

Josh Howatt

Fault of Frangipani

“An eight-year-old child does not vanish into thin air, Christina.” The words cut across the room in vindictive bites, snaps of ‘your fault,’ each jabbing at her collar. “He’s our son, not Harry freaking Houdini.”

Something about the way Peter was pouring the words into his lap, fingers weaving across his nape, reminded her of that night, downstairs, on the couch, when he threatened to leave her. For the second time. Or was it the third? The fourth? She couldn’t remember. Somehow, they’d all blended together into a seamless weave of belittling. Each time saying that he couldn’t be obligated to her or her “condition” any longer. He had actually used such a word. *Condition*.

His back to her, and still he was able to cripple the crippled. Some things never change, she thought, rubbing the useless flanks she once bragged as “thighs.” “*Belles tiges*.” A pair of scissors, an ice pick, they could all burrow into her, spear clean through to the other side and she wouldn’t feel a thing. “Burdensome,” he sometimes called them. Occasionally, “pretty.” Lately, just “dead weight.” She would not respond. She would not give him that satisfaction. That she, a mother—of all people—had misplaced their child.

The paned glass bloomed every time she exhaled, water turning solid. It was a March morning, for sure. One, which still had yet to burn itself off. Yet to swallow up the thickness of dawn and last night. She stared off into space. Into the yard. The Cedar moated in chrysanthemum and geranium, yellow hibiscus. The swing. The tuck-away hamlet of “how” and “why,” where her baby boy—her spider monkey—had asked about ladybugs, and Grandma Linnie’s varicose veins, about God. And now, suddenly, there were no more questions. Only the missing of a small, quiet voice. Jeremy’s.

Yesterday, Christina knew nothing of a mental health profile, of “identifiable features.” No, yesterday her thoughts orbited the smallness of fingers, how they looked pressing into Wonderbread, the way jelly paints across a child’s chin in violet swatches, the briefness of afternoon. This wasn’t a checkbook, or keys, something simply mislaid. She had done the unthinkable. She had lost him. Her seed, a grain from her belly, leavened. A moment spent inspecting Bartletts, and he was gone. Vanished, as if the scar across her lower abdomen had been made to rescue some vital organ, to cut out a tumored spleen, and not a Cesarean. Hers—she assured herself—would be a life sentence of emotional mutilation, which she would serve quietly, to totality, with not a pinprick’s glimpse of parole. The hole in her womb would be guilt enough, a constant reminder, a post-it note tacked to the fridge.

Peter began to sob. Deep, guttural, marrowed cries, parts of him being pulled out through his mouth, flaking off teeth. He sat at the foot of the bed, curling around a stuffed Dalmatian. She watched from the chaise, unmoved, almost. He felt so far away. Nine feet, maybe ten, but it felt like oceans, continents. Like years.

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"Is it Tuesday?" she asked, mostly to herself. The air had become so still and emaciated that she felt compelled to fill it with something, anything. "I think it's Tuesday, right?"

Peter slid to the floor, disappearing behind a sea of toile and hunter's green, the crown of his red hair bobbing like a buoy in the Atlantic.

When had it all happened, Christina asked herself. When had they forked, split into separate branches, barely twined together by blonde curls and Osh-Kosh and baby blues?

The Cedar tree. They had become exactly like the Cedar in the front yard, unwatered and wilting for all the block to gawk at. They both knew it. Wouldn't dare speak of it, but they knew, averting their eyes from the Cedar's sagging boughs every time the Corolla or the Mercedes pulled into the driveway. And how dare he, she thought. We live on a cul de sac, cobble stones, our neighbors practically own the medical field; how dare he make her ride around in a Corolla, for God's sakes. It was embarrassing enough having the thing modified with push-pull acceleration, always a wheelchair as the passenger. But a Corolla? That was an insult, loud and unapologetic. An intentional act, she was convinced. Keeping her subordinate, reminding her that, yes, you're paralyzed, yes, your legs are worthless slabs of tenderloin, and *yes*, I am the breadwinner who could leave you at any second, should you show your flabby, atrophied carcass in public. But now, most scorchingly evident that yes, you are incapable of protecting our child. Of being a mother.

Christina was no longer a trophy wife. Instead, she had become an Emmy kicked carelessly into the deep end of a swimming pool. She imagined her red, silk La Perla negligee flapping on a line on the front lawn, the one she hadn't worn in years. The housing association holding meetings to discuss the eyesore, this Cedar, that had sprouted up practically over night. And now the only thing, the last tiny, blonde thread that held them together had snapped. Evaporated. She knew it would take only days before they would spin off into separate trajectories, means of dealing, like binary stars flung to opposite ends of the cosmos.

