

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. The knife went in her chest.

My girlfriend's blonde hair looked greasy. It was dark, the window was open, the streetlight was a pervert. She screamed at me when she grabbed my thigh. 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 to this house again to live. I had been wearing hers. She wears all lengths men's underwear. There is a lot to be said about that. When she was gone, for those months that she was gone and I was here in this house by myself, I wore them too. She steals them from her dad. Giant and white, they've all become stained. Like a loose ring around my finger, the elastic band would wobble up my waist past my belly button. I hid this with her flannels and long johns.

When she got back, of those months she was gone, she said I had been *trying on dyke*.

In my thin cotton thigh, just now, she made two holes with her fingernails.

2

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

[What was the name of your mother's Christian rock band, the one where she played your same Roland keyboard with 88 weighted keys? What was the name of the church where you first sang when you were five? And what was the song? Glory in the Highest?]

I've been thinking of ways to start over. So I'll write a book before I die. This is the history of waking up and drinking water at the kitchen sink. Counting to 14 before choking.

[Double Blessing. St. Mary's. Yes. Gloria in the Highest, don't you remember?]

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.



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

<p><i>I am being proactive in changing this behavioral pattern. I think, thoroughly, before making any little choice.</i></p>	<p><i>– d.m.</i></p>
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I run to the bathroom with the lights off, hand over my mouth. I pound my knees against the white tiles, clutching my stomach. 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.

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.

[♪ I've got wet sweaters on my b a c k preventing ~~me~~ from sta n d i n g u p ♪]

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 I could barely play, the truth about her before I knew it.

*

*

♫
the
way
the
hair
was
feeling
on my
arm as
you
pushed
it
back
♫

*

*

*

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. I tend to gather details and assign them to rooms and little notebooks that say nothing other than the time and are strikingly similar from year to year.

These
walls
are
sewn
in dark
thread.

houses. A million
here are the walls that

Her sounds are daunting. The sounds that I do not hear, that she hums and sings and screams at the dog, I do not hear. Those working out sounds, those clustered together in bed sounds, 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 congregations of *sounds*.

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

We don't clean and we live like refugees in her bed and when she leaves for a few hours 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 her last moments before waking, if I am writing about her or my pain and if I can tell the difference? Does she wonder if I'm mourning or why I don't sing? *I don't have sounds when I am sick in your 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.

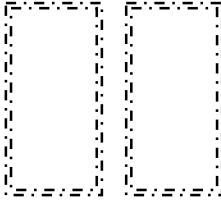
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I hear sounds! I hear sounds but they are not hers and they never will come close. *She writes the music I waited my whole life to hear*, I sign, wearing a red robe and long johns. And here where I sit cloistered while my body is bramble, while my body is fermenting, unrousing, while my body is not hers and hers is not waking; my sounds are as silent as I.

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.

Sometimes
when she's running late,
she will try to align
the hallway table
perfectly with the right wall.



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 the shadow of a doubt what he was created for and what would kill him if he couldn't, and he said he just knew.

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

4

Her car alarm erupts in chortles and chirps, long enkindled proclamations and low whining admonitions. She lies next to me, doesn't move. I know her arms are underneath her body. Her magnetic wraps, tight around her forearms, are causing her hands to turn purple and her fingers to swell. She has tendonitis in both arms and when she leaves it's to go to shiatsu or yoga or acupuncture. And before she leaves she hangs from the bedroom door, sometimes asking if I want rented movies, sometimes not saying anything at all.

"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. 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.

"I'm just tired," I had offered.

5

Sometimes the cats stare out the window and I just stare at them staring and marvel at their concentration. I wish I could sleep like they did, substantiated and insouciant. I didn't wake up that half hour early today and now my whole day feels half an hour wanting. Because if I don't have that to hope for, I only have her leaving. My little airport where I stay home.

The hallway table is perfectly aligned with the right 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. I find slack lines that map my fatigue, 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 make 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 the tears roll down my bone legs. I feel broken and unloved and I look at my watch and she has only been gone forty minutes. I told myself I would write while she was gone and all I can do is wonder why she tells me she is in love with me.

Sometimes we can't kiss. Sometimes I try to kiss her on the 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

When Dannie was on tour for two months and I was alone 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 in 2009 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 try 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* 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 all 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 home, surprising me a full five days early, 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.
 A large woven sleigh displays multicolored orbs of every size, matter, and texture. Some
 are frosted, some are beaded, others distort your body when you stop to find yourself in
 their reflection. The filing cabinet by the refrigerator hides beneath quilted poinsettia
 designs. Two open green tins filled with cookie cutters crown it.

