RED RED RIVER INN

1. Pit

I WRIGGLE MY LITTLE piggies over the edge of the pit and peer into the blackness. It looks like a big mouth, a throat emptying out into space. There's nothing in there but nothing, but I never understand what "nothing" means. One time, I tied all my shoes together and lowered them in to see how deep it goes. Then I had no shoes and I got in a lot of trouble.

The pit appeared before I was born, and Pop says it was very sudden. When he tells the story, he's always thankful that no guests were in this room at the time, or else we'd have "lawsuits up the wazoo." After the pit stopped growing, Pop just put a big sign on the door that said: CAUTION: PRESUMABLY BOTTOMLESS PIT. ENTER AT OWN RISK. I asked him once why we couldn't scoot the hotel over and let the pit be. Pop said hotels can't scoot and, besides which, the pit seemed pretty comfortable where it was. Not to mention that it's made the good-riddance of garbage a no-brainer: Pop takes dead bait and used batteries and even the whole guts of the old kitchen and pops them right into the darkness, which chews them on up, churning them into nothing.

At one point, Pop says, this had been a common room for the guests to interact. There had been an upright piano and even a fish tank in here, but those are long gone now. All that's left is a giant portrait of someone's royal grandpa and a hardwood ledge around the edges of the pit, all broken and jagged. The ledge is just wide enough for little feet, so I have no problem walking it, the way a big-feet person might. Sometimes I come in here to think my thoughts, and I sweep up to make the pit happy, because maybe being bottomless makes it hungry. Today I sing it a song I make up about a pineapple getting a haircut: *clippy clippy snip, snippy snippy clip!*

From across the hall, on the other side of the door, Pop's voice calls, interrupting: "Eureeeeekaaa!" I lean the broom handle against the wall and edge my way out, click the door to the pit room shut and tiptoe across the hallway to the kitchen.

2. Kitchen

Pop turns to me from his spot at the counter, an egg held sideways in his hand. "What are you up to?" he asks. I shrug. I'm bad at lying. He cracks the egg into a big bowl on the counter in front of him, then bends, scooping me under my armpits. "Uuuup!" he says, and sets me down beside the bowl.

Everything in the kitchen looks like a bored robot. I don't spend a lot of time in here, because Pop never wants anyone's help when he cooks. I used to hang around just to hear him sing, but then I found out I can hear him sing from anywhere, even the attic. His voice clangs like a big church bell in the dining room, but from the closet of the guest room farthest from the kitchen, he is a fuzzy recording. The best is this one song where he asks if I'd rather be things like a pig or a mule. I think I'd want to be a pig, because you get leftovers every day for supper. I think I'd also want to be a mule, because that's like being two animals in one. I always stand in the dining room for that song.

From so high up, I spot a candy stash I didn't know about. Pop hums beside me, sweat dripping down his curly head. "My famous Red Red River Chowder for supper tonight." He brings all of his fingertips together and kisses them, and then tosses the kiss into the air. "Sound good?"

Pop's special chowder tastes like the fog that rolls off the river in the morning. I nod at him and my chin bumps my chest.

"Good. Chowder is Dolly's favorite."

"Oh," I say, stopping my noddy head. I wonder how fog tastes if it gets all mixed up with flamingo lipstick. Pop turns back to his eggs. The counter is cold, but the jump to the floor suddenly feels far. Finally, I ask, "When is she coming?"

It's then that I hear it, right on cue: the *click-clack-click* of high heels across the dining room floor, and then, behind Pop, the shiny door with the special porthole window swings open.

"Hello, Eureka," Dolly says, all snakey.

I look down at her shoes, which are spindly. Everything about Dolly is spindly: her shoes, her hairs, her hellos and goodbyes. "Hello," I say back from my spot on the counter.

"Oh!" Pop cries, straightening like a ghost had tapped him. "I almost forgot! I found you each a treasure!"

He dries his hands on a dish-towel hanging from the back pocket of his housework jeans, then turns and walks across the room, kissing Dolly's cheek on his way. A paper bag sits squat on the chopping block, and he rummages through it. "There was a garage sale on the way home from the farmer's market," he explains. Dolly claps and rubs her hands together. My peepers roll. Finally, Pop finds what he's looking for.

