

## FRAGMENTS AND PIECES

by

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Shortly after *it* happened, normal things became strange. My auntie's monthly feminine blood became sporadic. Weeks of bleeding sometimes. And my uncle stopped brushing his teeth. At least my auntie accused him of never brushing his teeth. Uncle Cal would blast out of the bathroom door and shove his wet toothbrush in her face, pointing out the bits of toothpaste clinging to the brittle, plastic thistles. But Auntie was right. He no longer smelled of that clean, cinnamon smell. Now it was a stench, a breakdown of tissue—a spoiling substance pushing out of his mouth each time he spoke. I never saw them kiss again.

Three weeks ago, when Auntie took me away from my mother again, and we went to her rented house just outside of Morrison, hidden away in the blue spruce, with that familiar couch that welcomed me again, and the reserved feather pillow and wool blanket, I asked my auntie if they were ever going to go back to trying to have a baby.

She took me by the hand, led me into the bathroom and showed me three things sitting on the floor: a box of tampons, a box of maxi pads, and a box of panty liners.

Pointing at the collection, she said, “Those won't go away.” She dropped my hand and left the room, and my hand immediately felt cold. I stayed behind. My hand, I thought, should be okay on its own.

That night while Auntie made dinner, I watched her face. In the small kitchen, browning garlic in olive oil on the gas stove, she stared with her vacant look at the little television set on top of the refrigerator. The program *60 Minutes* told her about an autistic woman in Colorado who came up with a less stressful way to lead cows to the slaughterhouse. I

studied my auntie's face again; I could still see all of the tiny scars on her left cheek. Crisscrosses, crossing her skin, crossing my heart, as many crisscrosses for how much I love her.

Uncle Cal walked into the room dragging his boots on the linoleum floor, mud clots popping off, Auntie's pointer running up to investigate. If Auntie didn't pick up the clots right away, the dog would eat them, so before Auntie could say anything, I scooped up the mud but kissed Malachi on the nose to reassure her she did nothing wrong.

Auntie asked Uncle Cal to go pick up some canned green beans while she boiled the pasta.

"French style?"

Auntie never looked away from the frying pan. "How long have we been married?"

"Nine years."

"And in those nine years, have I ever eaten French style green beans?"

94 Uncle Cal pushed his strong hand through his slightly oily but thick black hair. He stared at the salt and pepper on the small kitchen table surrounded by mismatched chairs as if he were looking for something, or forgetting something. He grabbed his keys from the counter, squeezed my shoulder, then stepped out the front door.

Two hours later, she and I still sat at the kitchen table, watching the local news, our empty plates smelling of completeness. I helped Auntie clear the dishes, and as we washed and dried, Uncle Cal finally strolled in the door. He walked into the kitchen, stopped in front of the television and stared at it, spinning his keys around his finger. Auntie never turned from the sink. Uncle Cal said goodnight, and disappeared into the bedroom.

Later, burrowed deep into the couch, feeling small anxious jabs inside my stomach, I heard their voices through the thin walls.

"It's old, Izzy, the whole thing is old. The whole insinuation that it was my fault."

I never liked it that Uncle Cal calls Auntie Izzy. Her name is Isabelle and she deserves the entire recognition.

“I have never said it was your fault.”

“But you think it’s my fault.”

There was silence for a moment.

“I couldn’t help it, how could I have helped it?”

“I need to get some sleep, Cal.”

And silence.

Auntie used to talk more. When she worked as a vet, when she volunteered at the shelter. My mom said to me many times, “Fay, your auntie is ridiculous, cleaning out cages, wiping out dog shit and piss for free when she has a high-paying job.” But I would visit Auntie at the shelter and she would take me into the room with all the kenneled dogs, walking me down the corridor, pointing to the dogs that had just been adopted and were ready to go to their new homes. Huge dogs with slobber hanging from the sides of their mouths, or small yappy dogs that spun in circles. Some were a bit mangy, but when the people showed up to get the dogs, they always let the dogs kiss them with their wet tongues. Those people took them home no matter what, off to a fresh start. And the shelter was a no-kill shelter so every dog was saved. I asked my mom once if we could take one of those dogs home, and she said, “I’m not cleaning up after a dog.”