S
 no w
 f l a k e s
 and angels,
 bells, r o c k
 i n g h o r s e s,
 teddy bears and skinny
 Sain t N i c k s f o u r,
 dif f e r e n t v e r s i o n s
 of s t a r - t o p p e d t r e e s.

Before I got sick I was the cookie queen of the kitchen. I wanted the house in twinkling
 white to always smell like cinnamon shortbread or cherry thumbprints, oatmeal raisin or
 chocolate chunk peanut butter, snickerdoodle or molasses ginger drop cookies were 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 racks was better, so they wouldn't lose
 their shape or stick to the other cookies on a stacked plate, so they wouldn't continue to
 bake on a hot sheet. 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 fill up with sweetness. It was the first week of December
 2008.

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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 is 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 tin with frosted evergreen sprigs, white bells, and gold bows pictured on the lid. When we got home we talked about how she would never eat her cookies as we sat in bed and ate our cookies and smiled our loving smiles and fell asleep with our hands on each other's bellies. It was the next night that I got sick.

6

I made cream of wheat to help combat the nausea and tomorrow is an upper endoscopy. I 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.

Last night I had a dream about a house 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. And they had seven boys and all of the seven boys grew into seven men who loved men. They had no money and they stood naked together and they told each other about their parts. And the youngest 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.

7

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

I am in the kitchen again and it is morning and there is a cleaning rag on the floor. I am in my 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 tops of my hands like misplaced bones.* 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.

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 the pills begin to wear off. And I am alone again in a miscarriage.

Before those two months on tour, before the month of preparation, before she said we could be girlfriends and would I move back in? When I was subletting a shared room in the Mission and I didn't have a mattress so every night I cried into futon crevices, half on the painted floor. Dannie wrote me letters.

*I sat across the hall and heard
you tinker, heard your voice
quiver and break into echoes,
electrifying the whole house
with your wonder, your magic.
I fell in love with this.*

8

Dannie will never give me anything because she doesn't need my love. She will never give me anything because she doesn't need my love. She will never give me anything because she doesn't need my love.

I wake in the early morning and watch her sleeping. I wake and the fog is still sifting through shy oranges in the sky, through the fog on our window from the heat of our breathing. I go and sit at the kitchen table. I am awake and clothed without purpose.

I know that 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,

just for a minute, ” and I should and I do. She risked so much to have me and make believe in this house where there is no one but everything we’ve ever owned.

*Please don't take this to be extortive.
Please. Take your time. Take mine.
Everything I've ever worked for
in my entire life is on the line here.
Yet I cannot help this drive to love you.*

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, turkey bacon, two pieces of buttered toast. In her bedroom now she is sitting up and talking about coffee, and while she’s out do we need any groceries, she’s putting pants on over her long johns. Her dog waits for scraps on the hardwood floor.

*Of course I desire to see you everyday,
but as mayor of that burning city,
it is my responsibility now to take measure,
call for back up, bring food, water,
and medical supplies.*

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

Last night she had the largest cat in her arms. And there were no tears in her eyes. 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.

*Things are delicate now. Andy is not ready
to deal with the reality of how I feel about you.*

I am alone here in this kitchen.

I am awake and clothed without purpose.

*Andy told Ammo the other day that if he found out
you and I were speaking, he'd hate both of us forever.*

*Dannie will never give me anything because she doesn't need my love. She will never
give me anything because she doesn't need my love. She will never give me anything
because she doesn't need my love.*

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.

*I cannot take things with you any further.
I can't have any contact with you
until Andy...*

She does not think I am well enough. She thinks I think like a child. I want her attention, I distract her. She has to work. She has to go out and drink coffee and carry keys and grocery bags. She has to make music now or she will kill somebody.

*Your mom was right about Virgos in a way,
not that I'm gonna try to own you, but in the way that
I want to control everything.*

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 her dog and hope that she doesn't ask me what I am thinking.

*I understand your process, but I just fear
your incredible proclivity to this doom and gloom
and everyone hates me, it's over, there's no hope,
I'm chaos, who would stick around for me?
way of thinking/coping.*

She is a person of governing principals and overwhelming instincts.

*I love you. God knows I do. But
I also love Ammo and Andy and the life
we've created for ourselves. And I have to
make my focus/priority them and me – right now.*

Dannie will never give me anything because she doesn't need my love. She will never give me anything because she doesn't need my love. She will never give me anything because she doesn't need my love.

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 I 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.

9

The night Dannie held my hand as we turned around from the Christmas party we were driving 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 up in scarves and gloves and put a hat on my head to keep me safe from the chilly air, "see," she said, "it is just like we are in our Christmas house."