He hides an object in each hand behind his back, and offers Dolly one first. Something flashes in his palm when he opens it in front of her. "Oh!" she exclaims, picking the thing up with two pointy red nails. She holds it in front of her

face. A sparkly charm swings at the end of a silver chain. She plants a big pink kiss on Pop's face, and he smiles.

I do a couple kicks against the metal counter beneath me. Pop pulls away from Dolly and makes a face. He briefly inspects the counter for dents where I kicked it. Finally, he holds his other hand out to me. He can almost close all his fingers around my gift, but when he opens his hand and places the present in mine, it's bigger than my palm and all my fingers combined.

It's a brass box in an octagon shape, with tiny cross-shaped holes punched here and there in groups of three. A tiny handle rests flat against the top of the lid, and when I fold it out, I can hook one finger beneath. The box has a little latch, in case I want to lock it with a tiny lock. I pull the lid up and peer inside, wondering how many of Pop's chocolate chips I can fit in here. Fifty? A hundred?

"Do you know what it is?" he asks.

I look up at him. "For chocolate chips?"

"What is she even talking about?" Dolly asks no one.

"It's called a 'cricket box,'" Pop explains. "People who use crickets for bait collect them in here."

"Do we use crickets for bait?" he bitty fish Pop sticks in the peepers with hooks squirm into my mind.

"No, but I thought it was nice. Would you rather have chocolate chips?"

Pop turns toward the cabinet, but Dolly interrupts, holds out her new necklace to him unclasped. He takes the two silver ends from her while she turns her back to him and lifts her hair off her neck. I stand there for a minute, watching. After he does her clasp, Dolly puts her hair down and spins back around.

"My man," she murmurs into Pop's face. His cheeks glow under the round lipstick mark on his cheek. Pop doesn't even look at me when he speaks. "I'll call you when supper's ready, okay, chowderhound?"

For a second, I feel funny sitting up on the counter, taller but more invisible. I look down at my cricket box, jimmy the latch. What if I could catch a dozen crickets inside? And teach them how to sing like Pop? I could bring them all around the hotel and they could chirp songs to the guests as a service. Or what if I collected different kinds of bugs? Marta could get one, and Madame. And Barbara would want one, too. I look up again at Pop and Dolly, but they won't look at me. I slip off the counter and swing through the kitchen door, my index finger looped around the tiny handle of my present.

3. Grounds

The back of our hotel is like one big garden, and there are lots of benches to sit on and look at the river and smell the big showerhead flowers. There is even a hammock, although I notice that right now, it's taken by a snoozing lady with long hair. She's going to get waffle-skin. I think about warning her, but then I get shy.

I start my search on the side of the veranda, at the start of my flower rainbow. It's mine, because Pop let me pick them from the catalog during springtime. After we planted them all around the veranda, hummingbirds came. Today there are no hummingbirds, but I find exactly three caterpillars along the bed. The fattest one is yellow and black and white, and longer than my finger. Its hundred puffy legs swirl the air in tiny circles. I make sure it fits comfortably in the cricket box before I close it in.

I walk over toward the water and down the dock. Red Red River looks like the surface of an arrowhead, muddy and carved spooky. Pop says the water is red because there's lots of clay in it. I like it, even though it stains between my piggies when I dip my feet in and that makes Pop annoyed.

I find a good spot on the dock and put my cricket box down safely. Then I lie on my stomach and peek my head over the gray boards, trying to see underneath. The ends of my hair disappear into the cloudy surface. Under the dock: brown muck and barnacles, and exactly one snail sucking the slimy wood. I pluck it off carefully and inspect it. Perfect. Upright again, I unlatch my cricket box and stick him onto the inside of the lid. Then I close the two bugs in carefully again. Pop's fishing boat is lassoed to the dock's horns at my feet like a bull at a rodeo. With a foot, I nudge the boat, and it moves around at the end of its ropes. The water makes mouth noises against the dock. "Mmmyap mmyop," I repeat, saying hello back.

Before there was Dolly, Pop and I caught fish almost every morning in the summer. I like the boat because it makes wind and you get sprayed when Pop goes fast, and the fish dance through the air when we pull them up. We ate pickle and marmalade sandwiches for lunch and one day Pop taught me how to make four different kinds of knots. Dolly says pickle and marmalade sandwiches are gross and that she's afraid of fishhooks.

