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kleptothermy

It is late May and we are spongy snakes. We are weaving through paths paved by dead and rich investors and knocking milky bottles off the plastic ledges. We are slimy and dripping, skin pasting themselves to the robes on our backs. The cash registers fall out empty and the receipt rolls march themselves through their machines, coming up blank. Here, the lights are dim because we are on a mission. We are taking old labels off the artifacts lined up in neat rows, throwing them to the wolves of HOME DEPOT cardboard boxes. This is the summer when my brother and I are made to spend all our days at the store, leaving when the sun sets and the outside world has stopped gleaming. We exit the store most days to the residue of a fun summer day; pink-stained popsicle sticks and popped balloons are often scattered around the parking lot right outside the building. Often, we hear the sound of children yelling outside our forest, but we never stop to look.

It is late May and Jeanette likes to lurk outside of the store in her Honda Civic with her cigarette packets. The first time Jeanette came home, we thought she was slimy. We stuck our shoulders together and thinned our eyelids. I was wearing sunglasses that day and so she couldn't see.

In front of Jeanette, we call her Mom. She doesn't like it, says it sounds *snarky, like a bunch of oily teenagers* At night, Jeanette and Pop argue. Pop insists that she looks at us too big. *Just kids*, he'll say, his shadow shaking its head, all lit-up against the yellow salt lamps from a yard sale three years ago. *Don't be too hard on them. Christ, Nette, it's just 'Mom'! Why does it matter what they call you?* Then Jeanette's shadow makes a move as if to cross her arms and they fall silent. *Why did you have to bring them here? To this microscopic town in the middle of nowhere? Why am I in this house? I don't want to see your stupid fucking*-- Jeanette will start, sometimes, late into the night. We wonder what *fucking* means, but it sounds angry and sharp so we don't ask. Pop will say something like *Where else? Are we really fighting about this right now?* She asks:*what am I here for then?* And then Pop interrupts, his voice loud now, saying: *the kids.* Jeanette screams *they're not mine!* At this point there are usually no more shadows, voices blurred behind the thin plaster walls of the house.

Tonight, we lie in our bed, pressed up against each other from shoulder to wrist, eyes closed. Some nights we hold hands because we are young enough, not enemies yet. One day we will have to hate each other, but for now we hate Jeanette and her cat Valentina. Valentina is old and white and puffy and snarls. Her claws are sharp. Once, Jeanette and Pop yelled over the scratch marks on the bedroom floor. Now, they are fighting over our birth mother and we are pressed together. We fall asleep like this, the sweat between us like paste.

We have only seen our birth mother in photographs. It's been a long time since we've seen them—before we moved here for the summer, but after Jeanette. We look like her: my sharp jaw, my brother's grey eyes and slanted brows. In one of the photographs, a young version of her and Pop are seated on the curb in front of the store, a cigarette dangling from her fingers. They are both smiling and sweaty. She has rectangular glasses slid down her nose, Pop's hand on her shoulder.

The next morning, we lean on each other as we hop our way into pant legs and t-shirts, trying not to trip. We brush our teeth, sit down at the big table, scoot our chairs as close to each other as possible. We fold our legs up into lotuses since Valentina likes to slink under the table unseen. Pop comes in and makes us bowls of cereal. Jeanette comes in after breakfast, reeking of strawberry perfume and standing very tall. We say, "Good morning, Mom!" as she takes a drag out of her cigarette. She peers at us over her rimless sunglasses and grimaces.

We know she hates it. We don't know if we care.

"Good morning, you two," she says back.

We sit there and stare. We wait until Pop sighs and scrapes his chair backwards.

He's been doing this sighing quite a lot lately. That, and sweating. At the end of the day, we always try to stay away from his stink. Every day since we have arrived here, damp jagged circles have taken up house on his back and chest and armpits. It makes sense, but only because he told us things would be different this summer. Where we are from, he wears suits and ties. His shoulders always look cornered off. He carries around a card with the words FINANCE on it in big, block letters. Here, his shirts thin out, threads coming loose at the edges. His shirts are often white or a middling shade of blue. This summer, he wears jeans that are loose and heavy. The bottoms of the pant legs hang a centimeter off the floor like they are waiting for something.

Everything about Pop here wears thin.

Now, I rub my thumbs into the inner sleeves of my jacket and wait for it to wear thin, too, but I only sweat until the fabric is soft and sagging against my fingers.

Pop leads us to the car. We fill the back seat next to the large cardboard box. He starts driving. We don't know what's in it, and when we ask Pop tells us it's spoiled milk sealed up into bottles so that they don't smell. We don't believe him, but he sounds angry and sharp, and so we don't ask any more questions about the box. Pop sometimes takes it to the back of the store, as if collecting things to put inside of it.