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When I was younger, my auntie was the first person to ignore the threats, to get in my mother’s face, to push my mother out of the way, so that she could take all my mother’s vodka bottles and pour them out, one by one, over the side of our apartment balcony. My mother screamed like someone was ripping her insides out, pulling and tearing and discarding while she had to watch. These were the angry tears, not the

sad ones, the angry ones that sting and sear and leave invisible scars on the face—but not my mother’s face, my face.

After that, no more displaying the booze bottles on the pretty booze table, the one my mother ordered out of a catalog. Now each morning as I looked for the perfect pair of socks in my chest of drawers, I had to push the hidden bottles to the back. My mom thought my auntie wouldn’t look there, but my auntie always did, every time she came to take me away, and every time I had to go back to my mother’s because Auntie had to work long hours, because Uncle Cal had to work long hours. Auntie told me she would rather have me home with my mom than at her house alone. She only had to open the drawer slightly each time to hear the clinking. And each time, she took the bottles away. But my mother always refilled the stock.

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The day after we ate dinner without Uncle Cal, Auntie began packing things into cardboard boxes. She handed me the screwdriver, a Philips, and told me to go to her bedroom and take down their bed. When she said it, her voice was quiet and trembling and I wanted to see her cry, but she didn’t. I tried to walk away, but Auntie grabbed me by the arm, then the waist, and pulled me into her. She didn’t let go for a long time. When she hugs me, it’s never the fake hug; the hug where people pat you on the back like it’s something they have to do. Auntie always holds on with her hands pressed firm and flat on my back, forcing me in, and squeezing me tight.

She let go and I walked to her and Uncle Cal’s bedroom. The bed had a queen-sized frame made of basic wood, and unfinished. Unfinished wood, unfinished bed, the making of a baby unfinished. I rolled up the futon mattress that smelled of nine years of swamp cooler. Dumped it off the side. I struggled with the screws, the wood clutching onto them, fighting me. Uncle Cal walked in and stood over me for a moment.

“Push the screw as you turn it,” he said.

“I don’t understand.”

“Push it as hard as you can.”

“But I’m trying to get it out, why would I push it in?”

“You’ve been around your auntie too much.”

And then he was gone. I pushed the screw as hard as I could as I turned and turned, my hand feeling the bubbles of water pop up and the raw redness of my palms. And the screw came out. I ran to tell Uncle Cal that he was right, but I stopped in the mudroom. Through the window, I could see Auntie and Uncle Cal standing near the circle in the back yard. The circle. *The* circle. A while ago, Uncle Cal started walking each night around the backyard. Auntie and I would watch him through the window. A mean walk, an aggressive walk, pressing his feet down hard on the grass, moving his arms in wide sweeps and rapid swipes. A pendulum, cutting away, while his face stayed fixed on that spot, the spot you focus on when you walk. Only his eyes never wandered to see the trees. He walked in one perfect circle around the yard. He did this night after night until there was a path. Every so often, Auntie yelled at him because she said the landlord would make them pay for the grass replacement. But he ignored her. The louder she yelled, the faster he walked around that circle. And so there was the stain. A permanent marking on a temporary yard, a temporary place.

As I watched Auntie and Uncle Cal, I could only see her mouth move. She finally walked up the steps and in the door to stand by my side. We watched Uncle Cal. Malachi joined us. She leaned up against Auntie and Auntie never stopped watching Uncle Cal, even as she reached down and rubbed the dog’s head.

In the old days, Auntie would sit on Uncle Cal’s lap. They had secrets together. Sometimes they would have me pass their secrets for them. If Auntie wasn’t on Uncle Cal’s lap, or if they couldn’t sit next to each other because my mother or grandparents were dotted across the furniture,

surrounding Uncle Cal, they would whisper their words in my ears, and I would carry the words across the room, like fragile notes, and recite what I had heard.

“Tell your auntie she needs to shave her legs.”

“Tell your uncle he needs a shower.”