I walk back up the gangplank, past where the river turns into a marsh, and the marsh turns into woods. I'm not allowed in the woods, but I squint around where the trees are still pretty small. A moth flickers above my head. I follow for a while, careful not to go too far. Finally, it drops down in front of my face and I cup my hand around it. Its little eyelash wings tickle my palm. I scoop it into the cricket box as gentle as I can.

While I look for the last bug, I remember my own nice necklace that I keep in my dresser with my socks. It has a heart made of opal, and it changes color in the light. Pop says it became mine when I was really little, but I've never worn it. Sometimes I get muddy or break the strap on my good coveralls or run into the

table before supper and mess up the settings, even though I never mean to, so I am afraid for the necklace. It's safe with my socks.

I feel a little pinch on my forearm and slowly lower myself toward the ground. I look down at my arm and there it is, big black thing with white speckled legs, taking gulps of my blood through its needle nose. It flies down to the ground to rest for a second and in one swift movement, I bring my cupped hand down and catch it. I can feel it butt against the ceiling on my hand. I tell it that everything will be okay as I transfer it into my box. My forearm burns already; I smile. An extra-itchy mosquito.

I watch an egret draw a line with his feet in the river until he lands in the water near the marsh. The line smoothes, and the egret merges with the reeds, gone forever. Then I take my bug box and go back inside.

4. Attic

I climb the spiral stairs up to the attic carefully, staying on the wider outside part. The bumpy pattern of the wallpaper underneath my fingertip makes the noise of a whisper in a different language. At the top of the steps is Madame's waiting room, a small, rich blue room with a sloping roof. I walk past the four empty straight-backed chairs, knock twice on Madame's door, and then enter.

The inside of her office is a purple tent; soft-looking fabric swoops from the center of the ceiling to smooch each wall, ending in piles on the floor in each corner of the room. A huge candle glows on a table, throwing shadows of the only other furniture on the fabric walls and ceiling: two chairs on either side of the big table. In the chair facing me sits Madame, her hands folded in her lap, her eyelids closed. I can memorize her for a second, the way she looks when she's alone. Her long gray hair sits on her head in a pile. The beads around her neck could fill a cereal box. Her eyelids flutter open at my sounds, and she smiles warmly when she sees my face. "Hi, there," she greets me, gesturing toward the chair across from her. The material on the seat feels smooth one way and rough the other. I look up at the holes punched in the ceiling of the tent. Little specks of light shine through, stars shining all around.

"Do you have something for me?" Madame asks, smiling toothlessly. The first time she knew like that, I was little, and it scared me that she could see into heads. Now I know it's just something some people have. I put my little brass box on the table and open the latch carefully. Fortunately, the moth flutters out first, hungry for light, and I carefully close the others in again. It bobs up into the air; then, it ripples perilously downward toward the candle on the tabletop. I gasp. In a split second, Madame makes an "o" shape with her lips and blows out the flame to save it from burning up.

We sit still in the darkness. "Should I get a flashlight?" I finally ask. There's one big as a bucket in the hall closet downstairs.

I can hear Madame's smile. "No, Eureka, I never bother with those things. Our eyes will adjust, I suspect."

After a few minutes, I see the white flash of the moth testing the edges of its new home. Then, Madame starts to come into focus, the silver hairs on her head, the glint of the fake stars against her beads, the deep shadows of her wrinkles. She must know I can see her again because she smiles again.

"Eureka." She says my name again gently, like I am a hurt animal. "I think the moth will be happy here. Thank you for sending her." She reaches for a deck of cards on the edge of the tabletop, and brings them into her hands. She shuffles the deck, and the cards float downward like a waterfall in the air. "Do you think there is something you would like to ask the cards?"

Dolly's shoes clack in my head. I straighten up in my chair. "Yes," I say. I put my mouth close to ask the cards personally: "What is the difference between a man and a pop?"

Madame's eyebrows move up like elevators on her face, but she nods, shuffles one last time, and draws a single card from the deck. She brings it close to her face, examining it, pursing her lips. I look all around the tent for the moth, but I can't find it. I notice the Big Dipper on the ceiling. Madame finally speaks.

"The Hermit," she says. "Interesting. See how he stands alone on his mountain, holding a lantern in front of him? There is nothing around for miles. At his feet he has his books and his spectacles; these are his important possessions. He has left the rest of the world behind to come to the top of this mountain, to see this view and to study there alone. It is a solitary quest, Eureka. Do you know what that means?"

