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## Stony Brook Girl

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*SUNY Stony Brook*

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# Stony Brook Girl

I threw my flip-flops on and grabbed my string bag off the chair, tossing sunblock, sunglasses, bugspray, Band-Aids, bacitracin, two waters, two packs of fruit snacks, and a toy dinosaur inside it before lifting the toddler into my arms. We were just about ready to go. I opened the screen door and grabbed my cousin's hand, lifting her slightly above the big step to the lawn below. We made our way down the hill while her brother pointed out the colors of everything around us: the white clouds, the blue sky, the green grass. Once we reached the road, I looked down at the top of Ella's head, her braid coming apart, revealing wild curls.

"Ella, are you sure you don't want to wear your flip-flops? The ground is really hot."

"No, I don't need shoes. Mommy says we're Stony Brook girls, we're tough." She quickened her pace and hurried us across the hot street. "I'm a Stony Brook girl, I don't need shoes, I'm tough!" she sang.

I smiled like my mother would've and adjusted the baby at my hip as I followed her to the beach, kicking off my shoes and meeting the scorching sand.

My mom grew up in Stony Brook in a house just a minute walk away from where I was watching the kids, right up the block—kind of in the center of the block actually. A long gravel driveway from the street led to a big brown house up on a slight hill, where at each window you could see a different side of the neighborhood. There were light blue and lavender hydrangea bushes lining the side yard and a magnolia tree in the front that seemed to bloom and fall so quickly, the white petals drifting to the ground like feathers. Cardinals and blue jays flew past the wide bay window of the living room and squirrels were constantly breaking into the bird feeders. My grandma's unfinished por-

traits were hung on the walls above china cabinets and bookshelves covered in dust. Antique Persian rugs sat on the hardwood floors under furniture enveloped in florals. That was years ago, though. I'm sure it looks much different now. My aunt inherited the house after my grandparents passed away and was now shuffling around its innards like a young girl shaking a dollhouse.

My mom's room was in the attic, so she used to get away with everything. She used to tell me how she would sneak out all the time as a teenager; climb out the window to go to some party at the beach, or just to meet up with my dad on the roof of the pavilion, sneaking drinks and looking up at the stars. I was always jealous of that, of how much fun she had. Of how she had gotten to grow up here. I wish I could've known her at that age. I wish she could've told me more about it. With my mother gone, I am constantly clawing at puzzle pieces of her life to put together, to fill the outline she'd drawn of herself in my mind and never finished.

Something changes in that moment when I make the final turn onto Sound-view Private Road. Everything just feels a little more...magical, maybe. The plastic monotony of the suburbs is replaced with storybook cottages with ivy climbing the sides like beanstalks and dainty bird baths in the front yards. The short stone walls that border the houses are covered in moss like patches of fur, and the chipmunks that dart behind the prairie rose bushes might even sing if you ask them nicely.

The trees' towering branches waved at me as I rolled down the bumpy road. The gravel under my tires crunched to a halt as I pulled to the side and parked the car. Savoring the last few moments of air conditioning, I took a second to peer out my driver's side window. It looked the same as it always had: a little brown cottage up on a small hill with a screened-in porch, petunias in window boxes, a family of duck figurines on the lawn to welcome you inside, and anthill cities around the flat stone circle by the front door under a couple of wooden beach chairs. I pulled the key out of the ignition and opened the door.

The summer heat hugged me tight, and a slight breeze from the shore across the street blew some fly-aways from my ponytail in my face and landed salty air on my tongue. I glanced between the high bush blueberries that lined the other side of the street and saw a sliver of sapphire blue, the rising tide of the Long Island Sound. The faint sound of kids screaming coming from the porch made me whip my head around to face my aunt's house once more. My cousin was waving at the front door, and I waved back, making my way up the grassy hill, passing through the gaps of sunlight from between

the sugar maple tree branches overhead. Some bumblebees bopped about a rhododendron bush.

“Hey!” She opened the door and invited me in.