Laughter and silliness floated around me as I tripped across the floor to get to the other side. But when they were close to each other, or Auntie on his lap, I didn’t get to share in their laughter. It was like a closed room that I could see through, smiles between only them, they never looked away.

Auntie told me to put the feather pillow and the wool blanket into a box. I walked over to where they lay on the couch, but when I stared down at them, my hands wouldn’t move.

“I can’t find a box,” I yelled to her in the kitchen.

Auntie yelled back, “There’s one near the front door.”

I peered into the box. Books were stacked tight inside, but leaving just enough room for my pillow and blanket. The box lid would seal everything. I left the pillow and blanket and walked out to the backyard. I sat on the back steps and stared at the circle. I could hear Auntie in the kitchen packing. Glasses clinking, dishes clinking. The separation of things that two people had shared.

Malachi trotted through the house, panting. I could hear her toenails on the hardwood floors room to room until finally Auntie tried to coax her in a soft tone, “Malachi, go outside.”

I walked into the mudroom. “What is she looking for?”

“Nothing, she thinks I’m leaving her.”

I took Malachi by the collar and gently led her outside, and I threw a ball but she wanted nothing to do with it. She hurried back into the house and began her trotting and panting again. I walked back to the living room, near the front door, where I saw that the box had been taped shut,

and my pillow and blanket gone from the couch. I found my auntie kneeling on the living room floor. She stared at an ornamental wooden bowl with caramel and toffee colors pushing together, and sometimes streaks of chocolate brown swooshing into the mix. I stood for a while as she continued to stare.

She turned to me. “I can’t remember if this is mine or your uncle’s.”

“It’s both of yours. You got it when you went to New Zealand.”

My auntie took a deep breath and I could feel the energy drain from her body. “Oh, right.” She picked up the bowl, wrapped it in newspaper, then placed it in a cardboard box labeled “Cal.”

I saw the colors of that small bowl, and thought back to a year earlier, when my auntie and uncle were coming back from Zion National Park, driving east on a straight stretch of secluded Utah interstate. They were the only two in the car, while we drove separately behind them—my mother and me.

What perfect ridges. Mountains and mesas of winding colors, reds swapping with browns, yellows waving through, the dizzy walls of comfort and stability. And the empty air, empty sky, a few streaks of nothing clouds. The quiet. Nothing in my head, no sounds to squeeze my thoughts, to cause the tiny jabs I feel on my insides when I fidget. My uncle’s car disappeared over the paved hills, and we followed, my stomach dropping with each quick descent, making me close my eyes and picture a roller coaster. And then my mother yelled, “Jesus!” and slammed on the breaks. When I laughed because my gum had flown out of my mouth, my mother told me to shut the fuck up. Then I saw what had startled her. A bronze-colored horse running down the interstate, straight toward our car. Ours was the only car around other than my uncle’s, but we couldn’t see him past the hills. My mother rushed the car to the side of the road, stopped the ignition, and we stayed still, holding our breath, as the massive horse ran past us, its rapid hooves clapping the silver-black surface. We looked at each other, and then we let out large hoots of relief, my mother laughing until tears filled her eyes.

10 She moved the car onto the interstate again and we accelerated to catch up with Auntie and Uncle Cal. When we saw their car pulled over, we slowed and parked behind them. They were standing in front of their car, so my mother and I got out and began jabbering about the near miss, ready to laugh with them about their near miss as well. But then we saw it. In front of my auntie and uncle's car was another horse. Dead. Only when I looked closer, I saw that it wasn't exactly a horse. It was a colt. Its body was curled in a way I never imagined a body could curl. Blood leaked from the colt's nose, mouth and long wounds down her neck, back, and legs. Clumps of black mane and tail hair stuck to the splashes of blood on the pavement, and random hairs stood straight up, waving in the breeze. I looked at my uncle's car and saw that the windshield was gone. It had become tiny chunks of glass that had spread all over the front seat, all over the highway, stuck into the colt's body, and stuck into my auntie's face. That's when I noticed she was covered in blood. Her blood, the colt's blood, and I was uncertain which was which, and where the liquids blended together. Uncle Cal had some red as well, but it was all the colt's blood. I found out later that he had bent over to pick up a CD, and so the windshield missed him.