I nod. She continues. "At this point in his life, the Hermit has started to seek something deeper. He needs the truth about his situation. No one can help him right now but himself."

I nod again, waiting for Madame to say more. She sits back, folds her hands in her lap again. "I have the utmost trust that you will find the way, Eureka," she sighs. Her peepers are suddenly bright, burning light into the dark tent. Then they flutter closed. She is motionless.

For a second I wonder if she's okay, but the moth comes down from its adventure around the tent. It lands on her laced fingers, and a smile twitches across Madame's cracked lips. After a few moments of silence, I decide to go.

"Eureka?" Madame stops me.

I turn.

"Please let our visitor in on your way out."

I open the door and peer into the waiting room. There is one of the guests, a lady, babysitter-aged, waiting anxiously in one of the chairs. She looks up. I smile just my lips, shoving my cheeks aside with the corners of my mouth, and leave Madame's door open a crack. Then I shuffle toward the stairs, thinking thoughts.

5. Ice Machine

I step back out onto the spiral staircase and hit the hot air like a wall. Madame's attic is always the perfect temperature, but now I can swear the steps are hotter than they were coming up. Sometimes, when it's hot like this, I sneak off to the ice machine and eat ice cubes, which make my insides cold. I head down the second floor hallway, passing several of the guest rooms, my ears gathering sounds like a hair dryer's long wail and that high-pitched noise that means a TV is on somewhere. Pop's singing voice breaks its way through everything from all the way downstairs. It's the song about the pizza pie in the sky. I try to picture it fully: the pizza rolling through the darkness toward the moon, passing Orion, who takes a great big whiff of it. Meatball and pineapple. No. Oysters and olives. In the kitchen, Pop finishes the song with a really long note that gets louder and louder. I reach the ice machine close in the hallway and there is Marta, holding a big bucket for kitchen ice under the mouth of the machine. Marta is a wide lady with round arms and yellow hair like eggs dripping down her head. She comes from faraway, but she has been here for everything I remember. The machine makes a noise somewhere deep in its belly. "LOMMM, LOMMM, LOMMM!" I repeat, trying to speak its loud language without my human accent.

Marta jumps at the sound of my voice, sending ice flying everywhere. I pull my cricket box in toward my belly and round my spine like the snail's shell to shield the bugs from harm. Several cubes ricochet off my head before hitting the floor and sliding into the corners of the little room.

"Eureka!" Marta says, thumping her hand over her heart. "You scare me!"

She unfolds me with her hands, telling me it's alright. Marta has these long eyelashes, and they flap around when she has questions. "You looking for ice again?"

I nod, and she smiles. She reaches for a piece in one of her buckets, and then sticks the cube onto my forehead, holding it there with her index finger. Water drips down my forehead, and I stick my tongue out to catch it. We both giggle, and then she removes the ice cube, throwing it on the floor with all the other ones like it, and wipes the water from my head. Already I feel cooler.

"Madame says I am on a 'solitary quest' to find out the difference between a man and a pop," I share.

Marta frowns. "This is a riddle?"

"No," I answer, frowning too. Then: "I don't know."

Marta looks concerned. I try to figure out how to get back to laughing. I remember my gift and hold up my cricket box. "I have something for you!"

"Oh, what is this?" asks Marta, straightening up a bit.

I lift her bug from the inside wall of the box quickly with one finger, closing the other ones inside carefully. Then I put my box on the floor and hold my hand up to her. The caterpillar picks one or two of its front feet up to look around before continuing its journey up my arm. Marta smiles all her teeth and puts a finger in its path so that her bug climbs onto it. When it begins to travel up the back of her hand, she laughs loud again.

"You're giving out caterpillars today?" Marta asks, turning her focus away from the caterpillar and back toward me.

"All kinds of bugs," I explain. "But the caterpillar is my favorite."

She laughs and this time, her whole belly shakes. She looks back down at her bug again as it crawls past her wrist. "Can I keep him?" she asks in her low voice. I nod. She plants a big, firm kiss on my head and messes my hair around a little. Then she reaches into the bucket again for a new ice cube, hands it to me, and turns me around.

"Now get," she says, "before you slip and lose your bugs!"

I put the ice cube in my mouth as Marta grabs the mop on her cleaning cart, careful to hold her forearm steady for the caterpillar, who sits in the middle of it, looking all around again. "Hello little man," she says to it, but I almost don't hear, because she isn't loud this time at all.

