

invalidation

When I was six, I asked my thirteen-year-old cousin to marry me. He was my mother's cousin's son. I pulled pink wildflowers from the ground and picked my second nicest dress (my mother never let me wear my nicest dress unless we were going somewhere together). Pink-colored things reminded me of strawberry milk. I used to ask for strawberry syrup in my milk because it tasted sweet, but I especially liked the pink swirls it would make when stirred. My cousin would always make me some when I asked. He would let me sit on his lap and watch, then pinch my cheeks and say, "Sometimes, your cheeks are the color of strawberries—they're my favorite."

I gave him my mood ring from Galveston and he gave me a ring pop. When I made him say he would be mine forever, we kissed briefly and on the lips. Six-year-old me almost made two conclusions at that moment. One was that he loved me, and the other was that he would be my cousin, mine forever. The older I got, the more I thought about kisses. Mothers and fathers kissed, parents kissed their children, strangers kissed other strangers. But were cousins supposed to kiss? When I began to draw, the first things I drew were people kissing. The second was portraits of my cousin. I usually added the most detail to his mouth and jaw, which grew more defined as he got older.

When we were all growing up, he was my favorite cousin. Out of all the cousins, he was around the most. He was the only cousin that left California and lived by us in Texas. They had a saltwater pool in their backyard. He spent most of his time in the deep end. Most of the time I would sit on the edge of the concrete and watch, kicking my legs through the warm water as he floated. Other times I would watch from the shallow end, my stomach barely reaching over the top of the water.

"Would you ever swim with me there?" He'd ask, always motioning to the darker side of the pool.

"I don't know," I'd say. "I can't feel the ground over there." And after, he'd let me climb his back, long and slippery, while he held my legs. With me gripping his neck, he would wade through until his chin broke the water. I always held on until he tired out.

Like a scratched vinyl, my mother repeated her cousin's praises for my cousin. When my cousin told his parents about his acceptance letters to different universities, their cheers echoed in our home. Backward skip when everyone found out he'd decided on a local university. It was especially hard to draw his mouth from his high school graduation picture. The smile always appeared fake on paper.

My cousin graduated from university the year I turned fifteen. That was when he began talking about floating in salty water. Floating in the Dead Sea fascinated him. When I asked why he said there was something about floating that was enticing. Something about floating and something about being just one movement away from drowning excited him. So I did a report about the conflict between Palestine and Israel in my World Geo class which no one understood. My cousin hugged me when I told him and said, "maybe I'll take you to float with me."

Eventually, he stopped talking about the Dead Sea. Instead, he went to Utah to float in pink brackish water. While he was gone, I started to date a boy who treated me absolutely

different from the way my cousin did. And we did more than kiss, even though kissing was still on my mind. We actually barely kissed.

The summer burned harsher than usual when my cousin came back from Utah. He was gone for a long few months. There was a different heat that came from his body. His face was filled with stubble. He had brought someone else home with him. A Utah woman. He met her there before he went to the lake, and the only thing I knew he had in common with her was that they both wanted to float in the brackish water. So they floated together. I couldn't explain it, but from then on I hated Israel.

They decided to get married. He decided to have a real wedding, with real flowers and real rings and real vows. He was going to start a real family. I was happy for my cousin, very happy. But at the same time, it felt like I had accidentally swallowed salt water while swimming in the ocean. I was still with the boy, the one that treated me nothing like how my cousin did. Being with him was like drinking brackish water. An entire bucket of it.

Sometimes, I wished I lived in California. The sunshine was warm but not hot like in Texas—I could actually breathe in California. And I would've been close enough to Utah. Close enough for my cousin so that he would've taken me floating with him in the pink water. I would've been the one to float with him instead of the Utah woman. The wedding was in California. In Carpinteria, close to the beach. The water was cold when I went, nothing like the water in the Gulf of Mexico. I wondered if the pink water was as cold as the Pacific Ocean. Or if the sand was as pale beige as it was in California.

When my family and I arrived at the wedding, people scurried to their seats like small crabs. Everything was decorated to match the Utah woman's favorite color. The flowers were green, the seats were green, the decorations were green. The ceremony took place on the venue's courtyard, near the beach, but not on it. Everyone worried that the tide would roll in and saltwater would wet everything they worked so hard to put up. But they were willing to fund a venue with a private beach.