The police had yet to leave, still downstairs; she could hear them through the floor. She tried to decipher the bass in their voices, listening for anything that sounded like "body found" or "kidnapped." Heaven help her, "sodomized." It had been two hours since she made the phone call. The police first, Peter second. A reaction, which in hindsight, spoke *Iliad*-length poetry about how far their relationship had stretched, the subversive pecking orders of "who need know what, exactly. And when."

Her hands were still shaking, trembling like the epileptic claws of Katharine Hepburn in her final ailing years, frail shoots being vacuumed up by tornado. A shower, Chamomile, nothing was working. Not even the Percodan. The disregard to dosage. This doesn't happen in Basketville, she kept telling herself. Not to people in Basketville, people like us, people with stock options and hall console tables from Pottery Barn.

"I hate you for this." His voice ricocheted off the goldenrod wallpaper, a print which Christina had chosen after reading that yellow was supposed to be an optimistic color. "If he's dead, if something has happened to our son, I will never forgive you. I couldn't."

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She scoffed, pulled her flanks up against her breast, held them there with her chin. It felt like she was resting on something inanimate, a writing desk, river rock, and not her own flesh.

"It's not my fault," she whispered.

"You're right." He stood up, pulling tears from the bridge of his nose. "It's Jeremy's fault for wandering off. Or maybe it's Safeway's fault. You know, we could probably sue, I'm sure an eight-year old holds a high premium in court, nowadays, considering the economy. Or maybe, Christina," his eyes swelled, pleating his brow like trash after the compactor, "maybe, it was the sun's fault for producing too perfect a grapefruit for you to keep your inattentive, Azria-obsessed eyes on our child."

"Pears."

His eyes flattened. "What?"

"They were pears. Not grapefruits, Peter. Bartletts." Even as the words were spilling out of her, she could feel them fall to the mahogany, weightless.

It was almost perceptible, the fangs pricking into Peter's lower lip, his eyes locked on the vein throbbing where her neck meets shoulder. "Or maybe you'd like to blame Landry Cox for this, as well. Same as everything else, right Christina? 'Landry Cox ruined my life, totaled his Toyota, along with vertebra three and four, and now I'm totally incapable of doing anything required of me, from Christmas dinner to sewing a button to keeping my damned eyes on Jeremy.'"

This was new. The blatancy. Something had been brutally yanked from socket, lifted out by military convoy; Peter was cruel, but never this ruthless.

Christina let her knees fall against the sill, leaned back against the stripes of the chaise, and stared out into the dense gray of New Hampshire cloud cover. Her hands folded, stilling in the terrycloth crease between her legs. Peter was right; there would be no forgiveness for such negligence, she would surely rot in hell. Surely. A white-hot placard hung about her neck labeled "Baby Killer", standing next to rapists and child molesters, Jeffrey Dahmer. How could she have been so careless, she thought. How could she have let her maternity slack, for even a second? Even the aboriginals in the most infertile, inclement, epidural-deprived areas of northern Sudan know to keep the fragile shadow in their periphery. They erect entire villages with mud-caked hands, a child at their hem, another suckled at the teat. And she had been distracted by the firmness of pears. *Bartletts!* And that's what was most sinking of all; Christina hated pears, they all did. The way their flesh gave way, crumbling cowardly against the roof of one's mouth, leaving bits of papery, indigestible potato skin to be picked out between your molars. The recipe was something she had found in *Martha Stewart Living*. Nothing extraordinary about it. Except that the matriarch herself had sworn to a readership of three million that her pear frangipanis were a guaranteed way to win friends. Something that Christina had little of, anymore.

After the accident, they stopped coming. Slowly, at first, like a stilted tap. And then nothing at all. No more phone calls checking in. No more

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Birthday cards signed “P.S. We must do lunch. *Please.*” Not a drop. People used to bottleneck into her life, practically on a waiting list to share an afternoon of gossip infused salmon with the new neighbor, this French import, a former ballerina who was rumored to have been courted by everyone from Gerard Depardieu to one of the Rockerfellers. None of it true, of course, but flattering, nonetheless. It was always full mouth smiles, desperate to be noticed. Frenetic, trembling hands, unsure when they’d touch her shoulder in conversation. Now, when she entered a room it was only clicking heels and cupped whispers.