6. Aviary

My third bug is for the bird man and Barbara. Back down the stairs again, I walk down the hallway and open the door across from the sitting room. The room is made entirely of glass, and the air in here feels balmy and humid.

I close the door behind me just as a parakeet swoops low over my head. The room is full of branches and leaves in all different greens and what our brochure calls "water features." We have six parakeets, three doves, a married goldfinch couple, and the bird man's favorite, an African Grey Parrot named Barbara. Each type of bird has a little placard in the aviary with information about their species. Barbara's reads:

Adept at problem solving, communicating, and mimicry, the AFRICAN GREY PARROT (Psittacus erithacus) is one of the smartest birds in the world. They have a working vocabulary of up to 2,000 words and can perfectly reproduce the sounds of things like doorbells, coin flips, and quarreling alleycats. Scientists believe these birds can solve cognitive tasks at the same level of dolphins, chimpanzees, and even

below-average toddlers. AFRICAN GREYS maintain a diet of fruits, nuts, seeds, leaves, and sometimes snails, and can live to be 50-60 years old.

I hear a shuffling in the corner, and turn to see the bird man emerging from behind a tall ficus tree. He leads the way over to me with his arm, where Barbara perches. The bird man wears all black, which makes the several white bird droppings on his arms and shoulders stand out. On his head, he wears his giant crow mask, like the kind a mascot would wear. It has a big dark beak protruding from it, so I can just barely make out his peepers inside the mask's mouth. The feathers on it look black, but up close they're really brown.

"Hello, bird man!" I say, waving. "Hello, Barbara!"

The bird man waves back to me with his non-Barbara hand.

"Hello! Tisk tisk," Barbara says.

"Do you like my box?" I ask them. I can see the whites of the bird man's peepers inside the shadow of his mask. He nods. "I have something for you inside it," I continue, crouching to put the box on the floor. I know I have to be especially careful with my bugs in the aviary, so I open the box slowly, pinch the bird man's present, and close it up quick. When I stand up again, he and Barbara are looking at me expectantly. I hold out the snail by the shell. The bird man steps closer, dips his head so that his beak seems to nudge itself toward me.

He holds out the index finger and thumb of his Barbara hand to take the snail from me. Barbara crawls down his arm to his wrist to try and beat him to it. When the bird man has the snail between his fingers, she perches on his hand and tries to bend enough to grab it from his fingers.

"For meee?" Barbara asks. "Tisk tisk. For meee?"

I giggle as she twists her head an impossible way. The bird man shifts the snail into his other hand, and finally offers it to the impatient Barbara.

"Oh thank you," Barbara says, before she starts to work her sharp beak around the snail's flesh.

It takes her less than a minute to devour the bug completely, and at the end, she snaps her beak inside the shell for scraps. Finally, she is satisfied. She abandons the shell and sticks her head toward the bird man's mask. He bends his neck, gently touching his beak to hers. I think if I could see his face, he'd be blushing.

Barbara clucks at the bird man, and they both turn back to me. Barbara shifts from one foot to the other on the bird man's arm. "Oh thank you, oh thank you," she says to me.

"You are welcome," I say, laughing again.

The bird man nods.

"Bird man?" I ask, which makes him cock his head like an animal.

I stand there thinking for a minute. I want to ask the bird man about my question. But what am I really looking for? What will be different once I know? How would the bird man even answer me? I've never heard his voice. Then, I just blurt it out: "Bird man, whatdoyouthink isthedifference? Betweenamanandapop, I mean?"

The bird man stares at me for a minute, and then looks at Barbara, who, for once, is silent. Something starts to happen between them, almost like silent talking. They stare at each other, as though invisibly passing thought-notes. I feel like an eavesdropper.

I scratch the mosquito bite on my arm, nervous. Finally, they both turn back to me. Barbara hops off of the bird man's arm, flapping her wings a little on her way down to the aviary floor.

The bird man bends, putting one knee on the ground so that his big face is right in front of mine. At this angle, I can make out the droppings on his shoulders more clearly: white splats with gray centers, little badges of his friendliness. The bird man spreads his hands Eureka-wide in front of him. Then he is hugging me, his wingless arms pinning my own to my sides. He sighs from somewhere deep inside his mask, the kind of sound Pop makes when he hasn't slept enough. I press my cheek into him, feeling the scratchy material of his sweatshirt, and gaze down at Barbara, who looks on from her spot on the floor and bobs her head up and down.

