

# PILFERING THE REMNANTS

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You aren't making this easy for me, weeping on the floor like that. You walked through the front door in a woolen coat that drags slightly against the floor — your father's, that explains it — and you caught dust bunnies on the hem. I can tell from your expression this isn't the house you remember growing up in, always pristine to the point of clinical, I think you'd jab, snickering with your friends. I never minded, knowing how you really felt when you'd fall into the soft couch after spending the night somewhere else, sighing that relieved breath you inadvertently made every time you arrived home. You didn't make it this time. No, you practically held it in, as if inhaling would drag in something lost, taking residence in your chest. I suppose you were right, tears rolling and not stopping, body heaving as if you wanted that invasion *out*, gagged back into the too-empty space.

They've already taken the furniture, auctioned off down the road, likely to be found in neighbors' houses. They always did enjoy my oak shelves and maple table, running grimy hands along their surfaces, leaving oils and envy behind. Your brother didn't consult you first, and that's just Eric, isn't it: big brother attempting to take on everything. He couldn't have known your reverence for things being just as they were: some preservation of who I used to be. I am so sorry — I really should have changed the will after your father died, but that'd be too close to admitting something awful. You and I are alike in this, your weeping my weeping if I could still make the sounds, make the tears.

We may be similar, but you are better, recovering when I never could, that cracked, peeling leather chair sitting in the living room corner until it was abruptly tossed, not even worth the bidding. That hurt to watch, your father thankfully not here to see it. I'm not quite sure where he's gone, or how this works: I only know seeing you has made the loneliness worth it, though I cannot show it.

Cautiously, you make your way to the kitchen, and I know for a moment you're expecting me to be there, wiping down the counters or whipping up one of my famous roasts. Whenever you came to visit after you'd grown, I'd make sure everything was just right: dinner exceptional. Your smile would widen, and your eyes would slide shut — always such a serene expression — and I couldn't ask for greater flattery, genuine joy rarely captured on that face of yours. You're sifting through cardboard boxes now, and oh, I wish you wouldn't, doing more damage than good, but you've brought a bag with you, and I know what you're after. Eric's already set aside the jewelry and trinkets and your father's coin collection — hoping to make some money, I'm sure, though we both know he'd never be so callous as to sell my ring: yours intrinsically. Why the wooden spoon? You must remember stirring the pot when you were young, a chair your makeshift stool, as I stood over your shoulder. You'd ask to dump "flavors" in, our dinner your own personal bubbling brew.



That creativity's fused to your bones, always far more content doodling indoors than running around with your brother outside, though he'd goad and tease, equating you to a pampered house cat. If that were true, he was certainly a muddy labrador, sticking his nose into things he shouldn't with an innocence you couldn't get mad at. You do remember when he got that bloody ear, don't you? The boys would scramble about the woods, staying close to the edge — sure — but never close enough for my tastes. Anyhow, the Jefferson's kid... Blake, I believe, smuggled his father's pellet gun out of the house, and I should have known a scheme was afoot when I noticed Eric carrying a plastic bag full of used tin cans out of the garage. Silly boy, insisting on setting the cans up himself while Blake played around, boasting his aim — an arrogance your brother mocked later that evening, the nurses laughing at his observation.

I doubt even I remember all of Eric's scrapes, fretful as I was, and there are many more tales he never told me or your father. Late at night, I'd be walking down the hallway to bed — as you are now — and I'd catch whispers in the dark, giggles slipping under the crack of your bedroom door. Admittedly, I couldn't help but press my ear against the wood, listening as Eric told you stories he'd stowed away from the dinner table, serving them just for your amusement. You were — are still — my daughter at heart, so you'd scold him, but your tone and the gasps you'd let out as he confessed to switching his friend's ketchup packet for hot sauce or hiding Mr. Moore's pencils around the classroom showed your investment. Every now and then, I'd catch the slightest tint of citrus in the air, and I'd know scandalous anecdotes weren't the only thing Eric had snuck upstairs. Whenever he'd insist you peel tangerines for him in front of your father and I, our reproach would send him back peddling, so a trade out of parents' view it was. It wasn't until he grew some that he finally confessed to irritation whenever he tried himself: a stinging redness spotting about his palms.

You're leaning against the doorframe of your old bedroom now, and I wish I could still quip that it was just as you'd left it: something you delighted in during holidays spent back at mom and dad's. While it wasn't full by any means, especially in comparison to Eric, who slapped up any posters he could get his hands on, it remained yours. We'd painted the walls, you and I, one summer afternoon, throwing your windows open to diffuse the fumes. We'd made a whole day of it, picking out a powdery blue to cover pastel yellow at the store, taping up the walls, and rolling away. You were always such a curious child, excited to learn at any opportunity; you may not have been the most efficient of helpers, but you sure were a pleasant one, humming songs neither of us knew the lyrics to and asking me all sorts of questions about painting and building and renovation and eventually I'd laughed and told you I was certainly due a question of my own.