When we get there, we hook our elbows together and venture into the milk aisles. Everything here is dim, but occasionally, a strip of LED light still lies on the side of the "open-me!"-stickered-doors in the milk aisle, even if the light is faded and yellow. Here, the shelves are gone. The doors are why we love this aisle best. Pop says not to spend too much time in the boxes beyond the doors because we could suffocate. We always think that it will be cold, because we know that they are supposed to be cold, because we have seen doors like this in other stores. Except usually boxes like these are lined with shelves, which are bottle-lined, identical.
We fold one of our bodies into the box and wait for it to close. We close the door. We put our forearms up and press our fists against the glass. We tell ourselves that because it is see-through, we are still connected. My brother's hair lies plastered against the surface, his eyes crossed. I mouth against the glass and wait until my breath mists, until I can barely breathe in the box. And then I stumble out, letting go and huffing and laughing, knocking my brother over, the mist on the door fading into a final wisp.

We have tried to fit us into one box before. If we were a little bit littler, we could, but together our heads press uncomfortably against each other. My brother is always greasier than me, ears cold with sweat. Our mouths fill with hair and too much saliva. The door refuses to close. And so we choose to connect through the glass. Later, our fingers still linked across the glowing yellow of an LED light, we sit in boxes right next to each other and lean low so that we can stay together. We sit there for a very long time, linked. Pop always emphasizes fighting in teams.

When we finish investigating the milk aisle, we move to the snack aisle and peel labels off shelves. In the distance, Pop switches a vacuum on. We plug our ears and sit in lotus positions on the store's floor. He always turns the vacuum on in the mornings, as if there is more left to clean. These days, we have the feeling that he is waiting for something. While he vacuums nothing, we sit with our lower backs pressed against each other and shut our eyes. I open my eyes to see the labels remaining on the shelves too close-up, their letters blurring into fuzzy shapes. I don't tell my brother. He is smaller than me, only by a little. He feels bad about this but I tell him that at least he doesn't look like Jeanette. Or sound like her. She has bad lungs. We know this for a fact.

Pop stops vacuuming invisible things. We know that he is slouching over the machine now, chin resting on his hands. We know because we have seen this before. We don't know how he does this because we touched that vacuum once and it was slick and slimy with grime, the kind that never comes off once it's decided to exist in a place.

We unplug our ears, move to the meat section. We never spend too much time here because it stinks of rot, even now, but the kind of slight rot where you don't quite hold your nose but you half-hold your breath anyway, just in case it gets too bad. The meat smell has lingered long after the store has closed. We imagine slabs of meat lining

themselves up to be sold.

We hold half our breaths and take in the other half, but walk quickly past the meat to the ice cream sections. All the containers lie blank. We could put ourselves in these boxes too, we know—slide the flat glass doors back and climb into the large containers, and we almost have every other time. Today, we look at each other and decide that we are ready.

Distantly, Pop switches another vacuum on. We sit back down on the floor. Then he turns it back off, because he must have changed his mind.

"I have to pick up some things," he calls from what is probably the front of the store. "It'll take awhile, so you know the drill."

The drill means Jeanette will come pick us up, maybe. Sometimes she forgets.

Today is not the day, we think, looking at the ice cream containers. *Maybe tomorrow,* we think. We go and lurk just inside the store near the doors and wait for Jeanette. I'm angry today, staring at the parking lot blurred by the doors. I think: *fucking*. I think: I have been looking at cursive letters and trying to guess what they mean. This year adults have really wanted us to tell them how we feel. *Unprecedented times*, they say. *Stock market crash!* they say. *Displacement!*

We think this is all horseshit. This is a word we have learned this summer from Jeanette. Jeanette, even with her bad lungs, knows a lot of words.

Jeanette introduces herself with cigarette smoke. A puff blows straight into our faces as she pushes the doors of the store open.

"Come on, you two," she says, looking down at us. She turns around and curves a manicured finger toward us as she goes, beckoning.

Manicure and *pedicure* are also words we have learned this summer from Jeanette. We once heard her yelling about her *fucked-up mani-pedi.*

Jeanette forces me into the driver's seat. Jeanette's fingers fumble for the steering wheel. Jeanette, I think, is shaking from the cigarettes.

The Honda Civic peels away from the parking lot. I rub the insides of my jacket sleeves, sweat.

The Honda Civic's child lock is broken. Once we reach the house, I immediately get out and link arms with my brother again. Jeanette sighs, and then she starts coughing.