The birds in the branches above us sing two different songs. They are: *chap? chap?* and *whpwhp, teer!* I wonder how Barbara feels around these other birds, what with her big brain and her impressive vocabulary. Then I am happy she and the bird man have each other.

"I should get going," I say, my voice muffled by the bird man's shirt. "Pop's chowder should be done soon."

Barbara stops her head mid-bob. "Pop," she says. "Pop Pop." Then, suddenly, she bursts into song, filling the aviary with the sound of Pop's voice. *"Oh would you like to swing on a star? Carry moonbeams home in a jar? And be better off than you are?* Tisk tisk."

7. Hall

There is no alarm, no high-heel drumroll down the hallway. She is just there in front of me after I leave the aviary. I feel foolish, because I was thinking about Barbara and the bird man and my question when I should have been on alert. I look down for her noisemakers. She is barefoot, her toes painted a sparkly red to match her pointy fingers.

"What have you got in there?" she asks, eying my cricket box.

"Nothing," I say, cursing its shininess for attracting her and hiding it a little behind my back.

"Did you get a good look at the necklace your father bought me?" She crouches down a bit, the pendant swinging like a pendulum.

I pretend to look. Then, I hear myself blurt: "It's ugly."

Her features all fall, as though she has dropped them in her surprise. I watch her wrangle them back up again. She smiles in a pinched way at me. "And what have you been up to? Visiting all your father's monsters?"

I look down at my piggies, which are not sparkly or red. In fact, they are caked in dirt. Dolly hums a single note. "Eureka, you're so much cuter when you're quiet." The thud of her clean feet against the floor gets duller and duller every step she puts between us.

8. Dining Room

I squeeze in next to her at the table, dragging the wooden step stool from beside the china cabinet Pop filled with a collection of white miniature busts of piano composers. I drag it in between her chair and Marta's, who is pretending to Dolly to be hard of hearing. The long table is full: the six or so guests, including the lady from the hammock, sporting fresh waffle skin; the Bird Man, who had left Barbara to her usual corn cob dinner in the aviary; Madame, still muttering fortunes into the ear of girl who saw her after me, while the girl's face grows more and more concerned.

Pop sees the effort I make to sit next to Dolly, and smiles warm. He locks eyes with a guest about his age sitting across from him. "The second best seat in the house, after mine!" he proclaims, gesturing toward me.

Dolly fake laughs. I hook the handle of the cricket box tight around my finger, reach up, and snatch the necklace right off of Dolly's neck. She gasps, but I'm already running out the dining room door and down the hall. Someone yells after me, but it isn't Pop, I realize; it's just someone else.

9. Pit

I kick open the door to the pit and edge my way onto the hardwood ledge before Dolly or Pop can catch me. I throw the necklace into the pit and the pendant plummets, the chain flapping after it like a glinting tail. Then it's all gone, swallowed up by the darkness.

Dolly comes first through the doorway and skids to a stop at the edge of the pit. Pop sounds nowhere close enough. Dolly looks from me to the pit and back again. Her eyes narrow like tunnels on my face. She lunges toward me. I clutch my cricket box tight, feeling the hardwood ledge slip beneath my feet. I fall.

10. Middle of the Earth

Here is what nothingness means: seconds and minutes and days are all different words that say the same thing. My memories become a split-second movie that could never tell any story, no matter how many times I watch it. I think about everything I've ever thought about, but it happens much too fast to savor, and then it gutters from the precious light left in my head. The darkness invades, soaking my skin, making my insides frosty. I forget how to smell. I try to open my peepers, but they're already open, like I'm looking through a black blindfold. I wonder if any of my bugs ever would have met each other if I hadn't gathered them together. Then I decide that no, probably not, and the blindfold thickens to a smear of sticky tar. I sink deeper, absorbed into the darkness, the coldest and cleanest I've ever been.

11. Pop's Chest

A pinprick of light ignites off to the left, a match lit a hundred yards away. A metal tooth is ripping at my ribs. My nerves are crumpled. A glass shatter inside my skull. A bell clangs, somewhere far off; no, someone yelling. Louder now. I glance down at my chest, which looks to still be a part of me, and see the shine of the cricket box, my right index finger miraculously hooked around its handle, though it's dented now. I hold it close against my body. Is the last bug safe?