“He’s going to walk through that door any minute, you’ll see,” she said, flattening the robe against her shins. “And then you’re going to feel like such a fool for calling me incapable.”

“Actually, Christina, what I called you was ‘oblivious.’ There’s a discernable difference. Huge.” He was no longer using lips to shape words; instead, they were being formed in his neck, churned up and exorcised between the gaps in his teeth. She hated to admit it, but—as always—Peter was right; he hadn’t felled her to quite such a level of failure, verbally, *per se*. She had done that herself. In *her* mind, the two words were synonymous.

But this wasn’t about lexicon or whose neck was pinned under the sole of whom; this was about Jeremy.

She had already begun to miss putting on his shoes, the smell of his hair, like Crayons and salt water. The way his giggles would bounce down the hall and off every fixture in the kitchen. She wanted so badly to run downstairs and press her ear to the granite, listening for a residual voice, her lobes lapping up any vestigial Jeremy that was left.

Peter had begun pacing shapes into the carpet, Celtic knots, the sign of infinity. “I’ve lost everything.” You could hear it in his voice, the anguish. “First you, now this; now Jeremy.”

Lost me? Christina thought. Lost *me*? *My legs, my looks, my body, my husband, my closest friends, my baby, all of it, gone. And you’re telling me that you have loss? That you know what it’s like to be permanently anesthetized from the waist down, to empty your colostomy bag in your in-laws half bath, to drag the dead parts of yourself across the floor after a fall at four in the morning, to have life lifted from your innards and hacked from your body only to be stolen away eight years later? You’re loss?! She wanted to say all these things, but didn’t; instead, “I know.”*

“This never would have happened had we hired someone to watch him, like I so patiently asked you to consider. Daily, I said it, Christina. Daily.”

“I know,” she said.

“I told you it was only a matter of time before this would happen.”

“I know.”

“I said it, right? It wasn’t just my imagination? Where you not listening? Did you not care?”

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She closed her eyes, flung her wet hair back and forth, whipping herself in the face, refusing.

“Did I not sit at that disaster of a dining table downstairs, that you, Christina, that you so desperately had to have—did I not sit there and tell you—more than once, numerous occasions—that one day someone, some pervert would snatch him up and all you would be able to do would be to sit there? To sit there, screaming, juicing fruit onto the Safeway linoleum?”

It was so accurate, like he’d seen the security footage.

“I should have done it. I should have hired someone, just gone ahead with it. It’s not as if we were talking ‘security guard’ here, a 2-ton bouncer. I mean, my God, we could have asked Candice down the street. She’s 15; I’m sure she could have used the money. We could have paid her twenty bucks a day to...”

“Over my dead body.”

He stopped, taken aback. She was heaving, chest crimson and calicoed, the remainder of a French tip fluttering in his direction. “Over my dead body is some brat from down the street going to hawk over me like I’m a drooling, brain-dead vegetable.”

“That’s not what I meant,” he said.

“I am fully capable, Peter. Fully.”

“All I’m saying is that someone should have been there. To watch over things. To facilitate.”

“Chaperone,” she spat, hissing along and multiplying syllables as she went. “What you mean to say is ‘chaperone.’”

Peter rolled his eyes.

“A 16-year-old, a babysitter,” she laughed to herself, quietly, the absurdity of it. “Over my dead body.”

The air held itself, still as stone. Peter stood at the foot of the bed, arms folded, nodding, calculating precisely the most searing intonation possible. “You had better hope...” The *p* resonated throughout the house with such a willed ferocity that every window shuddered. “You had better hope, Christina, that it’s over *your* dead body, and not Jeremy’s.”

Bull’s-eye. A direct hit. Christina felt the sharp, serrated edges tearing through her, the notion of her Jeremy laying face down in a ditch, hidden under a veil of late winter decay. Blonde curls sprouting out from the earth like honeysuckle blossom. A sock pulled halfway off his tiny foot, exposing the tiny curve of his tiny ankle. She hadn’t yet pictured it. His passing. Sure, she feared he might be kidnapped, hurt, even things unthinkable. But not gone. She had convinced herself that therapy and the wonders of medicine could cover up anything, even the worst of outcomes. She had prepared for molestation, mutilation, blindness. She was ready to raise castrati, if it came to that. She would love him as if nothing had happened. But she had yet to allow herself the possibility that she may not even be given that chance, the possibility her child was dead.

