

## NORTHWIND

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## FIRE SEASON

These hot winds, the Santa Anas, blow through Southern California every fall. Angry, they arrive, kick dust in our eyes, rip fronds from palm trees—the earth tossed, drained, and ripe for fire. People hate them. But have you ever watched flames snarl and lick at the sun, devour everything that gets in their way? God is in those winds. Live through one big fire, and you'll understand what I mean.

Early October, gloomy, sixty-something-degree days, the temporary cold a ruse to catch us off guard. Always works. That was last week, and my youngest, Ingrid, came into the den, wearing a purple sweatshirt with a unicorn and matching leggings, and said, “Look, Daddy, winter clothes.”

“Not yet, baby,” I said. “We still have to get through fire season.”

She frowned, turned, walked upstairs, probably to show her mother—my wife, Gwen. Ingrid's been doing that lately: going to Gwen when she doesn't like my reaction, sometimes not bothering with me at all. That is, if I'm even home to begin with.

By mid-October, the gloom erupts, heat hovers. I can feel it while I'm still lying in bed, alarm blaring on the nightstand. *Just five more minutes*, I think, as though I'm Ingrid's age instead of dragging forty. I crack open an eye to the gray-dark, reach over, and slap the alarm silent. Let out a groan, roll onto my side. The hairdryer is humming—Gwen's the one who gets the girls up, takes them to school. I rise and lumber to the window, peek out the blinds. Over the identical, white, two-story houses, the neatly

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defined lawns bordered with rose bushes, cloud cover keeps the hot air stuck down, the neighborhood a soundless pressure cooker.

We haven't had rain in a long time, and the hills wait—parched, dry, and shriveled, like those village elders in *National Geographic*. My oldest, Jade, loves that magazine, started stealing our subscription when she was eight. "I'm going to be an Egyptologist," she told us. At sixteen, she's holding firm to the plan. She wants to major in Archaeology at USC, despite Gwen's protests that it's a risky career, that she'll be sent to God-knows-where to dig up God-knows-what.

"She complains when it's over eighty degrees," Gwen says. "How's she going to stand the Egypt desert?"

"She can do it," I say, and pat Gwen's arm, knowing her real concern isn't the weather. "No more dangerous than it is here." Which is true, but Gwen shoots me a glare.

Last year's fire season was especially bad—ten miles away, black patches still stain the hills, like oil spills on a driveway. For five days, we had to stay indoors "as much as possible," air choked with smoke and ash, so thick it blotted out the sun. Looked like the end of the world. I've lived in this area twenty years, and the fires have never touched my home, though we've had to evacuate more than once.

I let the blinds go and hurry back to bed, pull the covers over my face. But unlike childhood monsters, the demons of adulthood are undaunted by blankets. Two words form behind my closed eyes: LAST CHANCE. So loud, I think someone speaks them, and I fling back the sheet and jump up, searching.

*Hearing things, I think. Wonderful.*

The hairdryer shuts off, and Gwen emerges in her robe. "What's wrong?" she says, tucking hair behind her ears, face dusted with makeup.

I move past her and into the steamy bathroom, close the door.

"Good morning to you, too," she says.

I start the shower and lean onto the gray marble countertop, hang my head over the sink. Now is no time to be cracking up. I have a presentation today, a potential, multi-million-dollar client. I can just hear my boss: *Gentlemen, Mr. Campbell has a few screws loose, but not to worry. He'll take care of all your advertising needs.*

Into the shower, I pull the curtain, rub my face, push hands through my hair, wiping away sleep in a single swipe. I soap my body. Get out, brush my teeth, put on a suit and tie, and walk downstairs just as Gwen and the girls are leaving.

"I have an early meeting," Gwen says, fitting a binder into her briefcase. Jade is wearing too-tight jeans and pushes a more loosely denim-clad Ingrid into the garage. Ingrid gives me a quick wave before disappearing.

"Have a good day," I say, but the door slams before I get out the words.