Pop's dusty face looms over me. Something wet falls on my forehead. He's crying. I blink a few times. Behind him, the door to the pit has blown off completely, and lays in pieces down the hall. There is a hole in the hardwood floor where the old stove appears to have fallen halfway through. Something splats from above and splashes my skin wet. The entire hallway is covered in debris, every item the pit ever ate. Rusty spatulas, batteries, a snowfall of torn papers. Dozens of rotten fish heads gaze upward with their empty eye sockets. Large pieces of checkered tile in every uneven shape. A puddle the exact blue of the dining room walls curls away from an old can of paint next to my right hand, which dangles useless like jewelry from my wrist. Underneath the light hanging from the ceiling, a confetti stream of dust filters downward.

Pop scoops me up from the floor. I yelp, but still he doesn't see my limp hand now smashed under my chin, against his chest. Instead, he's looking toward the front door.

Dolly is running toward it. She has such difficulty clamoring over pieces of the old kitchen cabinets, she doesn't see Marta until she runs right into her. "You push?!" Marta yells, squinting into Dolly's face with an expression I've never seen her wear before. Meanness. Violence.

"I would never!" Dolly exclaims, turning around to look at Pop. I look up at him too. He pulls me in even closer, but he looks like his insides hurt, like he swallowed a sea cucumber down the wrong pipe.

"Dolly," he starts, his voice cracking. "What happened?"

Dolly stares. Then, she starts toward the door again, even dodging nimbly around Marta's round shape this time. But behind Marta is the bird man. And behind him, Madame. And down further stand a handful of very terrified-looking guests. Dolly freezes. She hunches her body like a caged animal.

Then someone speaks. It's a voice I've never heard before, and at first, I think it's one of the hotel guests. Then I realize it's the bird man, his voice crackly and muffled inside his mask. "Tell her to leave," he says.

He's looking at Pop, I realize. Everyone's looking at Pop.

Pop sputters.

The bird man lifts his chin. Light beams inside the mouth of his mask, exposing the bottom half of his flat nose and a pair of thin, chapped lips. He says to Pop again, "You'll tell her to leave."

Pop nods. I feel a big lump slide down his throat. He opens his mouth, then closes it.

Down the hall, Dolly makes a loud snorting noise. Then she turns and shoves the bird man right into the wall. Madame screams, and the guests behind her leap out of Dolly's way. Everyone watches Dolly scramble over a small pile of pit garbage, straighten her skirt, and disappear. She doesn't look back.

I study them. The bird man, voiceless once more, helping a guest up from beneath a pile of rubble with both hands. Madame, farther back, her attic calm gone, her probing peepers sifting through my thoughts. Marta has started to scramble toward me, wearing her wide-open love right on her face. Then I look up at Pop, who is crying again. I don't know where the tears come from: relief for me, or grief for Dolly. I realize for the first time that I might never get to know everything. But then I remember nothingness, and how it felt, and I know which is worse.

I look down at my cricket box clutched in my left hand, and point the opening away from me. A loud bone pain snatches at my other hand, and I cry out. Pop looks down at me, startled, only just realizing his own daughter was in his arms.

I thumb the latch of my box to release the mosquito. I watch as it circles Pop's dusty head, whining a warning into his ears. He tries to move away, but it's too late. His bug lands on his neck and bites him, taking sips of his blood from him for good, just the way it did mine. My cricket box clatters on the floor and Pop starts. I wriggle, and the bones in my hand scream at my brain. I bellow, startling Pop again. "My hand broke." I show him.

"Oh, fuck," he murmurs, his eyes wide.

Over his shoulder, Marta gasps. "I'll get the car!" she bellows, pushing past the guests behind her.

Pop goes somewhere far off and soundless. "Pop," I chide, until he starts to slide as carefully as he can after Marta, toward the door. I bury my face in his chest: a newfound place, uncomfortable but safe. I can hear the popping of the gravel driveway beneath the car's tires, Madame's wail, a blackbird's call as it returns to a tree branch overhead. Pop's tears drizzle onto my hair and cheek, and I lick the ones fool enough to run toward my mouth. They taste warm and salty, better even than the chowder would have. In the darkness of my hiding place, I smile all my teeth.