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Breathless. The image. The autopsy Polaroids of her dead son. His limp body being carelessly flung into the back of an ambulette. A coffin the size of carry-on luggage. The tears began again. Beads of salt, and nothing else. Anything fluid and been rung from her hours before; blood, memory, self-worth. It felt as if she had spent the entire afternoon as a quilt being ripped apart, then mended back together, torn and sewn, torn and sewn, scrapped together, then torn and sewn, until there was no longer any fabric left, only threads. Seams and batting. Only what was.

They were too hard. Unripened. The pears. She remembered that part, because she had rolled herself down the aisle, found the sign which read "Bartletts \$2.99/lb," thought to herself that the recipe called for eight pears, and how that would run her close to ten dollars, at least. She remembered that part. She remembered thinking that she would return home, spend the morning flocked in cake flour, call Linda to see if she still would like to join her on the deck for an afternoon of frangipani. She even practiced saying it, the word, "*fran-gi-pan-i*," flicking the final vowel into the phone like a hook baited with Louis Vuitton. What she didn't remember, however, was a small, intuitive voice saying, "Where's Jeremy." She wasn't even sure how long he'd been missing before she began wheeling herself down aisles, panting, knocking into displays, shattering jars of marinated artichokes, a Bartlett in her lap. It wasn't until aisle 9—Eggs and Dairy—that she had begun to scream for help. But he was already gone. Either of his own volition or another's, but gone.

"I'm sure he's being violated as we speak," Peter said.

She tried to ignore it, the taunting, the careful, deliberate incisions. She slid the hand mirror from the sill, held it to her face again, pulling at the broken capillaries, microscopic galaxies rung around her eyes, like a boxer's. Or worse, the reality, an opiate addict. She pulled her hair back, lengthened her dancer's neck. At least that hadn't fattened, swelled, she thought. And there, off the side of her face were his ears. The only real discernable handy-me-down genetics she could read in his face. Small, delicate, flared at the tip. Perfect by all definition. Once hers, now Jeremy's, now theirs. She ran her eyes over the crest, down along the lobe, inside the seashell of rose and ivory. If she held the mirror off at an angle and let her hair fall just right, it was like he was standing there behind her, clinging, apologizing for running off after a waft of metallic balloons. *Never again, Jeremy. Never again*, she would whisper into the scent of Crayons and soft Atlantic surf, should heaven give her a second chance at "Mommy."

She closed her eyes, listened for his little boy breath, feeling for a pulse under her, somewhere in the earth, beating across highways and strip malls and football fields. A rhythm known only between mother and child, held evenly for eight-months, three weeks, fourteen hours, and thirty-three minutes—she only wished the nurses had bothered to notate seconds, for she would never know the precise moment she became whole, and not a mere estimation.

Her reflection continued to bounce along the edges of the mirror. Behind her, she watched the nightstand, the antique jewel box, the chandelier earrings placed carefully inside, worn only in private, no longer

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paraded, peacocked. None of it moved. Time had stopped. The home no longer breathed. Instead, festered. Moldered. Christina swiveled the mother of pearl handle, allowing full view of the bed, the Chagall, shadows cast from every object, magnifying their grotesque pageantry. And there, above the headboard, just skid from center was the mark—a hand-print pulled into something all together not. If you squinted your eyes, and held it there until everything went blurry, it almost resembled a car crash, from profile.

It was the night they had moved in, their first time making love as homeowners. Members of Clearview Court. It was also the night Jeremy was knitted into being, atomic fibers weaving him together, as infinitesimal as the period at the end of a greeting card. This smudge was a reminder of one point in Christina's life when she and Peter might have loved so much, they could melt each other down and press themselves through walls. An unfathomable act of alchemy, creating this new life. She wasn't even aware that the oils from one's hand could discolor wall-paper. It must have been the lavender hand lotion, she concluded. Trish's L'Occitane from breakfast. A small part of her wanted to leave it be, a memento of their inception as a family, pressed paper-thin. But in the end Peter decided it gratuitous. "In bad taste," he had so graciously phrased it for her. She tried ammonium, vinegar, brown paper bags. Everything short of biopsying the 3 by 3 swatch. And that was the most curious thing she found; its size. She tried lying down amongst the boundless thread count, held her hand up over her head, tried to remember, tried to orient her palm and fingers to repeat the shape. But they never fit. It wasn't until days later that she realized it was because her fingertips never touched, only the meat of the palm. Only the flesh. Even in the moment of conceiving her child, part of her still held back. The part of her that worried that he, Peter, never fully loved her, limbs and all.