I move to the kitchen, pour what remains of the coffee into my travel mug, and grab a granola bar from the pantry. I wanted my family to be different—*better* than the one I grew up in, and though I spent years believing I'd achieved that, these days, I've started to wonder what "better" even means.

Though wary of kids at first, I was glad we had girls, believed raising them would come more naturally than with boys. What I didn't expect was the silence. Jade got her license a few months back and is hardly home, shut up in her room when she is. Ingrid just had her eleventh birthday,

and she's turning more reticent by the minute. Every evening, each of us in a separate room with its own TV—what kind of family is that?

I sit at the kitchen table, wait until Gwen and the girls drive off, then head to the garage. Slip into my three-year-old Mercury Sable. Fit my mug in the cup holder, unwrap the granola bar, and take a bite as I back out. On the freeway, the chatter of talk radio buzzing in my ears, the hills seem to loom more than usual, closing in. No winds yet, but I know they're coming. I try to focus on the road, mentally rehearse my presentation, but that fear keeps bounding back to me—what if, this year, the fires finally get us?

Gwen always takes the girls back-to-school shopping, to cheer practice, Girl Scouts. She's a lawyer at Preston, McKenzie, and Browning, where she's remained since graduating law school, made partner now. Loves the work, but she cut down her hours for newborn Jade, then again when Ingrid came along. I've climbed my way up to Chief Creative Director of Sloan & Yates, determined to provide my family with more than what Gwen's income alone allows. Our house, for one. But I've missed bedtime stories, campouts, games, Jade and Ingrid growing, changing, hoarding secrets behind closed bedroom doors, then coming out and giving me a look. Almost eerie the way they know things a grown man can't possibly comprehend. My girls are turning into women, and I've come to regard their distance as the punishment deserved for my absence.

I loosen my tie, then pull until it's undone, and chuck it in the backseat, but the air keeps thickening, heavy, hard to take in. I switch off the radio, signal and merge across five lanes of freeway, reach the shoulder, and shut off the engine. Clench the wheel and breathe. The panting slows, but I sit still for several minutes, watching dozens upon dozens of cars stream past. If I died right now, this would have been my life.

"Have you lost your mind?" Gwen says.

"Maybe," I say. "But I quit."

She drops onto a kitchen chair, briefcase at her feet. "I can't believe this. Without giving your two-week's notice? Without discussing it with me?"

"Desperate times call for—"

"Spare me the platitudes." She puts up a hand, as though I've misbehaved like one of the kids.

I glance out the sliding glass door. The grass lies trimmed and even, my only evidence, aside from cashed checks, that the gardeners show up like Swiss clockwork. I'm always gone before they reach our house.

Gwen says, "You've worked your whole life for that job. Now it's one bad day, and you're done?"

"It wasn't just today. I mean, it was, but it's more than that. I feel like a stranger in my own home."

"Don't be a drama queen, Harris."

My jaw hardens. I put my hands in my pockets. We have wooden wind chimes strung on the eaves, and their hollow *plunk plunk* drifts into the room.

"You're not listening to me," I say.

She pushes herself up. "I can't talk to you right now." She lifts the briefcase and walks off, and at the bottom of the stairs, pauses and says, "You better have a plan."

She ascends, and I listen to her footsteps until she reaches our bedroom door. Now what? I have no idea what she might do, and I don't intend to be out of a job forever. Just long enough to get to know my family again.

I tell the girls at dinner.

Jade stares at me like I've announced we're moving to Siberia and won't be bringing our clothes. She says, "How can you just quit?"

"I wasn't happy," I say, take a bite of biscuit, and chew.

She says, "School doesn't make me happy, and I still have to go."

I reach over and squeeze her hand. She stiffens.

I turn to Ingrid, smile, and say, "I never got to see you guys."

"Hold on," Jade says, and sets down her fork, loaded with mashed potato. "How are you going to pay for USC?" She throws a panicked appeal to Gwen, who's slumped in her chair, mute, arms crossed. More like a sullen teenager than either of the girls.