“Hi!” I replied, smiling awkwardly. The screen door slammed shut. I hadn’t seen my cousin, Charlotte, or her children in a couple years; I was a little nervous to be honest. I wasn’t sure I’d be a good babysitter, if the kids would like me, or if I’d be able to make good conversation with a four year old. Charlotte was wearing a long navy blue dress, and her stomach had grown so big it could’ve had its own gravitational pull. She had short brown hair pulled back in a claw clip and thin-rimmed glasses. She was so much more of a mom than when I’d last seen her—when she was in her early twenties, had graduated college and gotten engaged to some guy named Mike. Now she was seven months pregnant with her third child. I looked down and saw a little person attached to her legs.

“Ella is being shy.” Charlotte reached down and tousled the little girl’s hair, who was sneaking glances at me around her mom’s thigh. Ella had tight brown coils framing her face, a small button nose, slightly pointy ears, and smiled like someone who was always causing trouble. “Don’t worry, this won’t last long.” Charlotte smiled like someone who knew her daughter better than she knew herself. Then a second, smaller human stumbled onto the porch.

“Look who’s here! Say hi, Jack!” The little boy did not respond but attached himself to her other leg instead, and stole a peek at me from behind her left knee. Jack had brown curly hair too, but he was more of a mellow garden gnome whereas Ella was a mischievous elf. His head constituted half of his round little body, and an inch of his belly stuck out at the bottom where his Spider-Man T-shirt couldn’t stretch. “He warms up a little slower,” she assured me. I wished I had someone’s leg to hide behind.

“So, I’m thinking you guys can just hang out here for a little bit, let them warm up to you.” She explained how she thought today would go as I looked around at the porch. There was an outdoor rocking couch to my left, scattered markers and building blocks and tiny figurines ducking for cover underneath. A small table sat at the center of the room, covered in a teal cloth with a dainty lamp, some baby wipes, two applesauces, two spoons, and two packets of Cheez-Its. A smaller, red, wooden table was against the wall, decorated with various stray lines in crayon and marker, joined by two tiny green chairs. There was no TV and hardly any cell phone service. No air conditioning and no fan. I felt my t-shirt sticking to my skin.

“Anyways, I really should get back to work. Ella, why don’t you show Emma your doll?” she said. Ella snuck a smile at me and dashed into the living room. Jack babbled something and Charlotte explained to him that he was going to hang out with me for a little while. Ella ran back in seconds with a princess doll the size of my palm and introduced us. Jack got curious

enough to pry away from my cousin's calf and stomped over to see what all the commotion was about. Charlotte winked at me and made a swift exit while they were distracted.

I sat down on the floor, criss-cross applesauce, and it was barely a minute before Ella had planted herself in my lap.

"My name's Ella Anne Ciabado and I go to the bestest preschool in Massachusetts." Except she said it all in a single breath, and Massachusetts sounded more like "mash-chew-shitz."

"Cool," I said. Jack waddled towards the box of toys, no longer interested. Ella grabbed some of my hair in her sticky fingers and started poking at my face with the other.

"How do you know my mommy?" she asked.

"We're cousins, so your grandma is my aunt." Of course, this made absolutely no sense to her. She cocked her head in confusion but was quickly distracted by the surprisingly loud thud of a two year old's feet hitting the floor when Jack barreled over, plastic garbage truck in hand.

"Truck!" He stuck the toy in my face. His chubby hand smelled like peanut butter. I wondered if I was supposed to throw it, like when a puppy shows you its favorite ball.

"Yes," I agreed. That was a sufficient response, I guess, because he turned and ran back to get another to show me.

"Massachusetts is my home, but we're staying here in Stony Brook for the summertime," Ella said.

I knew that part. My cousin had texted me back in May asking if I'd be around and willing to babysit. She and her husband planned to stay in my aunt's cottage in Stony Brook for the first half of the summer before she was due in August and had to return home. Since they both could work online last year, she felt this would probably be the only time they'd be able to come down for a while. I think she was pretty desperate for someone to keep an eye on the kids while they worked from home. When I didn't answer for a week, she asked me again. It wasn't that I didn't want to see my cousins and help her out, it was that I wasn't sure if I could handle it...

I wasn't sure if I could handle being in Stony Brook again.