As I settled into my seat next to a stone fountain, the wedding party paced along a string ensemble of predictable wedding songs. Even the dresses were green. Thank God I wasn't part of the bride's party. I wore a long tan dress that blew in the coastal wind. It wasn't my nicest dress nor was it my second nicest dress. There were more pale-skinned girls walking down the aisle than I'd talked to in my life. But it seemed like I was the only one that noticed them and their gazes. Their skin was like desert sand, pretty desert sand but still desert sand.

The Utah woman began her trek to the altar. I knew because the same expected song screeched from the instruments. Her olive-green dress dragged behind her. Leaves from her bouquet fluttered onto the ground. That shade of green was a horrible choice. She had blue veins that popped above her pale skin. A color like that would've better fit someone with green veins. Someone like me.

My cousin and the Utah woman stood at the green altar with the priest. He spoke something about God and Jesus and matrimony. It had been a while since I'd been to church. I imagined my mother, who was sitting at another table with all adults, saying we would go back the next week. I couldn't remember what else about Jesus the priest said. My cousins at my table did their best to ignore me as I dipped my hands in the fountain water, wishing I could control the weather. I watched my cousin hold hands with the Utah woman. I tried to think of holding hands with the boy I was dating under the altar. A pink altar, a green altar, or even just a white altar. He wasn't there.

During the reception, my cousin danced with the Utah woman. But when he finished, he danced with me. My dress flowed behind me and I held his hands tight. I told him congrats and he said thank you softly.

“I thought you would take me floating,” I said under the chattering of family and loud music. Slow music that anyone could dance to.

“I would take you to the Dead Sea,” he said, “not Utah.” He hummed to the music for a little, music we both recognized. “It smelled.”

“But what about the pink water?” He squeezed my hands tighter as the music continued, slow pace.

“There are two sides to the Great Salt Lake. I did not float on the pink side.”

I snuck to the edge of the shore. The sun sat behind the horizon line. The shore was deserted, empty except for damp sand, seaweed, and saltwater which swallowed the edge of the sand with every rolling wave. I slipped out of my dress. It fell to the tan sand, the soft part of the sand, and blended in. The cool breeze clung to my body the same way my white lace underwear did. I walked towards the sun until seafoam met my toes. The water retreated and I gave myself to it, wading through until the top of it touched my hips. Pacific saltwater was cold, shocking, chilling. But I relaxed my head and let it meet the top, my hair splaying out like brown sun rays in a clear sky. I struggled at first, then my body lifted and I floated. I bobbed with the movements of the water. Waves rolled below me and the sky changed intensity. I wished the water was pink, but the saltwater was enough for me to be okay with my cousin leaving me.

But then I heard him call my name. My name, which slipped out in two syllables, seemed easy for him to say. But not in a concerned way. He must’ve been the only one that saw me sneak out. My name slipped out in a pleased way.

My body fell when I heard my cousin. I expected my feet to fall on packed sand. But the only thing that was under my feet was saltwater. It rushed behind me and under my feet and it pulled me under. Saltwater rushed into my nostrils and into my lungs, rushed into my eyes and burned each of the places in my body it touched. I clenched my teeth and forced my mouth to stay shut, but my body still became heavy. The saltwater blurred and I soared through it. I couldn’t see, but I imagined the depth below me looked like space, just deep darkness with a few speckled lights. My speckled body, speckled with freckles and acne and birthmarks, would melt with the space below me and I would become one with it.

Either the wave spat me out onto the sand or my cousin pulled me out of the water, but soon after, I felt the soft sand on my back. Each cough that escaped my body expelled saltwater that burned my chest and throat. After each cough, my body trembled from the water that still clung to my skin. The Pacific saltwater mixed with the saltwater in my eyes and poured onto my face, but I could make out my cousin hovering over me.

“Are you okay?” He asked. The weight of my soaked hair held my head down in the sand. I still managed to nod. “You must be cold.”

He fiddled with his suit jacket. When he got it off, he held it in both of his hands. The first place he dried was my arm, moving the jacket over it the same way that waves form. A full circle, half soaring over the water’s surface, the other pulling under into the depths. He moved to the other arm. My vision cleared a little more and I could see his soft smile.