Back at me, Jade scowls. She says, "I'm not going to a state school because you're having a mid-life crisis, *Dad*."

I run a finger inside my collar. "Gwen, you want to help me out here?"

Still slouching, she says, "I'm actually wondering the same thing."

Jade shoves back her chair and stands. "This sucks."

"Quarter in the jar," Ingrid says, mouth full of chicken. "You said the 's' word."

"Bite me." Jade storms out. Ten seconds later, she slams her door.

Silence, except for Ingrid scraping her plate, pushing her gravy into a single blob. She places her fork on the table and says, "Can I go to Maggie's house?"

I wipe my mouth with a napkin. "I'll take you."

"I want Mom to," she says, stopping me mid-rise.

I sit back as Gwen gets up. "Come on," she says to Ingrid, and together, they leave the room.

I finish dinner, put away leftovers, wash the dishes. Tiptoe upstairs, but I can't get my hand to knock on Jade's door, and I spend the evening channel surfing in the den. When Maggie's parents drop off Ingrid, she goes straight to her room. I climb into bed around midnight, Gwen inched so far onto her side, I wonder how she doesn't roll off.

Like high school all over again, the girls I love won't give me the time of day. Only now, I'm not so easily deterred. Next night, I try to help with homework. They don't need it. On Saturday, I offer to take them to see *The Princess Diaries*. They went last week.

"We could see something else," I say.

No.

Sunday, would Jade like to borrow my car? She prefers Gwen's—the minivan. I move to Ingrid's room, offer a trip to Baskin Robbins. She's vegan.

"Vegan?" I say. "Honey, do you even know what vegan means?"

She's lying across her bed, on her stomach, reading *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*. Attention held tight to the book, she says, "One who does not consume meat, dairy products, or eggs."

My eleven-year-old. Reading novels, speaking like a dictionary.

"Since when?" I say.

"Since now." Voice as iced and angry as her sister's.

I begin to leave, but stop a step from the door. "Ing, why are you mad at me?"

She places a finger between the pages and sets down the book. “Jade said we don’t have money anymore. She said I won’t get a TV for Christmas, and it’s your fault.”

I point to her bookcase—with the TV on top of it. “What do you call that?”

“I need a 19-inch,” she says, deadpan.

*God help us*, I think, but all I can do is nod. I turn and walk out.

“Shut the door, please,” Ingrid says. I obey.

In the den, I flop on the couch and switch on the 40-inch TV. Defeat, surrender, whatever you want to call it. I stay here all day and through the night, and it isn’t until the following afternoon that I awake to Gwen standing over me.

“What are you doing?” she says.

I blink a few times, bring her into focus. Roll and face the TV.

“Watching ‘Wheel of Fortune,’” I say.

“Is this how you look for a job?”

“I’m not going back to work.”

She swats my feet, and I bunch up my legs. She sits. “Okay, you’re going through a thing. I’m sorry for not being supportive.” She places a hand on my calf and says, “Take another week, but you can’t not work forever.”

“Watch me.”

Her hand slips off. “We have bills, Harris. A house payment.”

“So we get a smaller house. We lived in one before.” I take the quilted throw pillow from under my head and reshape it with a fist. “I grew up in a small house, and I turned out fine, didn’t I?”

“What’s gotten into you?”

“There’re too many doors here.”

She stays quiet so long I have to look at her.

“The girls will be home soon,” she says, green eyes locked on mine.

“You want them to see you like this?”

I flick my gaze back to Pat and Vanna.

Gwen rises and leaves. I think about going after her, hashing this out until we devise a solution. But when I push up to stand, my legs buckle and pull me down, as though even walking is yet another feat I don’t have the power to tackle.

I stay on the couch for days—five, eight, who knows—trudge out and fetch things from the pantry, spread them on a TV tray. I don’t shave or shower, and I speak to no one. Gwen comes in and tries to talk: “What’s going on?” “Why are you doing this?” “I don’t know what you’re trying to pull.” Once, she has to shoo Ingrid, “Dad’s not feeling well,” before giving up herself.