We go inside and make peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches from the kitchen cupboards. Jeanette sits on the porch and smokes. She is on the phone with someone, and she's laughing. Or she's choking. Valentina comes into the kitchen and stares at us with yellow eyes until we leave to play a game of blackjack on our bed until we are bored.

That night, Jeanette's shadow starts yelling while Pop spends a lot of time explaining. We hear things like *necessary* and *move on* and *no big deal* and *box with dumb photographs*. Jeanette is loud and high-pitched and so we hear her say *X* and *love* and *that fucking bitch* all sharp and angry, before she screams *they're not mine!* and they both fall silent. Pop's shadow is rubbing his palm against his forehead. Jeanette's shadow is trembling.

Sweat drips down our backs, our hair still damp. We shut our eyes, pretend to fall asleep. We are pretending for no-one except ourselves.

When we wake in the morning, our once-wet hair feels uncomfortably warm against our pillowcases. We rise and get dressed. We brush our teeth before going down to sit at the big table. We scoot our chairs together and fold our legs up into lotuses. Pop comes in and makes us bowls of cereal. Jeanette comes in after breakfast, smelling of strawberry perfume and standing very tall. We say, "Good morning, Mom!" as she takes a drag out of her cigarette.

She peers at us over her rimless sunglasses and says nothing. We sit there and look at nothing. We wait until Pop sighs and scrapes his chair backwards.

In the car, the box rattles against our shoulders. It flakes. Pop sighs a few times without comment. At the store, we get out of the car. Today, Pop has forgotten to wear a belt and he tugs at his jeans, which are riding low on his hips. The bottoms are brushing the floor. He notices and sighs again.

In the store, we go to the milk aisle and stare down the long line of "open-me!"-stickered-doors. Then, we go to the ice cream section and look at each other. My brother shrugs. We slide back the glass covering and lift ourselves into the empty container. We slide down, press our backs against the warm plastic. I wonder what it must look like from the outside, if the glass blurs the features of my face, what it looks like misted over.

Far off, Pop starts a vacuum. We plug our ears after discovering that we can close the glass covering almost all the way. My brother lodges his fingers into the crack and we breathe through it. The vacuuming stops. Pop starts yelling really loud, like Jeanette but lower.

"I have to go," he yells from wherever he is with the vacuum. "You know the drill."

We sit in the ice cream box for a very long time. I think of meat rotting. I think it has lingered on me, or maybe I am imagining it. My brother's shoulder presses against mine. We are both sweaty.

"Do you smell the rot?" I ask. He looks at me and doesn't say anything. "From the meat," I try, again.

"No," he says, still looking. "No."

We both go back to sitting, my brother staring at the ridged plastic walls of the ice cream container and me, sniffing my palms.

It's when I am almost falling asleep to the smell of rotten meat that we hear yelling. My brother slides the glass covering away. I feel the rush of air on my scalp and open my eyes.

"Hello?" It's Jeanette. I can smell the cigarette. My brother and I stand up, shoulder to shoulder. We get out of the ice cream container and walk to the milk aisle. Jeanette is looking into every one of the boxes behind the "open-me!"-stickered-doors. "There you are," she says, voice high and bored, face is a pasty shade of never-seen-the-sun. She shuffles us outside. The parking lot feels dark. Someone has come to clean up the empty water balloons and food scraps.

I sit in the front seat and try not to inhale the cigarette in the car, but I take a few full breaths of the cigarette stink before we pull into the driveway. I try not to cough and think I can hear my brother trying not to cough, too.
I get out of the car. My brother and I walk into the house, Jeanette following a few paces behind us. The air here smells different today, almost like lavender. The TV plays an ad for a lottery to win an all-expenses-paid family trip to the Bahamas.

At the end of the living room, Pop is standing near our birth mother. She is not wearing rectangular glasses. Her face is sharper, jaw more pronounced, grey eyes narrowed— studying us. The box sits between them, loopy unraveled masking tape on the ground. Pop's hand is wrapped around her wrist. On the floor in front of them are different photographs, some of her, of people we don't know. No bottles of spoiled milk.

My brother and I stand in the center of the living room. I pick at an elbow scab. We are only pawns.

"Hello?" It's Jeanette again. She is looming in the doorway, cigarette between her lips. She lets out a puff of smoke. "Hello?" she says again. "Fucking—" and then she stops.

I think: *unprecedented times*. Maybe my brother is thinking the same thing, too. I'm not sure what *unprecedented* means. Maybe it's cursive for not-knowing.

My brother presses his shoulder to mine, his skin hot and dry. Jeanette tries again: "Fucking—" and then stops. The

woman pauses. Pop takes a step forward, and then a step back.

We just stand there, shedding.