“You were great out there.”

As he moved up my arm, little circles, I imagined the color rising to my cheeks while my body warmed up. That strawberry color he liked so much that also matched the color on the bulge of his nose right then. He rubbed around the base of my neck, still smiling, and for a

moment I lost a breath. He was mine. I didn't want him to stop rubbing the saltwater off of me. I could've cared less if the Pacific water spat me out or not. I would always believe my cousin pulled me out of the depths. He was my favorite cousin after all.

Then his hands found their way to my chest. He paused. I saw his fingers unravel from the suit jacket, one by one until gravity took control.

It fell to the sand, then his tie and his button-down. He revealed his chest. His chest, which housed his rib cage which protected his lungs and diaphragm that fluttered and let his lungs take in the air around him, expanding and shrinking fast but steady. And behind his lungs sat his heart, which I knew was racing. All these things behind his naked chest, all working together to get air inside of him that I almost ran out of.

The air circled around my arms and my torso. I shivered while my cousin removed his pants. I kept shivering, couldn't stop. California air is much colder than Texas air. I imagined my cousin's suit blowing away in the wind, with no one to save it.

He held me after his suit fell onto the sand. Our bodies were pressed together. Chest to chest, stomach to stomach, his core was warm. He clung to me just as my underwear did and the saltwater did. That new heat radiated onto my skin, yet my arms and feet still shivered. The sensation was similar to the one I felt with the boy I dated, skin on skin contact. I couldn't tell if he was doing that just to save me or what. But then I realized that he could've put his suit jacket over me and it may have been enough. Maybe he did want to hold me, just to have his bare skin pressed onto mine. I noticed my nakedness then and felt the urge to slip back into my dress. My eyes darted around. I was glad there was no one around. But not because I was happy that he was mine. The Utah woman would've been enraged.

I arrived back at the venue with him next to me, some of my skin still wet from the saltwater and my dress clinging onto me. When my mother asked why I was so wet, my cousin placed a hand on my shoulder blade. He stood there and looked at me. Though his eyes were soft and inviting, I could see the honesty in his clenched jaw, spelling out "you know what to tell them" in its sharpness.

"I got caught in the undertow," I said as I watched the wave of shock roll over everyone's faces. The Utah woman had her hand hover over her chin, covering her mouth. She looked at me, then my cousin, and said that it was a good thing that he was there to save me.

After the time in the Pacific Ocean, I avoided bodies of water. The sand on the beach at home seemed like the sand on the beach in California and all of the saltwater seemed the same. Burning, choking, dripping, only I knew what my cousin did the evening he got married. I broke up with the boy I was dating. I couldn't deal with another guy touching me anymore.

My cousin moved back to California with the Utah woman. While he packed his things I stayed far from him. I still loved him, but our loves were different. I wouldn't have imagined different kinds of love at six, just would've believed all loves were the same. That husbands and wives loved the same way that moms and dads love their children and cousins loved other cousins. But I couldn't help but think that maybe he loved me the same way he loved the Utah woman.

After my cousin left, I drew the time I floated in the Pacific Ocean. Pencils scratched on the surface of the paper, first as swift sketches. One first with the outline of my body, naked beside the cotton underwear that covered me, but then the dress sketched over the body. High school did not let me be nude. Or close to. Different colored pencils filled the drawing with hues of blues, sea blue deeper blue as I descended into the depths of the Pacific Ocean. Hues of brown, tan, beige, colors of beach sand, and beach skin. Hues of orange and golden yellow and

pinks for the sunset, yellow on my shoulders from the sun melting into the ocean as did I, reflected from the water. No evidence of what took place afterward. My cousin's body was against mine. No one would find out.

Lots of people were impressed with the drawing. They analyzed it the way my English teachers analyzed literature. Some compared it to paintings of Ophelia's suicide. I was nothing like Ophelia. She was hopelessly in love, hopelessly had no control. The only thing she could control was the weight on her body, pushing herself deeper under fresh water until her lungs filled up. I was nothing like Ophelia. I floated. But the way she was depicted, calm, fearless, ready to die. All I remembered was the terror when I went under.