I’m not trying to be an asshole. I just don’t know what to say, words sticking to the back of my throat, as though they’re on to something it takes me longer to grasp. A vow of silence, I decide, might get me sorted out. My days like a monk’s, nothingness piled end-to-end, the babble of reruns my Gregorian chant.

But the afternoons are slow and muggy, too muggy to think, and so I sit and eat Nutella straight from the jar, a habit left over from childhood. Until the early eighties, you couldn’t even get the chocolate hazelnut spread in the States, but my mother had a friend ship it to us from Italy by the boxful. She had a penchant for foodstuffs like that, and items that

neighbors considered gourmet were staples in our house. Just one of many reasons people labeled Mom “eccentric.” She was an oil painter, said she loved the colors, the thick, rich mess, and when home, if she wasn’t making mushroom pâté or red wine risotto, she was holed up in her laundry-room-converted studio. Which left my dad, a high school history teacher, and me alone with the bizarre household cuisine.

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Hence Nutella, not spread on pita bread or folded into a crepe, but eaten with a spoon. Maybe mistaken for pudding, though I don’t ever remember having it another way. Once, Mom emerged to find me playing chess with Dad, the half-empty jar beside me, my white pieces smudged with chocolaty fingerprints. She looked from me to Dad, then said, “Can’t you get the kid a

napkin?”

Without waiting for a reply, she picked up a pawn, wiped it clean with her oversized T-shirt, and set it back down. And then she did the same with every piece, careful to replace each in its square. On and on, until she’d polished my king and moved to me, rubbed my mouth until no trace of Nutella remained, her own shirt now filthy with it. The whole time, Dad and I just sat there, waiting for her to finish.

We lived in anticipation of behavior like this, the way Mom would walk away mid-sentence, only to return an hour later and resume the conversation as though not a moment had passed. Start baking a cheesecake at midnight, or burst into a room with an off-the-wall question, like why didn’t we have any truffle butter, and could Dad please go get some? Most of the time, she acted normal, relatively speaking. But every few months, the strangeness would start, build for a day or two, and culminate with crazy demands. Like the time she stormed into the backyard during a game of father-son Frisbee, and insisted the fledgling magnolia tree Dad had planted just last year be removed. It was obstructing her view of the garden.

Whatever she asked, it didn’t matter. Dad would hop in the car or haul out the chainsaw, as though his compliance might forestall what always happened next, though it never did. Mom would tousle my hair, light up a Marlboro, inhale, and let the smoke trail out of her nose, slow as breath. Fix her eyes on something in the distance, and I’d strain to see whatever it was. Cigarette half-smoked, she’d drop it, snuff it out with her bare heel, and go back to her paintings. Then she’d disappear for days.

She never said where she went, and upon returning, offered nothing more than, “I had to clear my head.” In her absence, even the furniture seemed to breathe easier—but not Dad. He got up early those mornings, made me pancakes and fresh-squeezed orange juice. “Mom needed a vacation,” he’d say. Just that. But his movements took on an edge, as though each of Mom’s departures was steeped with the chance that, this time, she wouldn’t come back. I knew better—if nothing else, her reappearance was the one thing on which we could count.

The heavy October air seeps through the walls, and in this gagging, stagnant warmth, I practically choke on a new awareness: I, too, have been an unreliable presence. And like my father, I’ve indulged Gwen and the girls with whatever they’ve desired. I pinch the spot above the bridge of my

nose, headache from the constant glare of the TV I refuse to switch off. What the hell was I thinking? What the hell was Dad thinking? I reach for the phone, begin to dial his number, and it isn't until I'm about to press the last digit that I remember my father is dead.

I push "end" and put the phone back in its cradle, a chill creeping down my neck and spine. It happened a year ago, last week. *Lung cancer*, I remind myself, though he never smoked. That was Mom's habit.