In Stony Brook, at Soundview, she is everywhere. There's just something about the way the setting sun hits the saltwater at high tide; the way the ospreys seem to glide across the clouds as they leave their nest on the light pole, going to find food for their young; the way the sand crabs scurry back into their self-made labyrinths, leaving tiny bundles of sand in piles around their

doorways to the underground, that makes me think of her. The little blonde girl that runs into the water, laughing and utterly fearless, is her ghost soaking her sun-bleached hair in the saltwater one last time. The butterfly I spot fluttering around a patch of daisies by the pavilion is merely her spirit coming back to see if the boardwalk's changed. I can hear her laugh in the seagulls' calls, see her hair whisking around her face as a breeze pulls my bangs over my eyes, feel her feet touch the hot asphalt as I cross the road to the beach, carrying Jack in one arm and holding Ella's hand with the other. When I chase Jack—who is clad in a diaper and laughing hysterically—all around the front lawn, it's her legs that eventually catch up to him before he squirms out of my grasp again. When I change a diaper for the first time and nearly puke, it's her hands that fold the flaps of white fabric around the baby's soft belly, fixing it from facing backwards.

I don't know if I believe in an afterlife or ghosts or whatever, but if my mom's soul is still hanging around, she's here. She used to joke around and tell me that when she died, we could just go right ahead and throw her ashes in the creek. A Stony Brook girl's burial at sea.

The way my mom talked about Soundview, I was convinced that leaving it was her biggest regret. When they got married, my parents moved to an apartment deeper into the suburbs, far from the seashell-lined shores and marshlands my mom was used to. When she told me the stories of her childhood, her whole face would light up and she'd smile like the little girl she once was. It was a beachy glow that couldn't come from the shade of our suburban apartment, overshadowed by shopping centers and empty parking lots. My mom and dad had moved looking for a bigger place for their future kids after being unable to find one back in Stony Brook. I couldn't help but feel like it was all my fault somehow. As the first-born daughter, it felt like I was the reason they had to leave. I had pulled her away from the home she had loved so much and dragged her here. I used to imagine the summers I would've had if they'd stayed on that same block, if I had grown up there. I saw myself as the main character of her stories: camping out on the beach with friends, taking a canoe down the creek and exploring the marsh, getting into all sorts of trouble with blonder hair, tanner skin, and more freckles on my nose. I think she would've been so much happier in Stony Brook—we all would've been. I know at least that I would've been happier if she was.

There was a short time my mom had gone back to that room. She had gotten sober, for what we hoped was the last time, and ended up back in the place she'd grown up in at forty-something years old. This was a couple years after she'd left, after my dad had told her she had to choose between us and drinking and she'd walked out the door with a half-empty bottle in hand. She spent the years in between trying to stay clean and failing, flipping through apartments and jobs like pages in a book. She could never stay sober for long.

All the while I wanted nothing to do with her. I was so mad for so long. She had walked out of my life when I was eight years old, and she always thought she could pop back in as she pleased. Now, she was back in her parents' house after giving up on being a parent herself.

I shouldn't say that. My mom never gave up on anything. Not fully. All the times she picked up the bottle she'd eventually put it back down. It was those times that were so confusing. There'd be months of rhythmic tides, calm ones of weekly visits and promises of birthday presents. Then, there'd be months of home-wrecking, car-flooding waves, of calls going to voicemail and late night hospital visits. When she would come over on Sundays, she would try to talk to us like everything was normal, like nothing had happened. I couldn't do it, and I resented the way she could. I would lock myself in my bedroom when she'd visit, holding my hands over my ears with tears streaming down my face when she'd beg me to let her in. I wanted to be happy that she was finally okay—I swear I tried to be, but I couldn't trust it. It was like waiting for a rip current to drag you under by the ankles, to pour black water into your lungs and sink you like an anchor to the ocean floor.

I was in second grade when I realized my mom wasn't going to be there the way she should've been.

The bus driver had looped around the block twice before he had to let me off. His eyes were filled with pity as they met mine in the rearview mirror.

"Sorry, kid," he said, "I got other stops to make." I looked down at my Skechers and shifted in my seat, poking around in the dusty brown leather cushion to the spongy inside. There were a couple other kids still on the bus, looking outside at the empty street and looking at me, confused. 'Where is her mother?' their tilted heads and peering eyes seemed to ask. I sighed and looked out the window, the smell of gasoline and old pencils filling my nose. The sunlight shone through the trees that lined the opposite side of the road without warmth. The opened door had let in an autumn breeze, goosebumps rising on my arms underneath my Hello Kitty T-shirt. The engine whirled.