That drawing ended up winning lots of awards. It won on local levels, regional levels, and state levels. I got to travel three and a half hours to Austin. A weird city, that was what people said about it. But there was something off about the people there. Almost the same way I felt at my cousin's wedding with the white sand girls, where I felt the color of my skin popping out, giving me too much wandering eyes from people like them. People like the Utah woman. I would've stayed there if it wasn't for that.

Because of the drawing, I got accepted to the University of Southern California. It wasn't something I expected to happen. I had applied, but I believed it was a shot in heaven. But everything in California was expensive. The only reason I was able to go to California was because my mother and my father agreed that I would be safe and stable with my family there. But I knew by family they meant my cousin.

While I went to school, my cousin did as much as he could for me. He would buy me groceries, give my friends and I rides, stuff that family would do. He was around enough times for my roommates to question who he was. But I made sure we were never alone together. My friends always took trips to Venice Beach. He drove us there once, didn't mind the cooler full of alcohol that my friends liked to drink. I sat on the soft sand while my friends sipped on Smirnoff and danced in the Pacific Ocean. He sat next to me.

"Why aren't you out there with them?" He asked. His voice was still soft. His voice was always soft.

"The water scares me still," I said. I wasn't one to lie, so he believed me. However, I was only speaking half the truth. I was afraid of the water, but I was more afraid of what he would feel when he saw me in the water again.

"But you used to love being in water."

"Right. I wouldn't even go in the deep end, don't forget."

He stood up and grabbed my hand. His hand was much softer than my father's hands, which sometimes felt like tree bark. My cousin's hands were a bit larger than mine, his fingers long with every digit circling the back of my hand.

"We'll go in together. You'll be safe with me."

He took me into the saltwater, still holding my hand. We went until the water touched our knees. My friends didn't notice our appearance, they continued falling with the waves. My cousin took my other hand with his and we stood there. As the waves rolled around my knees, I felt myself enjoying the swirls of saltwater again. It was something I missed for years. The warmth of my cousin's hands melted with the chill on my legs and feet and for a moment my cousin actually felt like my cousin again. But then he gave me this look. His mouth was slightly agape. I could see parts of his teeth behind his lips, his tongue shivered a little along with his jaw. And his shoulders, he shifted his shoulders in a way where it seemed as if he would pull me in again. We were both wearing swimsuits.

So I jerked my hands away and flew deeper into the water, closer to my friends. I wanted to think he understood what I was more afraid of. He smiled and waved and made his way back to the cooler. He pulled out a bottle of Smirnoff. As he opened it, I wondered how the Utah woman felt about my cousin spending so much time with me. How she would've felt about the way he looked at me just then. If her heart would bang against her chest with frustration and intensity. He put the mouth to his lips. I knew I would be the one driving back that day.

Around the beginning of my first spring semester, my cousin invited me over for a quick dinner at his home. He still had his work clothes on, which that day was a cream sweater and navy blue chinos. And his hair seemed to sag more from his gelled style the closer we got. He'd mentioned his work sometime before, describing what he did as "coming up with advertising strategies that the big company takes and gives no credit for." But other than that, he barely mentioned it, instead asking about my classes. He grinned with his canine teeth at each of my responses.

We got to the house, and it was prettier than standard with its white stucco and brown shingles and desert-like front yard that someone tended on the regular. Like the Utah woman knew something about architecture. It was a house in a suburb right outside of Los Angeles, so it was allowed to be pretty. The inside was equally pretty, with the fluorescent lights bouncing off of the white walls like thousands of fireflies and modern geometric furniture with sharp impressive corners. It was hard to accept my cousin living in a house like that, thinking of the relaxed house we used to wander through in Texas.

My cousin led me to the kitchen. The Utah woman stacked three plates on the counter next to take-out containers. They were filled with some kind of pasta dish and salad, mostly green. When she saw me, she rushed a greeting out. Then she turned to her plate, scooping out small portions of food and arranging them in halves.

"I hope you weren't expecting home-cooked food," she huffed. "Was a busy day."

"You couldn't do it? This one time?" My cousin asked with his arms crossed.

"What? I'm no housewife."