"Did you?" she asked.

"Did I what?"

"Ever?"

He turned, confused, the corners of his mouth pulled into anchors. "Take another pill, would you. As a matter of fact, take two. Five, for all I care."

"Love me?" She swallowed hard, biting through the words. It was no longer a question; instead, a plea. "Just once?"

Peter's face shriveled, gathering at the nose, except that his mouth hung open as if to say *How dare you. After all I've done*. It took a few rotations of breath, but gradually the words tunneled their way to his center. Parts of his him began to slip. Muscles detached from bone, slid down his face, pooling at the mouth. There was a look of terror, like he'd gone too far. Like the last fifteen years had just come slamming in behind him. Light began to reflect in the corners of his eyes, spilling over into the creases. His Adam's apple bobbed. His jaw locked. Droplets began forming at his chin, saline beads working their way towards stalactites.

The mirror. He had caught his own reflection. A face like nimbus. Eyes the shade of wet asphalt.

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With four words and a limp wrist, Christina had stilted planetary rotation, hooked stars from the sky and put them back into Peter's sockets. Something there looked vaguely familiar, their second date, the way fingers mowed through red curls, apologizing for an unreliable Chevy. The spell was broken, she thought to herself. The malarial cells had been cast from his body and into some other vessel, perhaps the porcelain swine salt-and-pepper shakers in the kitchen downstairs, an unholy purchase from Pier One, to begin with. Peter fell to the ground, folded over at the knees. The sound that came out of him was that of an ironing board collapsing. He pressed his head into the floor, and lay there shuddering atop the Persian runner like a Muslim facing Mecca. Christina watched the ridges of his spine lift topography into Ralph Lauren. A mountain range of mint green classic-fit, giving way to quake.

Minutes wafted by. He lay there, sobbing. Christina wasn't sure whether to say something, or simply allow him the ablution of purging himself dry. She imagined herself—the old Christina, the capable, sought after, slender-hipped ballerina—standing over his body, lifting him by the underarms, cradling him, whispering atonement—something completely beyond her current physicality. Then he began to crawl. Dragging the crown of his head along the floor, he crawled. Curls rolling in like waves after Pearl Harbor, red cabbage-red, he crawled. Peter the perfect, Peter the sagging Cedar on the front lawn, Peter the man who used to call her his “Marzipan Madonna” now “hey, you,” crawled the floor until the chaise under Christina began to wobble.

Chokes and gasps poured onto the hardwood, self-loathing vomit. Her hand, flexed and humming, fluttered just above his head. The small plot of thinning where his age slipped through, something he hadn't noticed, something otherwise easily patched with American Express and Diner's Club, or else unsympathetically whipped for what it was, a flaw. Never had he shown such weakness, such lack. Such evidence of a heart. Not merely a stone swathed anthropomorphic. This was a heart that cast shadow, reflected light, a tangible sweetness far forgotten.

“I'm sorry,” he cried, spit spraying in buckshot. “I'm so sorry.”

His body spasmed. It reminded Christina of the article she had read while in rehabilitation at St. Sebastian's Memorial. Something on rusty nails, Tetanus. The gruesome pictures of bodies locked and twitching in the most unnatural of positions. Women balanced on their shoulders and heels, pelvises thrust skyward.

Fearfully, foreignly, her nails dove through his hairline, swimming just above the seabed. Cautious. Appropriately preemptive. Waiting for a Portuguese Man-o-War to reach out and sting her. She closed her eyes, whimpered softly. It was a feeling she didn't know how to hold onto, didn't know how to bottle up and save so that she would have something to get her through the next five years until something else disastrous happened.

“I'm so sorry,” he said.

“I know,” she whispered. “I know.”

“I'm sorry, I couldn't figure out a way.”

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"I know."

"To fix you. To make you whole again."

Christina cringed. Of course, he would have to spin this back into her lap. A veritable Svengali of words he was. Her legs; her fault.

"But most of all, I'm sorry for having given up before we'd ever heard the name Landry Cox."

A moistness hung in the air, licking at her face, whispering something that sounded like "Peter the poor." Christina dragged herself from the chaise, onto the floor, an almost insurmountable act in moving mere inches. She pulled his face to hers, eyelashes grazing her cheek, breath on breath.

"Things had started spinning at me so fast. Like a batting cage," he said. "It was like the years went whistling past and all I could do was try to get out of the way, not get balled. Eventually I just started swinging at things, hoping to land a hit, make it stop."