"C'mon, I'll wait here until you wave from the deck, okay?" He had creases on his tanned forehead and wrinkles at the corner of his kind eyes under gray bushy eyebrows. I didn't want to be difficult. I got up without meeting the other childrens' gazes and hopped down the bus steps, muttering a quiet "thank you" to the driver as I got off. I stepped onto the curb, pushed open the green gate to my backyard, and ran to the stairs of the deck without looking back, the crisp scent of fallen leaves and dirt filling my lungs. We lived in the upper half of a duplex, so our deck was a whole story off the ground, giving a perfect view of the backyard below and the side-street.

The loud thud of my sneakers hitting the wooden boards disrupted the calm October afternoon and birds fluttered from their spots in the trees as I reached the top of the stairs. Panting, I walked over to the railing and waved at the big yellow school bus, which roared to a start at my signal and rolled down the block.

The back door was open. I threw my pink backpack on the kitchen floor before dashing down the hall to my parents' bedroom, skidding to a stop at the doorway. Suddenly, I was scared; what if something had happened and that's why she hadn't come to the bus stop? What was I going to find? With two tiny hands gripping the wooden doorframe, I peered into the room and spotted a lumpy figure on the bed, the afternoon seeping in through the blinds and placing lines of light across the covers. I tiptoed over to my mother's side. She was sleeping. Her golden hair was splayed out against the dark blue pillowcase and her long eyelashes casted a small shadow on her cheeks, tiny clumps of mascara sitting around her eyes. Her cheekbones were higher than mine and her nose was straighter; it didn't have the awkward bump on its ridge that I would grow to despise. I reached out a hand and gently shook her shoulder. She shot up, startled.

"Wha—What? What's going on?" she asked, eyes still half-closed. When she made me out, her eyes went wide. "Emma? What are you doing here?" I didn't say anything. I watched her eyes move to the alarm clock on the cluttered nightstand and grow even wider. "Oh my god, is it that late?" Her breath smelled like wine. "I must've overslept." It was half-past three. I shifted, pulling at a strap of my overalls.

"The bus driver was waiting," I said, picking at the Snoopy Band-Aid around my index finger with my thumb.

"Boo, I'm so sorry." She reached up to cup my face in her palm. She always called me that. Something gleamed in her blue eyes that I couldn't make out. The poof in her bangs, what she liked to call her "Farah Faucett hair", was squashed on her forehead from the pillow. Her nails were polished bright cherry red. They always were. "Let's not tell Dad about this, okay?" The corners of her lips turned up in a forced smile, her pink lipstick smudged. I nodded. "That's my boo," she said, "and this won't happen again."

It did. A couple more times, in fact. Eventually, the bus driver wouldn't loop around, he'd just let me off and wait for my signal at the back door. Eventually, I stopped expecting her to be there.

I later decided in my teenage years that I was going to shut her out at all costs. I didn't need her. I could do everything on my own; I was tough. I wasn't go-



ing to be sad; I was going to be angry. The times when she'd come knocking at my door expecting forgiveness or pity were annoying. I didn't want to be reminded of her because a reminder of her was a reminder of all the hurt she'd caused. Anytime I had to speak to her, we'd always just end up screaming at each other.

I can't even remember all the fights we had, all the things we said to each other. I know they were almost always about her playing the victim, deflecting by blaming me for not doing enough around the house— angry with me for not filling the mother-shaped hole she had left. I know that she never understood why I was so angry with her, that she would beg me to talk to her again. I know that I yelled a lot of things without saying anything at all, that I begged her to understand all the things she'd done wrong, that I just wanted her to apologize, that I just wanted her to be there, that I just wanted absolutely nothing to do with her. I flinched when she'd try to hug me, the pungent smell of perfume failing to cover the smell of vodka and the sharpness of her shoulder blades piercing my fingertips. I know that I hate myself for it. That more than anything now, all I want to do is apologize. I wonder now if she died thinking I hate her, if she died hating me. I was so stupid to be so angry, to be so stubborn. If I had known how little time I had, I would've made better use of it. I would've begged for more stories. I would've taken her down to the beach and let her stay there for hours. I should've hugged her more. Maybe I should've forgiven her, even if she didn't apologize. I know now that love and hate are closely intertwined, that you could only hate something you truly love. I don't know if I ever hated her, but I know now that I always loved her, even when I didn't want to.