We ate in the living room, sat on the L-shaped couch around the coffee table. I wondered what kind of job the Utah woman had, and if she had to get cleaned up and "professional" like my cousin did. Or if she owned some illegal business and kept money under the table. Or if she even had a job at all, just sat around while she got cuts of money from her parents. There was no indication of anything as she sat on the couch with her legs crossed and her plate in her lap. My cousin sat next to her while I sat on the opposite part of the couch. He relayed the things I told him on the ride there to her and she smiled. She said something about her time in college, something I didn't care about much, and that she was glad I was having a good time.

"We actually have something to tell you," my cousin said to me. He glanced at the Utah woman while she tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. It seemed like she avoided his eyes. He said that while I scraped a green olive along my plate with my fork. I hated the sight, and especially the taste, of them. Green foods shouldn't be sour. "We've been saving up to go to the Dead Sea," he continued, "and I thought about my proposal. We decided you could come with us." After he announced that I finally looked up at them, beaming with excitement.

"But after you finish this semester," the Utah woman said. Her smile was wide, but I could see something green between her teeth. "And you have to pay for your own ticket. But we got everything else."

By the end of the spring semester, I saved up money from my refund. That government money, a grant, but what seemed like a handout, would help me get to Jordan so I could float

with my cousin and the Utah woman in a foreign sea. I got my passport and other documents prior to our departure.

When I got in their car, the Utah woman said she loved the loose ringlets in my hair. I thanked her, but from the backseat, I stared swords into the back of her head.

We landed early the day after our flight took off, then took a taxi to our hotel while my cousin and the Utah woman made small talk with the driver. I sat in the backseat and so did my cousin. She stared at me. Sometimes.

We passed by old looking tan buildings with bits of Arabic on the fronts. I took a few Arabic classes, but the letters flew by in a tan blur. So fast that I couldn't decipher. The driver drove through the dry countryside, and I understood the meaning of "Old World" as I stared at the vast amount of land. It stretched out farther than I could see. As we got closer to the hotel, I rolled down my window and let my hair blow with the wind. It rushed into the car, hot and dry. Similar to inland California and nothing like Southeast Texas.

The Utah woman mentioned that I went to school at USC like the driver would've been impressed about it. But her smile was so wide that I couldn't help but prick the corners of my lips up.

When we got there, while my cousin and the Utah woman brought our luggage in, I went to the edge of the pool front and watched the sea. People dotted the coast, sifted in the sand, and floated in the sea. The hues matched those that I colored in the drawing, cerulean, sky, cobalt. I recognized Israel on the other side, characterized by hills and coast. Though we were at the lowest point in the world on land, the sun glistened against the sea, probably the same way my brown eyes glistened as I watched. The tip of chlorinated water crested at the same time the seawater crested.

I wondered how we were able to afford any of the beauty I was allowed to witness. Considering how my cousin went to Utah instead of the Dead Sea at first, I thought about how the Utah woman was able to leisurely float in the salt lake. How she was able to have a wedding with all of her wants on the Carpinteria beach, how she was able to pick up and move to California with my cousin. She even got me my own room. One of those rooms where our rooms are connected to each other by that one door. I looked at the hotel, and for the first time, a warmth bubbled in my stomach for the Utah woman. I wondered how much money she spent to please my cousin if that even was her purpose.

Later that evening, the Utah woman went to drink at the pool bar. I watched from the window in my room. She and my cousin agreed that we would float in the Dead sea the next day. I always wanted to drink at one of those bars in the pool at hotels. When I was younger I wondered how the workers got inside without getting their clothes all wet. She sipped on something through a black straw. I had on my black bikini ready to go out and drink with her. Not really with her but next to her. I still had to observe her. My cousin came into the room, the connecting door creaking. He lingered a bit behind me rather than standing next to me. Looking at me, he asked where I was headed.

"The bar. With Harper. She's down there right now, look it's kind of cute."

And he did. He looked for a bit while the gold from the sunset glowed on his face. Like gold flakes dancing on the bump of his nose and on the top of his cheekbones. Then he turned to face me. Shadows hung over one side of his face.

"Yeah it is," he responded. "You know what's not cute though?"

"What?"

“When she’s drunk. Trust me, you do not want to experience it first-hand.” He laughed a little and I saw his canines. They seemed more rounded out.

“No way,” I said, giggling a bit. It gave me all the more reason to sit with her. What could she have started? I saw her laugh and her golden hair fell behind her back.