All my life, and probably before, her pants' pockets held two things: a pack of Marlboros and a gold Zippo lighter—windproof, refillable, and technically, not hers. She'd found it in the restroom of the gallery where she'd sold her first painting. Called it her "good luck gold," and never went anywhere without it. Until I left for college, and she pressed the lighter to my palm, along with a kiss to the temple, and closed my fingers around it.

She died four months later. A car accident, and as usual, she wasn't wearing a seatbelt. Secretly, I've always wondered if that Zippo didn't possess some mysterious power, hadn't in fact kept her safe through years of careless, even reckless, behavior—and if my taking it hadn't somehow caused her death. One action, could it be so simple?

I jerk my head from side to side, bring myself back to this room, this moment, and the way the sun casts a hazy glow from the shutter slats, revealing a coat of dust on the recliner, the shelves and shelves of videotapes. I shift and jump—Jade's hovering in the doorway, arms crossed. I wonder how long she's been there.

She stays quiet, eyeing me. Then she says, "You need to get a grip." So much like *her* mother.

I rub my palms together. "Jade," I start, but no words follow.

"Mom's pretending like everything's okay," she says. "But it's not."

I clear my throat. Cough and say, "It'll be fine, honey."

"Don't lie to me. I'm not a child." She sucks in a quick breath, stares down at her shoes. "I have plans, Dad. It isn't fair for you to fuck that up."

"Language," I say.

She drops her arms. "Are you serious?" She laughs, once, dark waves brushing her shoulders. "Go to hell," she says, and walks away.

I scramble up, "Wait," follow her out, down the hall, and into the garage.

She hits the garage door opener, grabs my keys off the workbench, and strides to my car. "I take it you don't mind," she hollers above the roar, and gets in, starts the engine. Peels down the driveway and into the street, gone before I can even think to ask where she's going.

I retreat to the den, sit, my hand balled into a fist. I whack the back of the couch. "Damn it," I say to the empty room, empty house. Punch the couch again, and with the impact, recollect all that frustration my father never showed.

You'd think, eventually, Dad would've tired out, confronted Mom about taking off, but to my knowledge, he never did—weathering her absences, and welcoming her back with a love I thought befitted a saint. I remember sitting with him after her funeral, the way he hunched in his La-Z-Boy, a single cigarette burn on the carpet. He said, "I should've loved her more," and I said back, "You loved her plenty." *You loved her too much*, is what I meant. But too much proportionate to what?

An hour or so later, the garage door roars to life. Footsteps, and Gwen pokes her head in. "You're here," she says, and enters. "Where's your car?"

I say, "Jade took it. We had a fight."

She nods, lips pinched. "Happy now?"

I shrug or flinch or maybe both, and next thing, she's gripping my chin, her face inches from my own, like she's trying to see into the throbbing core of my brain.

In a low voice, she says, "I'm at the end of my rope, Harris. Swear to God."

I whisper, "Me too, Gwen," and she lets go of me and straightens.

"We're adults," she says. "Parents."

"And?"

She rakes her fingers through her hair, her hand at rest on her neck a moment. Then she drops it to her thigh with a slap.

"You pull yourself together," she says. And after she, too, walks away, I wonder why it sounds so easy to everyone but me.

That night, I sit, stand, go to the window, everything—grass, flowers, sidewalk, asphalt—diluted by the murky wash of streetlights. The clouds have cleared, leaving a dry, bristling heat in their wake, and I'm surprised Gwen hasn't turned on the AC. I move back to the couch, back to the window, pacing, restless as the skies, and all the while muttering, "I need help," over and over, the closest I've come to praying in my adult life.

Dad always read the Bible, though we never attended church. He didn't say so, but I knew Mom would've balked, would've objected altogether had she not also been a champion of "spiritual freedom." That's what she called it. As a kid, I begged God every night to stop her from running off, if only for my father's sake. Thirty-some-odd years later, my faith in divine intervention is virtually nonexistent, and so I don't know why I'm talking to God, exactly, about this trash heap I've made of my life.

