was the next night that I got sick.

7

Soon Dannie will stir and soon I will ask her what she wants for breakfast and make it for her while she lies in bed preparing to leave me. She will ask me why I am distant and tell me, "I need you" and ask, "please come, please come and lay next to me," and I should and I do.

*Please don't take this to be extortive.*

*Please.*

*Take your time.*

*Take mine.*

*Take anything you want.*



She risked so much to have me and make believe in this house where there is no one but everything we've ever owned. In boxes, strewn about, dirty dishes and the sickness in her bedroom that maintains, that stays the same.

*Everything I've every worked for  
in my entire life  
is on the line here.*

And I am no one she's ever met before and I will never be anyone she's ever loved before and I think she misses those who left her when she wouldn't give me up, so I will try to make music and try to be funny and try to know her better than anyone else, better than they did.

*It just boils down to the fact that  
I cannot take things with you any further  
as long as you are in this house.*

And I am here alone in this kitchen.

I am awake and clothed without purpose.

*What happens at the intersection of natural disaster  
and conscious policy.*

In her bedroom now she is eating the breakfast I made for her and I make anything for her, anytime she lets me help. Salt and pepper eggs with hot sauce in the corner, two pieces of dry wheat toast. In her bedroom, she is sitting up and her toes also are cold, we have no sheets only wet blankets and her dog waits for scraps on the hardwood floor.

*Easier to open yourself to complacency than to fight for purity.*

I think about leaving.

I want to go to the flea market by myself.

She will never startle me again.

I am in the kitchen and all day I will be alone and in the kitchen, thinking up these words about her. I am not next to her. I am not in her arms. She is not holding me closely with tension in her fingers because she fears that my love is fleeting since she grabbed me and I cried.

She doesn't know my words and I will not read them to her. These words are tainted in her mind and she wishes I wouldn't write them and see them before me and read them to

myself and think that they are true. I will still tell her that I love her and it will still be true. I will still hold her if I am by her side, even though I may be in this kitchen without her. I will begin to sleep at her feet with the dog and hope that she doesn't ask me what I am thinking. I will wonder if she wonders if she made a mistake and will she keep going on and loving me because she risked so much and she can't go back on her word.

She is a person of governing principals and overwhelming instincts.

And she can't say she didn't know better and she can't say that I wasn't what she wanted, so she will wonder and I will wonder and for the rest of my life I will know that she might be thinking of me sitting alone when I am thinking of her, and what my face looks like in those moments and if I am crying and wondering and heartbroken about her.

Don't worry, these are my thoughts about me only.

Don't worry. I think these things and they may not mean a thing at all.

Don't worry. Our love only dies as much as we do and we haven't left your bed in three months.

Don't worry I am still sick, so I won't be leaving anytime soon.

Don't worry. It may even be easier when I am gone.

8

Her car alarm erupts in chortles and chirps, long enkindled proclamations and low whining admonitions. She lies next to me, doesn't move.

"Are you okay?" Dannie had asked me earlier. We were curled up in each other watching a movie at two in the afternoon. I was in a lot of pain but hadn't grumbled or cursed that morning. I left the bed early and went to the kitchen. When I came back I asked her what she wanted for breakfast and then let her consume me in her arms.

"I'm just tired," I offered. She held me closer and I kissed her fingers pressed against my chest.

9

The night Dannie held my hand as we turned around from the Christmas party we were going to. The night we came back to her house and she rubbed my back as I panted, and she kissed my forehead as I grimaced and cried out, holding my side. When I felt a little better I ate Christmas cookies, but she stared out the window either at the darkness peppered by far away streetlights or her own reflection beneath the Christmas lights strung up around her bedroom. She stayed with me in the hospital as they put me on morphine and lay beside me when I couldn't talk. She wrapped me in scarves and gloves and put a hat on my head to keep me safe from the cold air, "see," she said, "it is just like we are in our Christmas house."