My mom was resilient in every way. She was always emphasizing her strengths when she could, a smug tilt of her chin upwards as she repeated the moments she was proud of: the marathons she had run in her thirties, the time she'd beat up a kid for pouring ice down her best friend's back in middle school, the time a nurse had messed up her epidural during her second childbirth, nearly paralyzing her. She had this fearlessness I had admired, but it gave way to this false indestructibility she convinced herself she had. She was lucky, but she was reckless. She couldn't stay drunk for long either. A hospital visit would usually scare her into sobriety, revealing a liver that was bruising with every sip and gasping for air. It didn't make sense that she had survived for as long as she did, and she kept testing her little miracles. My mom lived off of second chances until she couldn't, until it was too late. Even then though, last fall, as she laid dying in the hospital bed, I half-expected her, needed her, to get up and yell at us for just sitting there, weeping. To get up and reprimand us for

thinking we could get rid of her that easily. She didn't though. And now her ashes sit in a box in my dad's bedroom.

The kids and I became friends fast, despite how nervous I was. I liked hanging out with Ella and Jack; they had so much imagination and so much energy. It was a lot, but I was definitely never bored.

Whenever Jack was asleep and Ella needed to get out of the house before she started bouncing off the walls, I'd take her on a walk. Well, I would walk. She would always end up on my back somehow, her little arms wrapped tight around my neck and her heels digging into my ribcage. The first time we went, I made up a game. Everything we saw was a magic something that could turn you into something else. "Ella," I'd say, "don't eat those berries off that bush over there, if you do you turn into a smelly toad!" Then of course, because Ella is Ella, she had to do the opposite of what I'd say and "eat" whatever it was I told her not to. If it was a pinecone that would turn her invisible, I'd pretend to go in circles calling out for her. If it was a flower that could turn you into a heavy boulder, I'd slump down and pretend I was Atlas climbing up the hill, stomping my way up the street as she giggled over my shoulder. This really cracked her up for some reason.

One day we reached the corner of the block at the top of the hill, in front of my mom's childhood home. I took a breath and braced myself to look. Bright blue flowers had bloomed on the hydrangea bushes, and little moss had grown over the stone path to the front door. I tried not to imagine her manicured finger ringing the doorbell or her flip flops slapping the rock as she ran to the front gate, leading the way down to the beach. It looked the same as it always had, but it was so still. The only movement seemed to be a butterfly fluttering about the wildflowers surrounding the mailbox. It stood now as a sort of empty mausoleum, one that was resisting its new condition. It seemed to be waiting patiently for life— or rather, for a return to the life that had filled it so long ago. It was surrounded by life and yet trapped in purgatory. I decided it was no place for the living. All was quiet, and I made sure there were no cars around.

"Ella, that tree over there turns you into a big, hairy, scary monster!" I pointed at a tall sycamore tree in the nearby wood and watched a bunny dart behind the trunk.

"Does it really?"

"Yes, it really does."

"Does it really, really, really?" Ella had that way of talking that made her sound like a cartoon character.

"Yes! So whatever you do, don't eat it."

I could practically see her mischievous grin behind my head as she reached a tiny hand out towards the tree's towering branches.

"Nomnomnomnomnom mm-mm, so good," she said, making loud chewing noises.

"Nooooo!" I yelled. "Oh no! There's a big hairy, scary monster on me!" I jumped and hopped and spun around in circles, pretending to try and knock her off my back. I hollered as I ran down the empty road; Ella's laughter, and mine too, filling the whole neighborhood.

I've never seen my mom as proud or as happy as when she could take my sisters and me down to the creek. That was her favorite place in the whole world. When I was much younger, before everything was terrible, we'd visit my grandparents at the house. Afterwards, we would go down to the beach and climb out onto the sandbar during low tide. The sandbar was reached by walking down the dock near the volleyball net and stepping down a small pile of rocks onto the wet sludge below. It was pretty far below the main beach, so the tide had to be really low to see it.