You'd stopped rolling then, turning to me with a serious concentration I'd never observed on another person's face — at least, not directed toward me. You made me feel adored, admired, and it took my breath away every time. Why powdery blue, I'd asked. It went perfectly with your rubber duck collection, of course, which you'd started lining up along the windowsills. The yellow had swallowed the ducks, and besides, the blue would give them walls to swim in.

The "collection" you spoke of was spotty at the time, only three ducks total. It was more than most children had, surely, but still nothing to change a whole room for. You'd only recently gotten into finding them, I believe, looking at your father with wide shining eyes whenever you'd spot a 50¢ dispenser. Without fail, he'd fish around his coat pockets, ends swishing dramatically about his calves as he fumbled around. You're fumbling, too, eyes





shiny with an entirely different interior, though the look would win him over just the same if he were here with us, scooping you up into an embrace that would crack your very bones. He was good like that, so terribly attentive, knowing how to comfort far better than myself. Here I am, hovering by your side, unable to even wipe your tears away, or offer a tissue.

The blue is all that's left; you'd bagged your army of ducks — which had bled on to dressers and hammered-in shelves by the end of your senior year — taking them with you to your new place. Ducks with crowns and pearls, stethoscopes and lab coats, sunglasses and surfing boards: all littered about the apartment. You'd challenged me to find them all when I visited for the first time, cried over the phone when a supposed friend had stolen several during a house party, describing the exact ducks abducted. I'd gone online, found identical ones, and shipped them to your place one by one. That Christmas, when you'd come to celebrate with us and taken up your old room, the last one was sat on the windowsill you'd set your first. You're staring at the exact spot, refusing to cross the threshold. There's nothing here for you anyhow, the room stripped and sold like the rest of the house. I'd tried to stop them from dismantling your bedframe, but to no avail. It was my second heartbreak after your father's chair.

Something's caught your attention, curiosity finally pulling you into a space otherwise screaming at you to leave. You're shifting a floorboard where your bed used to sit, and it lifts. Twenty-three years you'd lived here and I'd never noticed. Not in all my cleaning and straightening, though I suppose you'd assured that by keeping your own room tidy. It was a habit I'd instilled early in both you and your brother, but I'd still wipe the baseboards and shift the furniture, my presence still existent. It's...a grammar book. I can't imagine you hid your homework out of sight, so what? Oh.

You're flipping through the book, delicately pulling out paper after paper from between the pages. Your back is against the wall, and you're sliding down, resting against blue paint with your knees tucked up. Sidling up beside you is second nature, and I'm seeing exactly what you are: letters, written from you to me. I can't help it, I'm overthinking. Did you mean for me to see these? Was I meant to find them, meticulously making my way around your room, sleeve snagging against the edge of an imperceptible board? If not, why write them? Whatever the truth, you're sifting through them, carefully absorbing words penned to me throughout the years, your handwriting stabilizing as the dates tick closer. You're crying again, as suddenly as the first time, crumbled in the front entryway.

"I miss you," choked up amongst the weeping is all it takes for my entire being to light up, form warbling in distress. I'm reaching out, but you can't feel me, my hand unable to grasp you or anything else. I am afraid, and I feel it echoed back at me, house flickering to mimic my pain. It's not a bear hug from dad, but it does the trick. Your eyes have gone from clam-shut-tight to saucers, hands clenching on precious pages. You are afraid too. That's not what I meant, not what I wanted, for you. I want the shriek of joy you let out, running back down the stairs, after finding your Christmas present. I want the conspiratorial eyeroll after Eric let something incriminating slip at supper. I want hands pressed into dough, watching as I demonstrated how thin it needed spread out.

I want my daughter.

A crackling started from the adjacent room: Eric's. Your body jolts, tucking itself deeper into the wall, somehow. I'm scaring you. How do I make it better? The noise rucked up, bursts of static rippling through plaster, the barrier distorting them into increasingly upsetting sounds, if your shaking is to be trusted.



I miss you too. It is violently sad, to think it. It is an emotion without solution, doomed to drift without ever reaching its intended recipient. I move my mouth, trying to formulate sounds without vocal cords, without lips and tongue, without tangible body. Nothing.

I miss you too. I am angry, more than I have ever been. Your father dying was a mercy, cancer dragging him into hell while still alive on earth. Eric selling our home can be forgiven, his financial plight sympathetic and heart well meaning. It is this, over everything, that I would change.

The crackling isn't stopping. You're not moving. I can't leave you.

"skkkskskkkskkkk miss skkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkks you!" Unfurling, you scramble to your feet, looking wild and hopeful and teary once more.

"Mom?" I'm smiling, form settling, before I slip away.✱