“Yeah. Don’t mention this, but she got absolutely wasted by the end of the reception.” He paused. “You were gone before then.”

The tan beach popped into my head, and I averted my eyes. It started to feel like I was floating through space again, though gravity worked on my cousin. In small movements, I swam towards the door.

“You’re still going?” Gravity stopped working for him then, and he floated towards me.

“Why not?” I touched my arms and massaged the bumps that sprouted.

“You should stay here with me.” After he said that, my legs felt like large meteors. I spun around and for a moment the rays of the sun illuminated my face and blinded my eyes.

“What would we even do? What’d you have in mind?” But as I asked, he blocked the sun with that look, the same look from Carpinteria and Venice Beach and I remembered that I wasn’t supposed to let myself be alone with him.

“We could go sneak onto the beach if you want, just the two of us. See how the water really is.” He got closer. “Or we could relax here.”

My cousin grabbed my hands. His hands were rougher than before, and his movements were too fluid for me to react. He brushed his nose up against mine and stopped breathing though I knew he had strong open lungs. You needed them to float easier.

“It’s up to you.” Even though he said that, he hovered there. I said nothing, just stood there waiting for his next move. It seemed like we stood there for minutes doing nothing. Then he kissed me. There were no reasonable excuses I could’ve made for it. It wasn’t like the time the Pacific water swallowed me and almost took me to its own version of space. Nor was it like when we got married with our fake little rings and my pink wildflowers and our brief kiss. There was no indication that he was trying to save me, no water, no collapsing lungs, no California chill. On the contrary, the air around me felt like a dry sauna and the heat only rose more between our bodies. He dropped my hands and let his venture to the back of my top.

Pink rose on my cheeks, around my nose, and all the places his arms touched. I wondered how pink my heart was. Probably not at all because it raced inside of my chest, easily one hundred beats per minute, and when light hits blood it turns even redder. Not pink unless you mix white into it. White or clear to dilute the vibrancy, clear like mucus. Mucus was the only thing that would make my blood and heart a desirable pink. But I didn’t want my cousin to make me pink.

I forgot how long he kissed me for. Or if he kissed me multiple times. He smelled like the ocean, not the authentic smell of seaweed and bird shit, but like freshness and fake beach air. Like if he just stepped out of the shower after washing his hair with a masculine shampoo. Something labeled along the lines of “sea and surf” or “Fiji.” Those thoughts of fresh scents ran through my mind as I tried my hardest to push my cousin out of my head.

I think I couldn’t breathe. And I think he couldn’t breathe either. With some hesitation, he pulled away and let me go. There were hints of guilt in the way he carried himself. He looked at my feet, his arms dangling behind him, far away from me. We crashed back to earth when he let me go. And it was so destructive I could barely move. He stood there, waiting for me to say something first. But the mess in front of me was overwhelming. Unbearable.

“Please don’t be upset,” he said after my silence. “How are you feeling? Please tell me.” His voice, although still soft, shook a bit. Like he was trying to hold something in his throat back. I just stood there. My mind raced. I wanted to ask him why he even brought me on that trip. If that was his plan the whole time. Or if there was something about that moment, something that was different from the other times that made him act like that. If it was the way I let my hair hang, or if I had gained some weight since the last time he saw me. Either way, his lips were soft, as soft as his voice. That paralyzed me into silence.

Eventually my cousin left. He didn’t even slam the door. I stayed in my room for hours after, changing from my swimsuit into a baggy shirt and linen shorts. Moonlight flooded the part of my room near my bed. It was late when my cousin came into my room again. He sat on the edge of my bed farthest from me as I laid there. I knew he would bring up what happened earlier. He wouldn’t have waited until late at night if it were anything else. I thought he’d first ask me if I was hungry or what I did all that time. But he didn’t mention any of that. He actually didn’t say anything for the first few minutes. Then he broke the deafening silence with a long sigh.

“There isn’t much I can say,” he started. My cousin fingered the duvet, barely looking at me. I saw the sharpness in his jaw, so clenched I imagined him cutting through my defenses again. Not like I had any in the first place. “But I’ve been hiding things. Important things for a while now.”