To a seven-year-old me, this was the most spectacular place in the world. It felt like the sandbar only revealed itself to me, to us, when we wanted it to. I chose to believe that no one knew about it but us; it was our special place. It was our saltwater kingdom and my mom was the queen. The black claw clip that pulled her wispy, golden hair back was a makeshift crown, and the blue of her irises were reflections of the clear sky above and the saltwater below. The small pile of rocks that I walk across in two steps now seemed like a mountain one wrong move from an avalanche back then. My foot used to stand on a single stone. I'd welcome the gray mud that I'd sink into after the bumpy rocks had hurt the soles of my feet, the damp black sand below squeezing between my toes. It always smelled worse down there, like the worst level of low tide, but I was too happy to care. I'd sprint across the length of the sandbar and stand at its tip, staring out at the surroundings of my castle. I could see the shoreline from there on one side and the green marshlands on the other, and if I looked down, I could see the dark black pits of the drop-off, just a step away. At the sandbar's less steep edges, there were tiny snails in the shallow water. My mom showed us how if you scoop up a handful of them in your palm and chuck 'em out into the water, it sounded like popcorn kernels. One day she showed us how to be a god.

"See these little holes in the sand here?" She held up her yoga pants with one hand and pointed at the ground with the other. She seemed so tall to me then, casting a long shadow against the damp brown sand. These were arms and legs that had helped me take my first steps, that decades later would become too swollen and yellow for an open casket.

I ran over to the spot where she was standing and looked down. My feet were half the size of hers. Tiny pinpricks in the sand were scattered about like stars. My mom smiled at me, mischief flashing across her face, and stomped. Water shot up from the sand below like fountains and splashed on her calves. I squealed and started stomping too.

“It’s the mussels underneath, spitting water up,” she said.

We stomped and jumped and came crashing down all over the sandbar, scaring the mussels below half to death like careless, happy giants, and watched as the sun set over our oceanic realm, casting the beach in a soft orange glow.

There were times when Jack would come with us on mine and Ella’s walks. Mostly when he refused to take a nap, and I couldn’t take them down to the creek and have them get all dirty before lunch. These were the times I would pull the two of them around the block; their horse-drawn carriage taking the form of a red Radio Flyer wagon. After a couple minutes of fighting about who could sit in the front, who could bring what toys, and who was putting whose stinky feet in the other person’s space (it was always Jack, and he didn’t know what he was really doing, only that it was making Ella mad and that that was funny), I’d pull the wagon down the hill from the front door and up the block. That was when I came up with another game.

“Ugh, Jack! You’re sitting in my spot! You big—”

“Ella, wow, look at this!” I gasped as I picked up an empty acorn top from the side of the road. She stopped sticking her tongue out and shoving at her brother to look over at what I’d found. Jack just sat there, binky in his mouth, unbothered. “Do you know what this is?”

“No, what is it?”

“I think it’s a fairy boat for when it rains.”

“Really?” She scrunched up her nose and tilted her head.

“Yeah, there’s lots of magic lost things if you just look for ‘em.”

And then that was our thing: finding the magic-lost-things. A dandelion was the last ingredient in a witch’s brew, a broken-off piece of asphalt was a space rock from a blazing comet, a clover was good luck even if it only had three leaves. All of them were magic-lost things, grateful to be found by us. We knew just how special they were.

Ella began to bring a small plastic pink purse to carry them in. At the end of each day, she’d go up to Charlotte and show her all the things we found, telling her she had to hide them in a secret, special place where nobody could find them.

Once, Jack fell asleep on our walk. I had taken a glance backward to check on them, wondering why it was so quiet, and found his little head slumped

down, his binky still in his mouth. Ella was fascinated with our latest find, staring at the halved rock, which was actually a broken troll egg, that I'd picked up a couple minutes ago. When I'd brought them back and passed him off to Charlotte, she'd been shocked.

"It's usually so hard to get him to fall asleep," she said, her eyes wide.

Ella took advantage of the opportunity and grabbed my arm, pulling me back out onto the porch. There was a big princess party we had to get ready for. We were already running late.