Auntie and Uncle Cal stood staring at the dead animal. We heard the other horse running back, coming toward us, and my mother said she would try to lead it away from the road so it wouldn't get hit. She ran after the horse, but it turned and ran into the desert, far away from my mother, far away from her baby. I walked up to Uncle Cal. He wouldn't look at me or say anything to me. So I walked up to Auntie and tried to take her hand, but it was limp as she also refused to look away from the animal.

Uncle Cal rented a moving truck to take away all of his things. Auntie let him have most of everything anyway. She said she only wanted what would fit into her old Volvo station wagon, minus the space reserved for



Malachi. He gave her no argument. As he stood at the front door, ready to drive to his rented apartment in Denver, Auntie told me to go into the kitchen. I did what I was told, but I made myself small on the floor and watched. They stood for a long time facing one another, some distance between them, not saying a word. Then they moved closer, and closer still. All the while, Uncle Cal had his hands on his hips, sometimes looking away, out the window, at the floor, rubbing the back of his neck with his big-knuckled hands. Sometimes he would grin, but I could see his lips shaking, and he would turn away and bite down.

In a soft voice he said, “Does my mouth smell?” And then he silently cried. And Auntie silently cried as well. They stepped even closer to each other, and their foreheads touched. My auntie took his face into her hands. I had to turn away because my temples hurt, my throat hurt. I’m not good at crying silently like my auntie and Uncle Cal, so I hurried to the backyard and let the pain come out. My stomach contracted with each howl and no matter how hard I tried to stop, my body felt the jabs over and over. By the time Auntie came out back, I had finally composed myself and she told me it was time to go.

I sat in the passenger seat while Malachi settled down in the back, secured by her doggy seatbelt. As we left the small house behind, the circle, the last remnants of mud clots that Malachi missed, I cringed knowing that we were taking the route to my mother’s. My scraggly nails scraped the leather seats; with my teeth, I ripped off the last bit of white fingernail from my left thumb. We passed the drive-through liquor store, passed the jewelry store that had been family-owned since 1958, passed the playground where Brian Manerino had hit a baseball that slammed into my eye causing it to swell and go purple. The jabbing in my insides was more than I had ever felt. A stinging and scraping and rawness. The car bumping on the potholes, Malachi letting out her heavy sighs as she curled up with her eyes closed, Auntie staring straight ahead.

Auntie pulled up to the apartment complex and drove through the grounds, around the large dumpster where we once found a dead cat with

a roach still in its mouth, and parked in front of Building 5. As Auntie climbed out of the car, I looked around, searching for anything to hold onto. I saw Malachi's leash and grabbed it. As Auntie walked around the front of the car, I hooked the leash to the dog's collar, unclipped her seatbelt, then called her out of the car with me. I ran as fast as I could toward the playground, the dog galloping at my side. Auntie yelled, "Fay!" But I ignored her, and the dog ignored her because we were running and Malachi loves to run. Heaviness in my chest, old tears and new tears mixed with sweat, and hair stuck to my face.

Auntie yelled again, "Fay, stop!"

And I finally gave in.

I stood, catching my breath while she ran toward me. She stopped with her brow bent, the dog jumped at her with excitement then calmed. Auntie began to speak, but I cut her off.

10 "Who's gonna take care of Malachi? I'll feed her, and give her baths, and take her for walks, I'll pick up the poop, I'll take her to the vet, I'll take her to the park." My breathing kept on, pushing out of my body, pushing more tears.

Auntie's face became warm, like it does, like she can feel me inside of her even though she did not give birth to me. Like I grew from her, not from my mother, but out of this warm place, tapped with no anger, no longing. She wiped off my face with the sleeve of her soft cardigan.

"What did you think, Fay?"

My breath collapsed. I squeezed her and buried my entire body into her. I pushed my fingers into her sweater, into her skin. And she held me back.

She whispered, "I have to at least tell her."