I sat up in my spot. His words began to weigh on my chest, making it hard to catch my breath. I had never noticed my cousin’s body until after what happened. He reminded me of fire coral the way his skin stuck to his bones and muscles. His shoulder blades stuck out like branches and the digits of his fingers splayed out, ready to sting something else besides the bed.

“Wait,” I said.

“It was always necessary to hide them too,” he said.

“Wait,” I said.

“Everyone would be ashamed,” he said.

“Wait,” I said a little louder. That time he turned to me. His face was scrunched with desperation. “I don’t wanna hear this here.” I imagined the Utah woman sleeping in the room next to me. Her eyes shut tight with the comforting assumption that her husband, my cousin, was sleeping next to her. But then she’d wake up to the sound of him in my room. If we stayed there. “Take me to the beach right now.” My throat dried up. “Then we can talk.”

I assumed my voice came out assertive-like. Kind of like a grown bossy woman. But my cousin moved to the door first, looking back at me at what I thought was a resemblance of a smirk. My voice didn’t come out like a grown woman’s. Rather, it came out just like who I was: a squeaky confused late teen.

I followed him until we got outside. If it weren’t for the moon and some of the hotel’s lights, everything would’ve been washed in complete darkness. My cousin realized I had stopped walking and turned to me. He didn’t say anything.

Reaching my hands out, I asked for him to carry me on his back. Without words, he accepted and bared his back to me as his invitation. I climbed him carefully, minding his spine ridges and mountains of back muscles and shoulder blades. His body burned hotter than before. It almost seemed hot enough to singe my skin. I wrapped my arms around his neck and shivered from a chill that only existed inside my veins, even before he held my thighs. He made his way to the beach with me hanging onto his back. The path blurred in front of me. I wondered if the skin of my arms made his blood freeze the way it did mine. Or if he felt the short hairs on my legs stab into his hands when he gripped them while stepping over an obstacle. If he liked the

way my thighs felt, or if he noticed the way my breasts pressed into his back. Things I never thought about when my cousin carried me in the past.

We got to the beach and both sat in the sand. The moon's reflection on the water looked like white glitter spilled on selected parts of a canvas that refused to blend into the murky black surrounding it. My cousin turned to me. We only sat a few feet apart. I told him he could continue.

"Well," he started, "Like I said, I've hid things for so long." He took a deep breath. "I hated the school I went to, I've got a lousy job." Then he looked out at the moon. "But our family and Harper, they're happy with all of that." I wiggled my toes in the sand and wondered if what he'd say next would be even more shattering. It was.

"But we're not going to make it."

At first, I didn't understand what he meant. I thought he meant me. My lungs became shallow. But I remembered that the Utah woman slept alone in the hotel bed and my stomach sank. I understood.

There was a bit of silence afterward. He really couldn't say much.

"I think you know how I feel about you." Silence. "So, I need to know. How do you feel about me?" I thought about the man next to me. How warm I felt when he'd make me strawberry milk and carry me to the deep end of the pool. I remembered the void in me when he grew older and began living his life without me, a void I tried to fill with another boy. I thought of how wet my hands were from dipping them in the fountain at the Utah woman's green wedding from trying to conjure a storm. But then the thoughts of his body on top of mine soon after crept up on me. And his jaw. And his lips. They made me want to hide deep in the sand. My love for him consisted of admiration, but his? What was his love for me made up of? None of those things affected my answer.

"It doesn't matter how I feel about you," I said. That man next to me, he was my cousin.

I stood and paced towards the Dead Sea. One foot sank in front of the other until it touched the edge of the water. I heard my cousin's pleas to come back, but they fell on stubborn ears. The water was chilly on my feet, but not as cold as the Pacific Ocean. My body grew heavy as I got on my knees and crawled halfway into the water. But soon after, the water started to hold me up effortlessly like my body was just filled with air. I turned on my back and kicked away from the land. The water cradled me and I let it.

The moon's light fell on me. Though there was a calmness in my abdomen, an emptiness crept into my chest, making my lungs heavy again. I floated alone. All my cousin could do was watch. It was supposed to be our dream to float together. Our marriage appeared in my head, the one with my pink flowers and pieces of trash rings. As I floated, I questioned why I wanted to be there in the first place. Like the moon's light, everything was fake, false, a reflection of something much bigger than me.

Floating in the Dead Sea alone, I made the decision that I wanted a divorce.