He didn't always go to sleep so easily. On a particular day in late June, all Jack wanted to do was drive me crazy. He and Ella had been bickering all morning, and he absolutely needed to take a nap. He had pulled one of her curls for the fourth time when I finally just scooped him up and took him into the living room and told Ella to wait for me out on the porch. We had to be quiet in the house since their parents were working and I tiptoed over to the daybed.

The living room was all wooden: wooden floors, wood-paneled walls, and old, dark wooden furniture. A faded, antique-looking rug covered most of the floor, scattered across it were toy cars and picture books and tiny socks. Pictures of my aunt on her wedding day and my cousins' baby pictures adorned the walls, in addition to an old cuckoo clock and a map of Long Island. There was a daybed that folded out of the couch in the corner, next to a small table home to a stack of diapers and baby wipes. I laid Jack down on the mattress, making sure pillows were surrounding him so he couldn't roll around and fall off. The second we sat on the bed though, he wasn't tired. He immediately got up and started jumping into the pile of pillows I'd made.

"Jack!" I shouted in a whisper. He laughed maniacally. I shushed him to no avail. Everytime I'd catch him and put him down, he'd just get right back up and do it again. I can't remember how long this went on for. At one point, I laid my head down and pretended to sleep, hoping he'd want to copy me. Instead, I opened my eyes to him hanging an inch over my face and lighting up once he saw I was awake. It had become a game. Ella had begun to yell at me from the other room.

"Emmmaaaaa," she yelled. I dashed from the bed to the doorway of the porch and begged her to just be a little more patient.

"I promise I'll be right there. He's just about to fall asleep, just please be quiet." She wasn't, of course, and this happened about five more times. I got more and more worried Charlotte could hear all the commotion.

I thought I might lose my mind. I decided the bed wasn't working; I picked Jack up in my arms again despite his squirming and whining and stuck a binky in his mouth. He still had that baby smell, even though we'd gone to the beach earlier that day. There was some sand in his hair; I brushed

it out with my hand. I did the only thing I could think of: I started rocking him in my arms. Even he was surprised, I think, because he stopped wriggling and looked up at me with his big brown eyes. I'd never done that before. It was like some weird instinct I never knew I had. I felt ridiculous. I even started singing something quiet.

It actually worked too. He finally closed his eyes and fell asleep against my chest. Everything was finally still. Looking at the sleeping boy, I thought I might cry.

It got to be really hard going back to Soundview every day. After a couple of weeks, I started to dread the drive there, the final turn into the neighborhood. It felt wrong going there without my mom when she couldn't be there. It was like walking into somebody's bedroom when they weren't home. It hurt to be reminded of her, to have her thrown in my face with every gust of salt air and every pointed pebble digging into my heel. I wanted to walk out onto the edge of the sandbar again and just scream, kick the sand and scream until I had nothing left in me. I wanted to walk out onto the edge and stare into the abyss of the drop off and let it swallow me whole. It felt like the summer after I'd lost my mother I'd become one. Not really of course, but sort of. There was a twisted irony that I hated to think about. My mom would never meet my kids if I had any. She would never be able to show them this place she loved so much. I could do my best to try, but I'd never know it like she did. She couldn't help me be a mom, even if she was still here; she'd barely known how to do it herself. I pushed her away as my mother for so long, so why did performing this motherly role make me think of her so much?

Underneath it all, I missed her. I had tried to push her out of my mind for months; I couldn't do that here. I'd been so mad at her for so long, but all I wanted now was to have her back. I'd suck up the whole sound through a straw if it meant I could have her back, just to tell her I'm sorry. It's an ache in my chest, a pit in my stomach, a tug on my hair that will never leave me.

I started to realize though, why my mother couldn't ever really give it up. I loved these kids so much. I wanted to protect them. I wanted to help them. I wanted to make them happy. I couldn't imagine ever wanting to hurt them. Why could my mother do that so easily?

My mom used to say that she loved us more than anything in the whole world. I remember her saying once, that nothing compares to the love a mother feels for her daughter. She used to say that all the excruciating hours of labor were worth it, forgotten even, once she'd seen my squishy, red face, how she knew then that being a mother was what she was made to do. If that were true though, how could she leave? What could've been more important?