I fall asleep at some point, plagued by odd dreams until I awake with a start, blood quick in my veins. I inhale a few deep breaths and turn my attention to the TV, to a commercial for a gold locket, the Lord's Prayer inscribed inside. Some overly made-up woman and her grinning kid, and I think, *Good grief*, and almost laugh, but next thing, I bolt up—too fast, sit still a few seconds to muster my balance—then stand and stagger to the living room to look up that prayer, which I ought to know by heart.

In the magazine rack, behind the *National Geographic*s and *Glamour*s, I pull out the Bible, my dad's, discovered in his dresser after he died. I go through the concordance, then to the Book of Matthew, read the prayer once, twice, I don't know how many times, until I've memorized the words, until I can almost make them sing. I carry the Bible to the den, and two paragraphs later, I come to this, underlined in black: *For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*. Like the hand of God, reaching down with a great cosmic pen.

I keep reading, doze in bursts, waking and continuing on. Daylight creeps in through the shutters. I make a pot of strong coffee, fill my travel mug twice, make another. All day, I read. I read and read, grab a bag of chips or a box of cereal and keep going—*Man does not live on bread alone*. Sleep with my cheek pressed to the tissue-thin pages, wake and start again. I leave the Bible splayed open and go in search of Gwen.

My family has been spoiled, raised with too much space, too many possessions, and I pause in the hallway and tap a few times on the wall. Take a breath and move forward. It's time to put things right.

Gwen is at the kitchen table, fingers punching into a calculator.

"I figured it out," I say.

She glances up, her expression the one I imagine she'd give a homeless man who's wandered into her house. I know I must be a mess, same sweats and T-shirt I've worn for days, but I smile and smooth my hair, harsh sunlight beating in through the sliding glass door.

"Good," she says, going back to the calculator. "Tell me after you've showered."

I sit down beside her. "Gwen, I started reading the Bible."

She stops. "You're religious now, are you?"

"It's not about being religious. It's about how to live. We've been going about this all wrong. You, me, the girls. We shouldn't be accumulating riches on Earth."

She raises a hand. "Accumulating riches?"

I take her hand in mine. "Last night," I say, and she jerks from my grasp, like I'm a leper. I press my palms flush to the table. "We won't live forever," I say. "We need to save ourselves, our daughters."

"By living in squalor?" She shakes her head, leans back.

The glass door is wide-open, screen shut to keep out the bugs. There are portulacas blooming, and I wonder who planted them, can't remember the last time I was out in the garden. Wind howls, blows into the house. My skin prickles. Santa Anas.

"You always get weird around fire season," Gwen says. "Morbid. But this." She stands and gathers her things.

"Hold on," I say. She doesn't.

I brace myself for the slammed door, but it never comes. Only Gwen's muted footfall, the soft click of the lock, and silence, except for the wind and the frenzy it stirs in the chimes.

I awake to a loud thumping on the stairs, peel my head from the table, my body from the chair, and find Gwen in the hall with a rolling suitcase. She starts walking to the garage. I follow. Her minivan's trunk is flung open, two other suitcases inside.

When I reach to take one out, she says, "Don't," and forces me back, heaves up the third suitcase, shoving to work it in.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"I'm picking up the girls from school and taking them to a hotel."

She gives the suitcase a final push and slams down the trunk, walks around the van, and I'm one step behind. When she swings back the door, I catch it.

"You have to stay," I say. "We have to fix this."

"We?" She points to her chest and says, "We tried to fix this," then aims the finger at me. "We wanted nothing to do with it."

"That was before. I have a solution now."

"Fanaticism is no solution."

"I'm talking about salvation," I say, throwing up my arms, and she ducks into the van and shuts and locks the door.

Face pressed to the window, I say, "I love you. I want to save you."

She bites her bottom lip, sticks the key in the ignition, and starts the engine. I push all ten of my fingers to the glass, imagine my hands purging the demons between us.

"Go in the house," she says.

"No."