She nuzzled his face, trying to press herself into his thoughts.

"I kept beating up the dust, swinging circles, and the whole time you were home plate, right underneath me."

His neck felt so warm. So safe. She crawled in.

"What I wouldn't give to take it back. All of it. Start over."

If Christina didn't know better she would have thought he meant the marriage, but she knew. She knew he was referring to the eight words that nearly killed her. *Hey Hon, pick up the laundry, would you?* The lung-locked guilt he must have felt. The regret. The weight of her legs slung over his back. Occasionally, during the first few months, Christina would wake up in the night to Peter sobbing quietly in the bed next to her, coiled upon himself, sheets soaked through and pulled taut over his shoulder, as if suffering from something abdominal and severe, like colitis. Other nights he'd stand on the lawn, his face to Orion, wearing only his Banana Republic boxer shorts. It was almost as if Christina could see the pieces of him falling apart, falling off. Hairs in the sink. The various phases of the moon chewed from his fingertips and abandoned on the couch cushion, under the coffee table, a years worth of moons. Once, in July, almost six months after it had happened, a neighbor caught him sitting on the corner where Christina had been thrown fifteen feet and into the gutter. The knobs of his knees were gray, pimpled with asphalt. He told her he had dropped his wallet coming back from the convenience store, empty-handed.

And now here they were, years later, slumped on the floor of a three-story colonial with the additional reading room and half-bath ad-on she had always dreamed of. Oh so far from the 10 by 20 box they shared during Peter's first year residency. A near perfect life, acres from where she had imagined it. Miles even. Millennia.

She had no words. She knew it was her line, something selfless and consolatory, but the thoughts were lost on her, vaulted away at the back

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of her brain, supping with her faded memories of Parisian summer and hairnets and the smell of bread baking. All that was left was anecdotal litter. Trite hums of "it'll get better," "there's always California." Christina's mouth buzzed, the opening notes of "Michelle." It was the only thing she could think of. She used to sing it to Jeremy at the ungodliest of hours, her eyes at half-mast, lips chapped, begging for sleep, his. The same song Peter balladeered up to her window, knelt on her doorstep, the only one he knew with French lyrics conveniently woven in, never getting them quite right.

"Sont des mots qui vont très bien ensemble," she whispered. "They go together well."

Peter spit a laugh of half-weep.

"Très bien ensemble," she sang, barely hanging onto a key.

Slowly, their lips found each other. Christina realized that she'd forgotten the feeling completely. That too, was lost. Now found. When was the last time, she asked herself, unable to remember. It felt so distant, like childhood, like being face down in grass, the feel of knee-highs and wool skirts and teenage romance, bare feet in sand, something overlooked and decayed. Something ancient.

And then there was the sound. Unmistakable. That of a latch being thrown.

They stopped.

The front door flung open downstairs, surely smashing a sizable hole in their drywall. A picture fell. Shattered. The sound echoed up the stairs, through the sliver of hope under their door, and into the bedroom. Footsteps drumming up the mahogany staircase, too heavy to be Jeremy's. Too full of life and luster, to be an officer or the Drummands or the Keiths, heaven forbid, Linda expecting frangipani. These feet were not yet jaded by loss, by heartbreak, an astronomical mortgage payment.

There was no knock, no clearing of the throat. Instead, the flick of a knob and the smash of another portrait. Standing in the doorway, back-light by hope and fear, was Candice from down the street, her Heidi braids swinging like heavy pendulums of Fate, the scales of Libra.

No one spoke. Gravity had somehow magnified so that none of them were able to coax muscles into action, least of all the coordination of lungs and jaws. There was no elasticity in their bodies, only clots of numb. A crystallization of that final moment, staring into the face of afterlife.

Candice stood wiping bangs from her brow slicked with sweat, cheeks the hue of cranberries. Her eyes were larger than Christina remembered. A forehead creped too soon, underdeveloped breasts heaving. Lips, glossed and rosy. Her fingers knotted. *Was he? Had it really happened?* She refused it. Shut it out.

A prayer whispered at the corners of the room, a mother's promise, a plea bargain with God. *If only you let me have one more birthday, another scabbed knee, one last bedtime, and nothing else.*

Christina pressed her spine against the chaise, railing against whatever

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was seconds from pouring from this messenger's mouth.

"What? What is it?" she cried.

And then the girl parted her lips and spoke.

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