On a hot, sunny, July day, we ran into my aunt at the beach. Jack was back at the house, so it was just Ella and me. She was burying my feet in the sand when Dawn walked over to us with her dog, a light brown, long-haired dachshund. Her name was Sadie. When I was really little and used to go over to my aunt's house, Sadie would run under the nearest bed once she'd heard my light-up sneakers hit the hardwood floor. She was older now and came right up to us, her tail wagging.

"Emma! I heard you were down here." She smiled at me, and I stood up, brushing the sand off my legs.

"Hey, I wasn't finished yet!" Ella crossed her arms and furrowed her brows.

"She's a character, isn't she?" my aunt said, chuckling. She had light blonde hair and blue eyes that crinkled when she smiled. Her bangs framed her heart-shaped face, and she always wore some dainty necklace and earrings to match. Dawn was one of my mom's older sisters, and she looked the closest to her out of all of her nine siblings. She was what my mom should've been: happy, alive, home.

"She is," I said.

"Hi Grandma," said Ella.

"Hello sweetheart." Dawn bent down to tousle Ella's hair. "I'm so happy they're down here and I get to see them." A pang in my chest—jealousy maybe, hurt mostly. "She can be quite a handful though I bet."

"Maybe, but mostly it's fun." I smiled, letting that hurt pass. I meant it too.

We talked about how things were going. She told me about the house she'd bought down the street, how they finally finished the renovations to the patio. She had a garden growing in the backyard, and told me parsley attracts black swallowtail butterflies. She told me how I'd have to bring the kids up to her house for lunch soon, how Ella loves the tree swing in the front yard.

"Emma, come onnnnn," she interrupted, pouting.

Dawn laughed. "Alright, alright. I'll let you go. Ella, you be good, okay?"

Ella didn't respond, just reached up and tugged at my shirt. Dawn and I hugged, and I watched as she made her way down the road to the big white house on the corner, Sadie trotting along at her ankles.

"Why don't we go down to the water, put our feet in," I said, shielding the sun from my eyes. I was sweating and sand was getting in my shorts. We sat way up at the top of the beach, at the start of the ramp to the pavilion and beside the wild blueberry bush. Ella shifted. "C'mon, I'll carry you across the crab lands."

Ella was terrified of the sand crabs. She always began to cry within two feet of the holes that populated the upper shoreline. It was odd to see her

scared; she was very much the type of kid that wasn't scared of anything. I didn't like to see her upset, but I knew how much she liked to splash around in the water. She needed to get over her fear. She hesitated still, but I rose to my feet and lifted her up. She winced as we made our way down the beach.

"Ella, it's okay. I promise." Her hands were over her eyes, and she buried her head in my shoulder. "The crabs don't wanna hurt you. I got you." She moved her fingers and peered through the crack between them to the ground below, still whimpering. I was on my tiptoes, dodging the crab holes like landmines. "Ella, I thought Stony Brook girls were supposed to be tough?" She let her hands fall and looked up at me through narrowed eyes, not liking that I was right. But then she turned and looked out at the beach, stopping her squirming with a calm resignation. When we passed over their little universe, and reached the darker, damper sand, I plopped her down. She sped off to the water. I followed and grabbed her hand before she could go in past her knees.

The water was cold. I welcomed the breeze that rolled off the incoming tide. The green marsh in the distance sat under a cloudless sky while an osprey flew overhead. Black snails were collected on the seafloor like dropped marbles and schools of tiny brown fish swam around our legs. Bunches of seaweed floated about near broken reeds. Empty mussel shells and horseshoe crab skeletons rested behind us.

As I stood there and looked out at the sound, feeling the sunburn form on my scalp, holding the hand of my self-proclaimed "Stony Brook Girl," I wondered what would happen if I had thrown my mother's ashes in. Would the creek bring her back to life, back to me, molding her a body of mud and smooth stones with saltwater in her veins and the breath of the tide in her lungs? Or would it take her back, swirling her cinders in with the rest of the broken, dead, alive things and letting some settle on the banks of the sandbar before pulling the rest out to sea? I wondered if she'd be happier that way, if I'd taken some happiness from her. I wondered if she was there then, watching me standing at the edge of her world, of her kingdom I'm not fit to rule, and if she'd think I was doing any of this right—and if it would even matter.