She backs up the van, and I jog alongside, until she veers at the bottom of the driveway—"Let me save you!" I shout—and she speeds down the street, blows through the stop sign, and vanishes behind a row of houses.

I stand on the sidewalk, alone, not one neighbor on his lawn, not one car driving by. In the distance, I hear a lawnmower buzzing, the low hum of the freeway. The wind thrashes my shirt against my skin. I walk into the garage, into the house, to the doorway of the den. I eye that Bible, and it's all I can do to keep from snatching it up and setting it on fire.

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*Darkness swallows the day, but I don't sleep, and God keeps silent, and so do I, the image of Dad at my bedside, the night I tried to destroy my mother's painting.*

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I crawl upstairs on hands and knees, lie down in the hall between my daughters' bedrooms, splayed on my back and staring up as though God were a patient, powerful ghost, floating around in the attic. I think of my mother, flippant in patched-up jeans, golden blonde curls wild around her face. "Spiritual freedom," a convenient creed for a woman abandoning house and home, and now that sin visited upon

me.

My eyes close to a memory: Mom gone again, my parents' bedroom door ajar, I enter to find Dad doubled over, hands pressed in a steeple to his lips. When he opens his eyes, they're blood-shot and glossy, but he smiles, drops his hands.

"Hey, buddy," he says. "Need something?"

I back out, shaking my head, and close the door behind me. Straight to the kitchen, I fill a pitcher at the sink. Carry it, sloshing, into my mother's studio, and stand before her latest work—on a four by six canvas, a dozen fiery-orange butterflies blurred in motion, fleeing from the hollow of a leafless tree.

It takes both hands to heave the pitcher over my head. I envision those vibrant bodies doused, dead and dripping onto the white tile floor. But just as I swing back, Dad's shadow falls into the room.

"Harris," he says, calm but firm.

I freeze, my arms still lifted. When I don't move, he comes up behind me, takes the pitcher, and walks out. I hear him dump the water, dry the pitcher, and replace it in the cupboard, my mother's butterflies triumphant and untouched.

Darkness swallows the day, but I don't sleep, and God keeps silent, and so do I, the image of Dad at my bedside, the night I tried to destroy my mother's painting. "It won't bring her back any faster," he said. But I didn't want her back. I wanted her gone for good. No more disrupting and disappearing, no more bringing my father to his knees.

I lift my body from the floor, and one by one, close each bed and bathroom door, let the catch of every doorknob punch deep into my heart. Downstairs, I do the same, den, living room, dining room, drop blinds, draw the curtains, and I collapse in the dark on the living room couch, press my face to the cushion, inhale some fruity perfume or maybe a cherry sucker. I can almost taste it, a sob rising up in my throat.

I imagine my father next to me, Bible in hand. *We have to be patient, Harris*, and I'm a boy again, kneeling beside him, trying to put my faith in

his ways. For years I try, but then I'm not a boy, and he's still waiting. Still holding that same Bible I declined to take to college, the one he held at Mom's funeral, where I refused to bow my head. I rise and walk outside, away from him, onto the street, neighbors tucked in bed, turn a corner, turn a corner, hills before me. Climb.

Climb and climb to the highest point. *If you trip, don't stop*, I tell myself. Don't wipe the dust from your palms. Winds whip all around, pushing, pulling, grit grinding between your teeth. Keep going.

At the top, turn and wait for the sun rising over the valley, how the houses don't even look real, a girl's dream village, plunked in an unkempt backyard.

"My people," you say, arms spread, almost laughing.

Gather, make a pile of brush, dried grass, dead leaves. The Santa Anas howling, humidity nonexistent, perfect, just perfect. Reach into your pocket and take out the lighter, hold it, gold and glinting before you. Flip it open, envision those houses dissolving, the doors splitting and cracking and crumbling to ash, carried away. Think of the silence erupting, roaring between your ears. The winds are with you. Strike, ignite the flame. One action—it's that simple. Just open your fingers, and watch it go.

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